



dress Alexander McQueen

Golden Girl

Renée Zellweger shines on and off the silver screen

by Johanna Lenander/photography Bryan Adams

Being a writer at a photo shoot is not something I normally enjoy. It usually involves a lot of waiting; a lot of, "I'm sorry to bother you, but when do you think so and so will be ready for the interview?" and a lot of trips to the catering table, which is embarrassing as I am usually the only person eating. However, on an early Saturday morning in June, as I walk into a tiny hotel bedroom crammed with clothing racks, hairdryers and stylists, I am struck by the warm and friendly vibe. People say hello. They smile. They chat and laugh. Then I notice that one of the petite blond women sitting in the room is not a stylist, like I had thought, but Renée Zellweger herself—in the flesh. It's not so much that she looks different in real life. Rather, it was her low-key manner and the relaxed attitude of those around her. It made me forget she was, well, a movie star.

THE INTERVIEW – SCENE 1.

Actress talks about dealing with stress. She says that as a metaphorical way to create order, she likes to do her own laundry, in a New York City laundromat.

Writer: That sounds like unusual movie star behavior.

Actress: Oh, I don't think so.

Writer: No?

Actress: What's "movie star behavior" anyway?

Writer: I wouldn't know.

Actress: Me neither. It's just living, right?

Writer: I suppose that's true. Everybody's people.

Actress: Exactly. [Laughs] What you call "movie star behavior" is in my translation "behavior that would render one friendless." [Laughs again] It implies entitlement and it makes me laugh, 'cause I think how do you become entitled when you're lucky enough to have a job that you like?

Writer: I guess it's because the rest of us feel so removed from all of that that you almost don't think of movie stars as human beings...

Actress: [Laughs] It's funny, I was walking home from the shoot yesterday and this woman stopped to say hello. And she was

surprised because she said that I really looked like myself and she said 'most of them don't' and it made me laugh.

Most people want to be regarded as individuals and recognized for who they are. For actors, this must be an existential dilemma. In their job, they invest their heart and soul in various fictional characters. Yet, they also have to ensure that their off-duty personality sparkles while remaining appropriately opaque.

As an actress, Zellweger has a talent for convincingly inhabiting vastly different roles. She can be earnest, conniving, funny, heartbreaking, sexy, frumpy, and pretty much whatever else is needed from a leading lady. She's really good on the red carpet too—gracious, witty, knockout elegant.

But just like in her movie roles, the actress does not get caught up in stereotypes or genres. The off-duty Renée Zellweger seems determined to live her life in a way that can make ordinary people relate. She goes to the laundromat. She took the train to the Obama inauguration and stood huddled up in the crowd like everyone else. She is unfailingly friendly and polite. And most unusually, she listens. She absorbs what other people have to say and offers a response.

"It's interesting because the parameters for



Anne Deveraux (Renée Zellweger)
next to son George (Logan Lerman),
My One and Only (2009)
© RCV Entertainment

what is considered acceptable behavior are very ambiguous now," says Zellweger. "With the cell phone camera, you get that thing where your picture is taken but it's not taken with you, it's taken of you, as if you were the Statue of Liberty or something. People don't say 'hello,' they just put the phone in your face and snap."

Zellweger laughs as she speaks. She has always dealt with life's little adversities by turning them into comedy. "I look for humor everywhere, all day, every day," she says. "It's a constant. It's in my life perspective, my communication, my defense mechanisms. It's my go-to safe place. Inappropriate moments for laughter make me laugh the most. Surgery. Biopsies. When things are going so badly that there's nothing else to do."

Zellweger's sense of humor has served her well. She is not just an actress doing comedy, she is genuinely funny. Her performances are delightfully hilarious because of the humanity she brings to her parts.

In the upcoming romantic comedy, *My One and Only*, Zellweger plays Anne Deveraux, a bourgeois '50s housewife who takes her sons on a cross-country quest for a new husband. "She's a little detached; she's not involved with her

children and she's living a role, with unrealistic expectations for perfection," says Zellweger. "She's aspiring to live the American dream as one might envision it in its most idealized state as opposed to being involved and grounded in what's true." Through trials and tribulations and failed attempts at romance, Deveraux gradually starts to reverse her value system. "It's a really interesting transition. She starts to involuntarily lose the things that she uses to define herself and she really discovers her own value and strength and starts to have real relationships," says Zellweger. "And I like her, even when she's running around in the beginning of the story, ridiculously. She's fun. She's naively optimistic in a silly way that actually becomes more and more important as her story progresses and it develops into something much more genuine."

It's interesting to hear an actress give her character such an astute diagnosis of dysfunction. Do you have to understand tragedy to be funny? "I don't know," says Zellweger. "I think funny comes from smart. But when I'm working on a movie, I don't think of it in terms of how people receive it, as in, 'this is funny, this is sad.' It's just whatever is honest, you know."

Finding that core of honesty in a horror film is a more complex business. Zellweger's first scary

movie, *Case 39*, is about a social worker who tries to intervene in a child abuse case but ends up being pulled in too deep. The movie opens this winter. "It's scary as an actor because there's a lot of vulnerability in the mix," she says. "You have to have complete faith in your collaborators when you're asked to do certain things that may not be based in reality. 'Cause if you took them literally, you'd feel quite silly."

Zellweger says she was drawn to the project because the script reminded her of the creepy, subtly unraveling plots of masterpieces such as *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Shining*. "She's interesting to me. I like that she seems to get her self worth from doing right by other people. It's almost like a compulsion," says Zellweger of her character Emily Jenkins. "I love watching her lose her surefootedness in this place of moral virtue and losing her ability to distinguish between what's real and what's in her mind. It's really interesting to watch her deteriorate into the kind of person that she's trying to protect people from."

The movie was directed by German director Christian Alvart and shot in Canada three years ago. "It was exhausting. But it was what I needed. I needed to go to Vancouver and work in the rain with a very demanding young director

who's inspired and on fire. We worked really long days sometimes without stopping to go to the bathroom. I've never before worked with someone who moved the camera so quickly, it was very impressive," says Zellweger. "One time we did 62 setups in a day, which is unheard of. And I have very, very fond memories of it."

As hardworking and as down to earth she seems to be, there was one time when Zellweger refused to come out of her trailer. It was the night of November 4, 2008—the U.S. presidential election. Zellweger and many of the crew who were filming the upcoming *My Own Love Song* were glued in front of the television news. They didn't stop watching until John McCain gave his concession speech and Barack Obama addressed ecstatic crowds in Chicago.

"I write checks and I watch the news and I suffer hives pretty regularly, but, I don't know, I don't talk about it," says Zellweger of her political fervor. "I think it's easy to damage the thing you intend to help unless you are responsible in how you approach something, and I believe you have to do work to substantiate your opinions before you push them on to the public."

Zellweger is an avid reader and is more knowledgeable about foreign affairs and recent political history than most of her fellow Americans. That may be one reason why she remains so connected to the real world.

THE INTERVIEW – SCENE 2.

Actress is talking about the stunning photo and reportage book, *Intended Consequences: Rwandan Children Born of Rape*, by photo journalist Jonathan Torgovnik.

Actress: I recently read a book by this guy who went to Rwanda to photograph the sons and daughters of rape victims from the 1994 massacre. It's about how the mothers have managed to find love for their children and what a struggle it is that they're the product of both Hutu and Tutsi parents. They have both their features and they're recognized as mixed race. It was a real smack to think about how rape in that war was a process, a war tool, and how these women were repeatedly gang raped and sometimes taken from place to place and abused over and over again. The atrocities are too many to mention and it's silly to try to pretend that you can properly empathize from your apartment in NYC, but it moved me profoundly. And you start to think 'I never had a bad day! I never

had a bad day, ever!'

Writer: That's why it's important to keep your eyes open to the world...

Actress: Anyway, this is not the happy photo shoot at the beautiful Standard Hotel, is it?

Writer: No it's not! So let's...

Actress: Let's move on to clothes!

Writer: Yes! So what's with you and Carolina Herrera? [Actress has exclusively worn Herrera's designs for public events since 2002]

Actress: It's a wonderful relationship and I'm so grateful for it because it eliminates most of the things that I find impossibly uncomfortable about my profession.

Writer: Which are?

Actress: You know, being responsible for being appropriate and all the politics involved. I can't ask a bunch of designers to spend tons of time – even if they offer – on a dress that I might wear. I can't accept that, it's too much! I can't do it! I have a very good relationship with everyone at Carolina Herrera; they're so generous and I have really great friendships with some of the people who work there. In the off-chance that something doesn't work

out we can communicate openly. And it's enriched the experience of having this public persona side of the job. It's made it fun in a way that I would never have imagined. I get an excuse to see my friends! It's like the photo shoot for this story – I'm going to miss that group of people. I like getting together all day and collaborating like that and sitting in the hotel room laughing with those people who became my friends. I'm kind of having a lifetime of that and I love it.

Writer: Because you're constantly collaborating.

Actress: Yes all the time. And it's fun. It's just fun.

I must confess now that I didn't linger at the photo shoot that Saturday morning. The timing of the interview was vague and I didn't want to wait around all day. I interviewed Zellweger on the telephone instead. Remarkably, when she called me at the scheduled time two days later, she immediately asked me where I had gone to that Saturday. I was surprised. I was surprised she had noticed I was gone, and surprised that she cared. After speaking to her, I'm no longer as astonished. People are important to Zellweger. She wants to make connections, real connections, to those she meets. I think it's about mutual respect. And it might have something to do with wanting to have a positive impact in the world. If you see her, I think you should smile and say hello.



Emily Jenkins (Renée Zellweger) and Lillith (Jodelle Ferland) in *Case 39*, photography: Mark Fellman, © 2007 by Paramount Pictures

Renée Zellweger

by Bryan Adams

New York, Saturday, June 21st and Sunday, June 22nd, 2009.
Against the sleek, industrial backdrop of André Balazs's very unstandard Standard Hotel in Manhattan's Meatpacking District, Renée Zellweger showcases her trademark versatility. Dressed in some of this season's key looks, the Hollywood actress shows photographer Bryan Adams how she can bring any character to life, even in a frozen image.





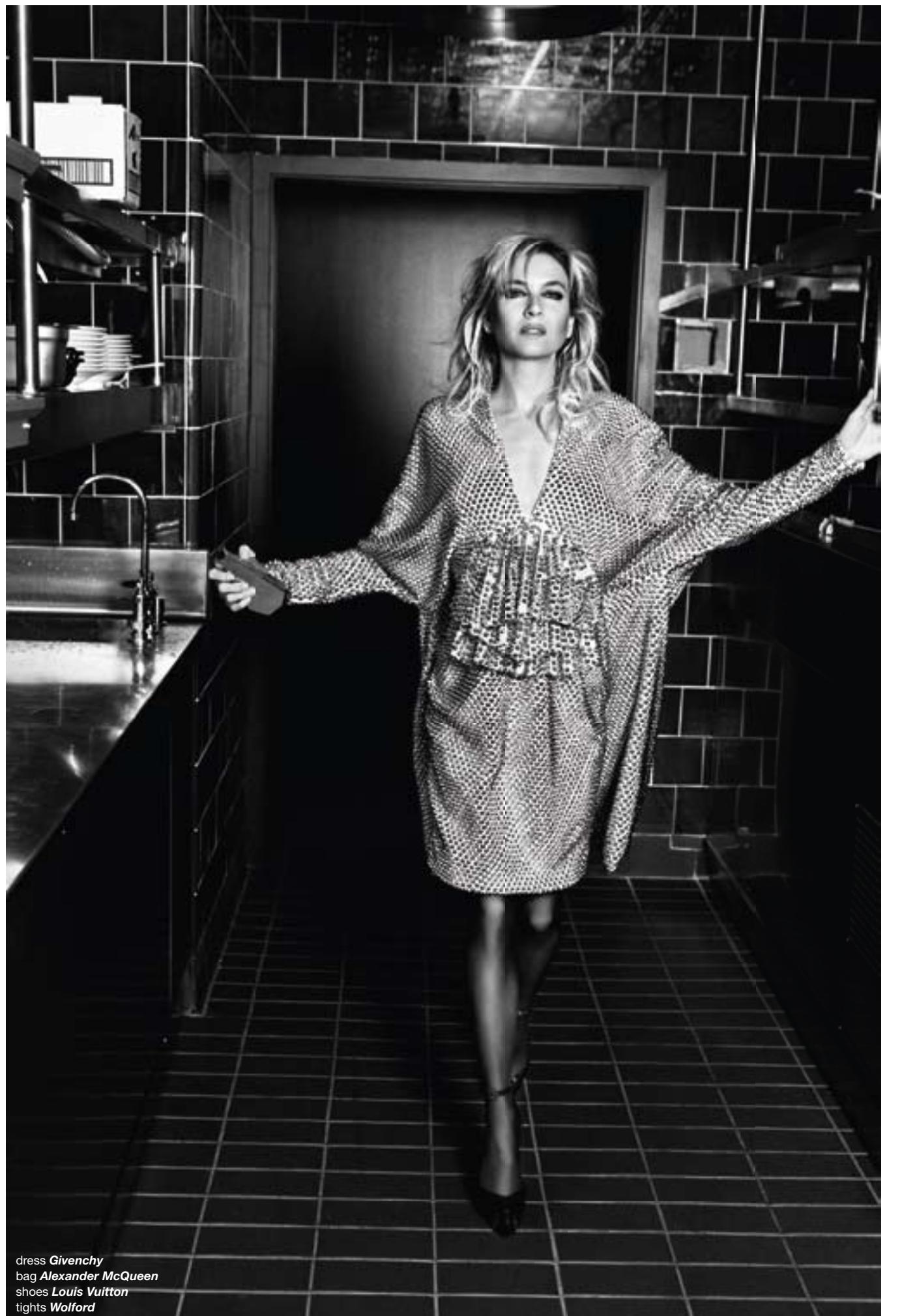
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boots **Gucci**
tights **Wolford**



bodystocking, shoes, shawl
and boa **Maison Martin Margiela**



dress *Chanel*
tights *Wolford*
shoes *Yves Saint Laurent*



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shoes *Louis Vuitton*
tights *Wolford*





dress Ioannis Dimitrousis
tights Alexander McQueen





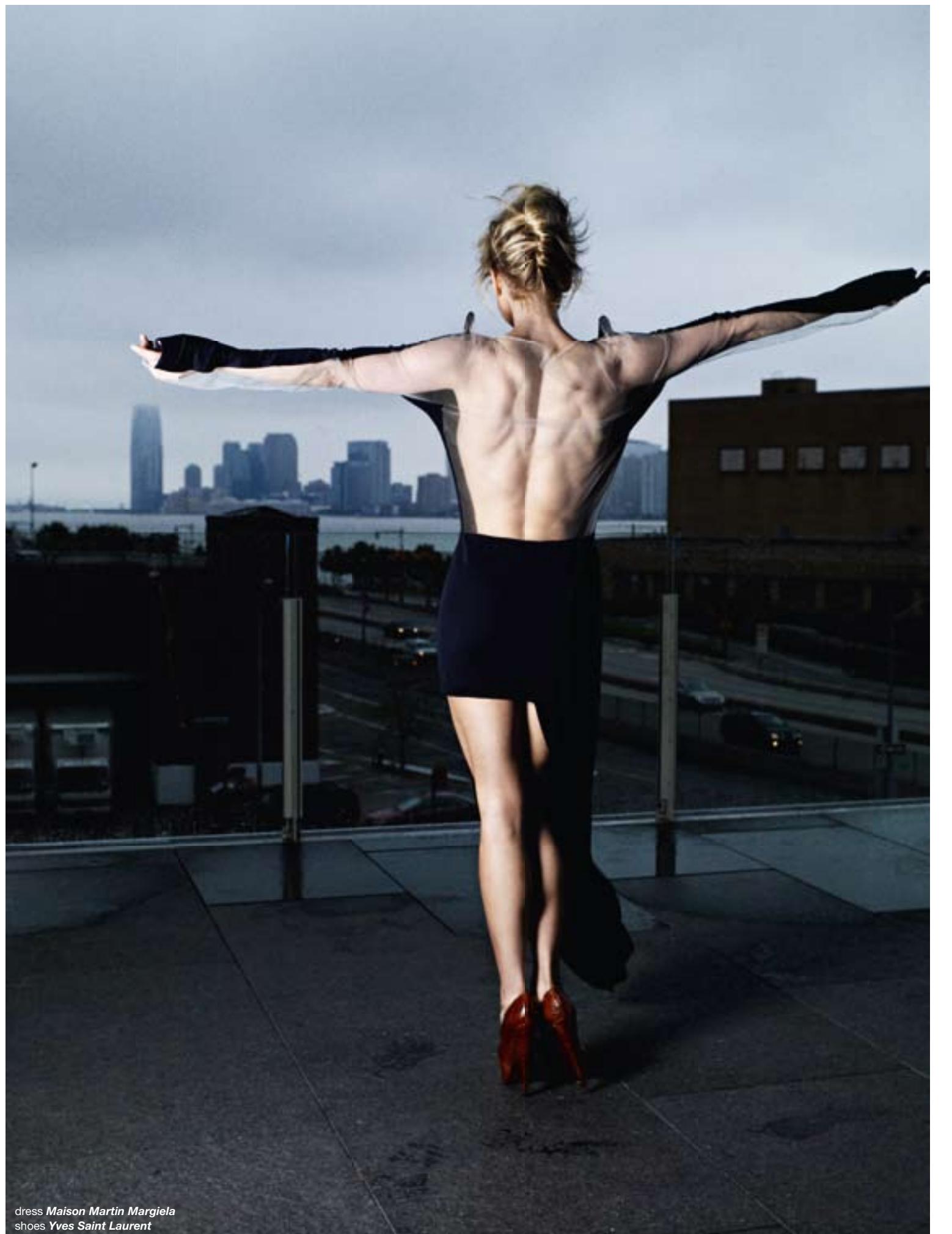
dress *Maison Martin Margiela*
shoes *Yves Saint Laurent*

Left page
dress *Yves Saint Laurent*
collar *The Blonds*
tights *Wolford*
shoes *Louis Vuitton*
bracelet *Eddie Borgo*



Renée:
dress **Doo.Ri**
shoes **Chanel**

Bryan:
all **Calvin Klein Collection**



dress *Maison Martin Margiela*
shoes *Yves Saint Laurent*



dress and boots *Nina Ricci*
jacket *Balmain*