

# Anjelica

## daughter of a dynasty

Oscar-winning actress Anjelica Huston tells **David Leser** how she gave up dating rogues such as Jack Nicholson, dealt with the heartbreak of never being a mother, and now has an “impossibly happy” relationship.



**I**F YOU HAD TO PICK one place – any place in the world to meet a Hollywood legend, you’d be hard pressed to go past the Chateau Marmont. Concealed above Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles, behind a grove of palm and rubber trees, this famed Bohemian salon has been a home-away-from-home to the finest musicians, writers, artists and film stars ever since the Great Depression. It was in this exclusive residential inn that Grace Kelly roamed the corridors late at night and Jean Harlow conducted her secret love affair while honeymooning with her second husband. It was here Howard Hughes retreated to his penthouse suite to view – through his spyglass – the scantily clad women in the pool below. It was here also that Paul Newman fell in love with Joanne Woodward, and Marilyn Monroe spent her weekends with a secret suitor, and Dennis Hopper pursued a young Natalie Wood during the of *Rebel Without a Cause*. >>>



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PHOTO CREDIT

Ginger Rogers once said of this French replicate pile on the hill: "If only the walls could talk," but that was before Van Morrison made them sing with a private concert in the lobby, and Jim Morrison bloodied his sheets before falling out of his second-floor window.

It would seem, therefore, an appropriate place to meet Anjelica Huston, one-time muse to the world's great fashion photographers, former long-time partner of Jack Nicholson, Academy Award-winning film star, and member of one of Hollywood's most famed dynasties.

Anjelica's entry into the world 55 years ago in Santa Monica is still the stuff of fable, an event more than a mere birth. It was July 8, 1951, and her father, John Huston, was in the Belgian Congo (now Zaire) directing the film, *African Queen*, with Katharine Hepburn, Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall when, in the middle of a shoot, an African runner came bounding out of the jungle bearing a telegram. Huston took the envelope, opened it, read the contents and then stuffed the note back in his pocket before Lauren Bacall finally piped up, "For God's sake, John, what is it?"

"It's a girl," Huston replied. "Her name is Anjelica."

And almost ever since, there has been a mystique attached to the name. At 16, she began her acting career as an extra in *Casino Royale* before being cast in two of her father's films. At 17 she was hanging out with Warren Beatty and being feted by the Rolling Stones during the height of Swinging London's cultural assault on the world. At 20 she'd turned into an international fashion model, mesmerising the likes of Richard Avedon, David Bailey, Guy Bourdin and Helmut Newton with her exotic beauty. By the following year she'd met Jack Nicholson and begun what was to become a turbulent 16-year relationship, one that would end in 1989 only when she learnt he was to become the father of a child to his 26-year-old mistress, Rebecca Broussard. Anjelica had been trying for years to get pregnant.

And then there were all the roles that were to leave their indelible mark on our collective consciousness – the ruthless, amoral Lilly Dillon in *The Grifters* (for which she received an Oscar nomination), *The Grand High Witch in The Witches*, the slightly preposterous Morticia Addams in *The Addams Family*, the haunting Tamara Broder in *Enemies: A Love Story* (for which she received another Oscar nomination), the conspicuously awful Mrs Gwyneth Harridan in *Daddy Day Care* and, of course, the mafia don's vengeful daughter, Maerose Prizzi, in *Prizzi's Honor*, for which she won her Academy Award, playing opposite Jack Nicholson's hitman character, Charley Partana.

Let's do it, Charlie. Right here on the Oriental. With all the lights on!

Legends are built around the collection of noteworthy stories and here was another one for the annals. Anjelica had worked only sporadically in movies since her 1969 appearance in her father's film, *A Walk With Love and Death*. Then in 1984 she returned to the screen in *Prizzi's Honor* to become the first actor to ever win an Oscar in a film directed by a parent. She also happened to be the first person in motion picture history to win an Oscar where a parent and grandparent had done the same. (In 1949, John Huston won an Oscar as director of *The Treasure of The Sierra Madre*, a film in which he directed his own father, Walter Huston, to an Oscar-winning performance as best supporting actor.)

Yet despite all this heady success and fame, her life was suffused with sadness – the separation of her parents when she was a child, the sudden death of her mother at the age of 17, her struggles with the towering figure that was her father, the indignities caused by Jack Nicholson's renowned infidelities, the failure to have children ...

And so for all these reasons – and more – Anjelica Huston's life could be read as part fairytale, part ballad of a wistful girl, enough certainly to send this writer, or any other for that matter, on a pilgrimage in her direction.

ANJELICA HUSTON ENTERS the luxuriant garden courtyard of Chateau Marmont on a crisp afternoon in spring. There is no mistaking her. The queenly gait and tall, ramrod figure dressed head-to-foot in black. The dark auburn hair and sunglasses. The nose and mouth which, together, seem to forge this colossal, arresting beauty.

As she heads in my direction, I have visions of Morticia Addams or Maerose Prizzi – or a combination of the two – bearing down on me from a great height. But then comes the voice, a tuneful melody straight out of Ireland, where her childhood was spent, blended with a languid Californian drawl.

"Hello," she says quietly, offering a bejewelled hand. "I'm Anjelica. How was your flight?" And already there is a sense of melancholy in the air, although not for any reason I might have suspected.

"I've had a terrible morning," she offers almost immediately. "My dog Whippet just died," and it is at this point I realise that behind the dark glasses there is most likely the evidence of a morning spent in tears. I order Bloody Marys in an attempt to steer a path through the sadness and uncertainty. It seems to lift her spirits.

"Good Lord," she says almost cheerfully when the drinks arrive. "An alcoholic lunch."

It's well known that Anjelica Huston adores her animals, and revels in the natural environment. She has chickens, dogs and nine horses on her 60-hectare ranch and at her home in LA's Venice Beach – a fortress-like compound built for her by her sculptor/architect husband, Robert Graham – and as many as 11 cats, three indoor and eight outdoor.

"That's not by design," she says evenly. "I live in Venice and there are a lot of strays down there so ... a family will move in. I don't like the sight of starving cats. What can I tell you? They get well fed and they move in."

Whenever she can, Anjelica returns to her ranch two hours north of Los Angeles, in the shadows of the Sequoia National Park. She feels good in the natural world. "I like to be with animals," she says. "I like to garden. I like to be in the mud."

Show me the girl and I'll show you the woman. In 1953, appalled by the choking fear and intimidation set loose by Senator Joseph McCarthy's anti-Communist witch hunts, John Huston left the country, taking his family with him to live on a remote 60ha property in County Galway, Ireland. The place was called St Clerans and it came with its own Norman ruin, waterfalls and river.

"I guess every childhood," Anjelica says now, "is filled with its little ups and downs, its little falls and stumbles, and things that make you happy and unhappy throughout a day. But visually, in my memory, it's the most beautiful place I can think of. There was a big house, which was, in effect, my father's residence ... and there was a little house down a driveway separated by a bridge and that was, essentially, where my mother and my brother (Tony) and I grew up. And nanny."

By this time John Huston was already an iconic figure in the American narrative – a painter, sculptor, boxer, gambler, journalist and multi Oscar nominee for both his writing and directing – he'd already written his first play, (*Frankie and Johnny*), and directed enduring films such as *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *The African Queen* and *Moulin Rouge*.

He was brilliant, egotistical and restless, and Anjelica's mother, the Russian ballet dancer, Enrica (Ricki) Soma, was already buckling under the strain of trying to make this, her husband's fourth marriage, work.

The cues were there from the beginning. Huston's third wife, Evelyn Keyes, had become so fed up one day with the noise and mess made by one of her husband's pet monkeys that she'd demanded he choose between the monkey and herself.

"This one monkey used to go straight to the underwear drawer full of her bras and take everything that was faintly feminine and trash it," says Anjelica, laughing. "She was incredibly jealous ... and so finally, Evelyn, furious and outraged, said, 'That's it. It's the >>>

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PG CREDIT

monkey or me.' And my father chose the monkey." (More laughter.)

Her father's exploits were legendary. Gun battles in Mexico over pre-Columbian art. Elephant-hunting in Africa. Spectacular pranks with friends, such as the time he flew over a golf tournament in Palm Springs and dropped 5000 ping-pong balls on the course while the tournament was in progress. "I think my father was sort of a bad boy," Anjelica says.

As a child, she would visit him on film sets where he'd be making movies such as *The Misfits*, starring Marilyn Monroe and Clark Gable. "I'd come and visit him on location for a couple of weeks ... then I'd go back to school. I remember casting a jealous eye over Ava Gardner when I was about nine and thinking, 'That's what I want to be'."

After long absences, he would return home to host dinners with people such as Jean-Paul Sartre, John Steinbeck, Orson Welles, Robert Mitchum, Katie Hepburn, Bacall and Bogart. There were gifts for the children – semi-precious stones and pottery from Mexico, silk screens and kimonos from Japan ... and then, in the mornings, he would receive them like courtiers from his Louis XIV bed.

"He had the most beautiful bed in the world," Anjelica recalls, seemingly much more relaxed than when she arrived. "It was like artichoke leaves on the pillars ... and then two doves kissing on top. We'd run up the stairs to the big house, go up to his bedroom, never before 10 o'clock in the morning, unless it was our hunting morning ... and he'd get dressed, and it was this long ritual. He lived like a king."

And like many a king, his word was final and his tongue often wrathful. "He could be very frightening," Anjelica says. "I've seen people shake in their shoes."

WHEN ANJELICA WAS 10, her parents separated and she went to live in London with her mother and brother, Tony. (Tony Huston is today a well-known actor and writer.) By the time she was 17 she'd appeared in two of her father's films and rehearsed for the role of Ophelia in *Hamlet*, as understudy to Marianne Faithfull.

It was during these rehearsals that Anjelica was notified her mother had been killed in a car crash in France. She was 39.

"Isn't it terribly hard, so terribly hard, to negotiate death?" she says plaintively when I broach the subject of her mother. "My father was questioned once as to how we should all deal with his death [he died in 1987] and he said, 'Well, think of it as your own.' And, really, one has to.

"So the death of your mother is (long pause) ... it will leave you changed forever. There will never be another ... that particular pain, you know is very hard to negotiate. You'll be sad about things that will come up in your life. You will cry bitterly about things. But I think, for a level of pure shock value, you know your mother dying at such a young age is tremendously hard to fathom."

After her mother's death, Anjelica went to New York to promote her father's film and to continue understudying for *Hamlet*. During her visit, Richard Avedon, the acclaimed photographer and friend of her mother's, asked her to go to Ireland for a *Vogue* magazine shoot. It was the beginning of her modelling career, despite all the self-doubts.

"I always sort of mistrusted having my picture taken for magazines," she says. "I wanted to be a model, but I always felt, 'Oh, it's more because of who I am than what I can do.' I was very physically insecure at the time ... and in America I was still considered very exotic. You know, I had a big nose. I think I was more to European tastes."

Then one morning the call came from French *Vogue* asking if she'd like to work with the new prince of fashion photography, Helmut Newton. "I was ecstatic," she says now. "I'd never worked with him before. He was the apex ... the hippest of the hip." (Their collaboration and friendship would last more than three decades and, in January 2004, Anjelica would be among the few intimates gathered around Helmut's Australian wife, June, after Helmut suffered a fatal heart attack in the driveway of the Chateau Marmont.)

PHOTO CREDIT



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To this day, Anjelica remains unsure about her looks, despite being likened to a Caravaggio painting. "That's a great compliment ... [but] I think it's a mutable thing. There are moments when you think, 'I'm not so bad', and other moments where you get very depressed about the way you look. I'm never quite sure about how I look. I know how I'd like to look, and that's never really going to happen."

I mention to her that a writer once described the "Anjelica Huston look" as "Helena Rubinstein ritual rouge lipstick in acrylic, Maybelline wonder curl mascara and Christian Dior eye shadow in greys and copper".

Do you recognise any of that? "No," she replies, a deep, roiling chuckle catching in her throat. "A friend of mine who was an important fashion editor at one point in her life just told me recently, 'Anjelica, you should never wear red lipstick'. And I'm saying, 'Why didn't you tell me this, like, 40 years ago?' (more laughing) She said, 'I've always said that to you'. I said, 'You've never said it to me. You've had me making this gross mistake all my life'."

Maybe this fashion editor was wrong, I suggest. "But the worst thing is maybe she was right. I could have gone all these years without committing this terrible fashion mistake. It could have been completely different had I stayed away from that wicked red. And now I'm completely lost ... reduced to some meat colour."

Anjelica Huston is cackling now and the cool spring air suddenly feels warm around our faces.

IT'S A CURIOUS AND SPECIAL privilege to be able to sit with a complete stranger – in this case a very famous one – >>>



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and ask questions of an intimate nature, questions to do with marriage, children, ambition, purpose and, yes, Jack Nicholson, too.

Yet as the mood lightens, it seems possible to take the conversation in these directions, partly because Anjelica Huston seems to allow it with her natural warmth, intelligence and honesty. True she is guarded, but also surprisingly girlish, battle-hardened, but also vulnerable. A little like one of those strays, perhaps, she is so prone to adopting.

In 1992, three years after her relationship with Jack Nicholson ended, Anjelica married the Mexican-born sculptor, Robert Graham, putting an end, it seems, to a lifelong pattern of being drawn to rogues. Her half-brother, actor/writer, Danny Huston, went so far recently as to describe her relationship with Robert as “impossibly happy”.

“I think we have a good relationship, yeah,” she says. “I think it’s important to have your own thing going in a relationship. Your own vocation, your own passion. He’s completely absorbed by what he does. He’s really a consummate artist. And people are good when they have objectives, I feel. Purpose. Very important for a man. Purpose and a full stomach.”

One could say more? “And that too.” (laughing) I suggest to Anjelica that there’s long been this assumption about her having always been attracted to the bad boy, a hangover from her often difficult relationship with her father. “Well, they’re always cuter, aren’t they?” she replies. “They just are. They’re great, but you don’t necessarily want to be married to ’em. They break your heart. I think it’s important that you don’t pick someone who has the kind of potential for heartbreaking. You pick someone who is more adult, who’s not going to, you know, mess with you.”

Of course, that’s exactly who Anjelica chose to be with when she got together with Jack Nicholson, the one-time reigning lothario of Hollywood. She smiles ruefully. “Yeah ... but you know, those bad boys, those danger kids, they’re always attractive aren’t they? The brave and the beautiful. And they always die young.”

Yet Jack is still going? “Yeah, but you know ... he’s got a touch of the beast (laughing). A touch of the beast as well as the beautiful. It’s just the purely beautiful that don’t get to live.”

Are you still friends? “Yeah ... I mean ... yeah. I don’t see him a lot. I talk to him once in a while.”

On the subject of children, Anjelica admits she tried for years to have children, with Jack, as well as afterwards. And, yes, she went through the ordeal of in-vitro fertilisation. “They don’t tell you, you have to do it about 10 times in order to get results,” she says lightly. “By the time I got through two efforts I was ready to kill myself. It’s gruelling and also you feel very disappointed, very unfulfilled, if you don’t make the grade. You feel like a big pin cushion and a big failure at the same time. It’s depressing.

“And also you have to really, really, really passionately want it to go through that. And I frankly never felt that passionate about it ... There are certain days where I think, ‘Oh, that would have been nice,’ and other days where I think, ‘Thank God. I would have strangled this child by now.’”

In the absence of children, it would have been tempting to fill the noiseless spaces with work, and certainly Anjelica Huston has known prolific periods in her life. This year alone she has already appeared in two movies, *Art School Confidential* and *These Foolish Things* (with her childhood adoptive aunt, Lauren Bacall), as well as in the television mini-series, *The Hades Factor* (with her half-brother, Danny), and as a guest star in *Huff*, where she gets to play yet another formidable woman, this time psychiatrist Dr Lena Marlova.

She has also just finished working with Liam Neeson and Pierce Brosnan on *Seraphim Falls*, a movie about a Civil War colonel with a grudge. The movie is produced by Mel Gibson.

All this notwithstanding, Anjelica remains less than thrilled with the job offers coming her way. “I can’t say that I’m flabbergasted at the standard of woman’s roles out there,” she says. “I think it’s probably a really overlooked market – women over the age of 40 ... All of whom like to consume in one way or another, be it clothes or movies or whatever.

“I think there’s probably a big untapped love story market out there and I think they should probably do more about it. Yet they’re still making a lot of movies tailored to the 14-year-old boy – the eternal 14-year-old. He never grows up, does he? Bruce Willis is bald, but that 14-year-old boy is insatiable.”

Anjelica would prefer to direct, as she did in the 1990s, on movies such as *Agnes Browne* and *Bastard Out of Carolina*, but once again those possibilities seem limited. “Here’s the thing,” she says. “If they made it a little easier to do the initial hunting down and sort of capturing the prey, it might sort of be more enjoyable for me, but it’s so hard to get anything done. It’s so hard to get a movie off the ground ... unless you’re one of three people. Everyone is out there looking for the same money [and] I’ve never liked going round asking people for money. It’s never been one of my passions.”

Trying to save the world is also not on the agenda, despite the desperation she feels for her country at present and the admiration she feels for younger, politically committed actors such as Angelina Jolie. Anjelica remains a member of Amnesty International and chairwoman of Homeboys Industries, an organisation dedicated to rehabilitating gang members. “I do a bunch of stuff,” she says. “I’m not on a plane to the Sudan every other week, but I think there are ways of helping at home, too.”

So what is it, I ask finally, that gets her up in the morning? Anjelica lets out a sound somewhere between a moan and a yelp. “Well, I’d love to be able to say I’m like my husband, who gets up in the morning with a great, biting urge to push forward, but I’m not quite sure I’m that ambitious. I certainly don’t feel about the day as he does. I feel more incremental about it. If I can do small things to improve the situation around me, to beautify the situation around me, that’s where I’ll start. I don’t start in those hemispheric big ideas. I start with the planting of a tree and then I watch the thing grow and I say, ‘That’s great. It’s grown to a great height and it’s not posthumous.’”

The shadows have begun creeping over this famed Hollywood hotel as we walk through the garden courtyard back to Anjelica

FIG CREDIT

Huston's car. As the car door opens I see it's fitted out like a Turkish pasha's den – all ottomans, cushions and warm-toned rugs – the kind of private space you might imagine for a Hollywood legend to be in as she's spirited through the City of Angels. ■