

WOMEN IN
HOLLYWOOD **ICON**
2006

「**SOFIA COPPOLA** Only three women have been nominated for an Oscar for directing, and she's one of them. The auteur behind *Lost in Translation* and *Marie Antoinette* talks about her childhood spent on film sets, her unusual inspirations, and why she's drawn to the small moments that last a lifetime.

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GREW UP IN A REALLY CREATIVE HOUSEHOLD. MY MOM WAS INTO conceptual art in the '70s; she would put us in her pieces. People would come to the house, and they had to watch me and my brother Roman in my room, and she called it "my best work of art." She said to us, "Don't look at the people." We would make little Super-8 movies, and then video when I was older. Somewhere there's a production of *Cinderella* that my dad made of me and my brothers, just for fun. • My mom was always encouraging us to make stuff. We didn't have TV when we lived in the country [in Napa Valley], so maybe you have to use your imagination to entertain yourself more. I used to do little plays in the house with my friends. My mom worried that I was bossy; I don't think she realized the other kids liked being told what to do. • I went to school in a lot of different places. We were in the Philippines for a couple of years during *Apocalypse Now*. I remember my dad taking me in helicopters; I'd visit all the departments [on the set] and hang around. It was always fun because everyone was doing stuff, making things. The costume department made little army outfits for my teddy bear. I wasn't at home with a tutor or something; I'd go to local schools, so you kind of got a sense of the place, and that

was always an adventure. I remember living in Oklahoma during *The Outsiders* and *Rumble Fish*. They all treated me like the goofy kid on the set; you know, I had big teeth. Rob Lowe was really nice. He was dating Melissa Gilbert, and when they came to New York, they took me to Rumplemeyer's for ice cream. We lived in New York during *Cotton Club*—that was like seventh grade. I was living in the country, and all of a sudden you could take taxis and have independence. I lived down the street from Fiorucci, the new-wave store. I was super into all that. It was fun being in New York at that age, but then I went back to Napa; that was just like normal high school.

My dad did this summer where he wanted us all to do one-act plays. It was called Creativity Camp, and we had to all make something. It was my dad's place, so the cousins were all there. We were kind of bitching about it. That's when I first worked with Jason [Schwartzman]. I asked him to be in my play, and he stole the whole show. That's when we realized that Jason was an actor. When my friend [Wes Anderson] was casting *Rushmore*, I said, "Oh, you have to meet my cousin Jason."

I know how vulnerable it [feels] to be in front of the camera. [Though she was baptized on camera in *The Godfather* and had cameos in other films by her father, nothing prepared her for the wrath of critics, who lambasted her performance as Mary Corleone in *The Godfather Part III*.] I didn't know anything about acting, I never wanted to act before that—but that was definitely a turn-off. It didn't shatter my dreams because I didn't want to be an actor. I knew I wanted to be creative; I didn't know in what medium. I went to art school and studied painting and I got into photography. When I was just out of college, I had a hard time trying to decide what I wanted to do, because I had so many different interests. None of them really clicked for me until I made a short film. I thought I was being a dilettante, but now I have a background in all these areas that really helps me when I'm directing. When I read *The Virgin Suicides*, that's when I decided I wanted to make a movie.

The boys looking at the girls' deaths [in that movie]—I really like the idea that even though their lives were short, the impression they left behind lasted for these boys' whole lives. And how important someone can be even if they're not around that long. I didn't realize it until after I was finished working on it, but I definitely thought there was a connection to my brother's death. [In 1986, Coppola's oldest brother, Gian Carlo, was killed in a boating accident on a day off from filming *Gardens of Stone*; he was 22.] It's always that kind



of bittersweet thing—that something’s beautiful that’s not permanent. In *Lost in Translation*, it’s about this moment that can stay with you and change you, and that’s just as important as if you spent 20 years with someone.

I’m interested in the search for identity, and trying to develop, and the choices you have. In *Lost in Translation*, [Scarlett Johansson’s character] is trying to understand that stage in her life and is on the verge of figuring it out. In *Marie Antoinette*, it’s the full evolution of someone transforming from a girl to a woman. To me, it feels like the next chapter. I feel like I’m more grown-up than I was when I made *Lost in Translation*. Now I feel clear about what I want in my life. I can see a link: how each film starts where the other one leaves off in a way.

I’ve never seen a movie about Marie Antoinette from her point of view. There’s something about her that seemed relevant to nowadays. I know people [who’ve seen the movie have compared her to] Princess Diana or Paris Hilton. I don’t see that connection because that is such a different, weird phenomenon. It’s unique to our time. I just liked uncovering the human side of this kind of mythic person, this famous, notorious queen. There’s so much more to her story that I never heard about. I got the Antonia Fraser book, and then I thought about it as a movie—the challenge of making a period movie. I wanted to focus on the teenage years because that’s what really struck me, that they were just teenagers at this really volatile time. Imagine what it would be like to be 14 and sent to marry someone who’s not interested in you. All of the stuff that she went through, and how she turned to partying and frivolity as a way to try to make herself feel better or as an escape. It was the whole story of this girl kind of finding herself and growing up—but in this really extreme setting. The biggest challenge was working on this big scale, and then staying focused on the important part, which is the main characters, the acting, and the scene. It was fun, but it was overwhelming too. I never got very loud. People just kind of accept that’s my style: I’m not marching around with a megaphone or anything, but I can still be heard.

I think directors are control freaks, definitely. I try not to plan it too exact because I like to be open and flexible. I don’t do storyboards. I mean, sometimes I have an image in my mind as a reference for something—like that opening shot of [Scarlett’s] underwear was from the painter John Kacere. Whenever I start a movie, I put together a reference book with photos that inspire me or just things from magazines. I tear things out, whatever—

colors or mood. My friend Brian Reitzell—we started to work together on *Virgin Suicides*—and I talk about the music early on when I’m writing, and he makes me CDs: Versailles Mix 1, Versailles Mix 2. We’re all kind of building an atmosphere. I’ll tell him what I have in mind, and he’ll play me stuff that he thinks relates to it. Music is the most abstract element to me because it’s not visual, and it’s really hard for me to understand things I can’t see. I could figure out how to make a dress, but I would have no idea how to make a song.

I think the people you’re drawn to working with are people that you have some kind of shared taste with. I feel like that with Kirsten [Dunst, who plays Marie Antoinette]; I really liked working with her on *Virgin Suicides*, and I feel like she understands what I’m looking for. I think

it’s just a matter of being clear about the tone of the movie and what the character is, and then letting them go. My brother Roman and I, we have a shared [sensitivity], and then we each have our very own. It’s just cool because when he shoots something, he knows exactly what I would want, so I can be doing something else. [*Roman Coppola was the second-unit director on Marie Antoinette; Schwartzman plays Louis XVI.*] My dad always worked like that, with his family—or everybody he worked with for years, you know, they’re like family. It’s a nice atmosphere to have people that you have a shorthand with and you trust. It’s great when my brother comes to help out: It’s like your big brother shows up to save the day.

I’ve been working for so long I’m looking forward to just focusing on this project. [*She taps her belly; Coppola’s first child, whose father is French rocker Thomas Mars, is due in December.*] I value my brother so much that I wouldn’t think to have an only child. We’ll see how it goes. But it’s nice to have an excuse to eat cake all the time.



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Musical or Comedy, and Screenplay) and nomination (Director) for *Lost in Translation*. DON’T-MISS FILMS: **THE VIRGIN SUICIDES** Coppola’s ethereal feature debut, based on the novel by Jeffrey Eugenides, follows the impact made by the luscious, self-destructive Lisbon sisters (Kirsten Dunst among them) on a group of neighborhood boys. (2000) **LOST IN TRANSLATION** (1) Scarlett Johansson stars as a young newlywed who befriends Bill Murray’s aging actor while each is adrift in Tokyo. “He’s in touch with his romantic side,” Coppola says of Murray, for whom



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she wrote the script. Still, she adds, “I relate to women more. I don’t like to see movies that are all men without any women characters.” (2003) **NEW PROJECT: MARIE ANTOINETTE** (2) Kirsten Dunst and Jason Schwartzman get the royal treatment in a gilded, languid reimagining of 18th-century life at Versailles. “I had to meet the director of Versailles and explain the story, and they were really supportive,” says Coppola. “He liked that I was doing it from her point of view, really focusing on Marie Antoinette.” (October 20)

THE ESSENTIAL COPPOLA

AGE: 35 **PLACE OF BIRTH:** New York City **AWARDS/ NOMINATIONS:** Oscar win (Original Screenplay) and nominations (Picture and Director) for *Lost in Translation*; two Golden Globe wins (Best