



Behind the public facade of La Bella Rossellini hides a woman who's more vulnerable than vivacious. By Karen Moline.

ISABELLA

It's a balmy evening on a wide plaza in the shadow of the Buntessminister für Arbeit und Sozialordnung near the Alexanderplatz in what used to be East Berlin. Isabella Rossellini and co-star Campbell (Dying Young) Scott, both dressed in vintage 1950s style, are on take six of a scene on the set of *The Innocent*. As 'Shake, Rattle, & Roll' comes over the radio, the couple, giddy with happiness and seemingly carefree, begin an impromptu dance outside a wurst stand. They stop when a dog snatches dinner from Scott's fingers. But the dog is a bit over-excited and, when he misses his cues, it's more like a scene scripted by Woody Allen than author Ian McEwen.

"All right, let's go again," says director John Schlesinger as the trainer gives his eager Fido a stern talking-to.

The period clothes suit Rossellini. The wide skirts cinched with a belt, the cropped sweater, her hair curled in soft waves. She looks luminously beautiful and awfully like her mother, Ingrid Bergman. And a few days later, when make-up and a grey wig have aged her 30 years, the resemblance is almost frightening. But Rossellini has never capitalised on the fame of her parents. Instead, she carved out a career first as a television journalist, next, and quite unexpectedly, as a top model at 29 and the face of Lancôme at 30, an age when most models are crying into their moisturiser; then as an actress who made her Hollywood film debut at 33 when Taylor Hackford hired her opposite Mikhail Baryshnikov in *White Nights*.

"Well," she says in an accent more Swedish than Italian, as we sit in her trailer, her dachshund and Jack Russell terrier, Ziggy and Macaroni, in her lap, "I am a late bloomer."

Ask anyone on the set to describe Rossellini and you'll hear the same word over and over again: vulnerable. It's not just because her character, Maria, a shy German secretary who proves her love for Scott's character (the innocent of the title) with a heartbreaking twist at the end, has been concocted by McEwen, whose brilliant flair for turning the banal into the shockingly horrific stretches Maria's vulnerability to its very limits. It's because Rossellini, with her round face and easy smile, seems herself to be both accessible and hidden. Although she can be amazingly beautiful — large eyes of an unusual shade of hazel set in a face that has not only sold a million tubes of *Immencils* but is one Schlesinger readily admits is loved by the camera — she can also seem downright ordinary in some lights.

Very real, without the chiselled cheekbones most models have sliced in as if with a scalpel, Rossellini has no hesitation about walking around the set with her hair in rollers. Preferring no make-up, when she isn't modelling for Lancôme, her whole persona is decidedly

non-movie-starish. Her sentences are punctuated with the word "embarrassed". Even though she is quick to laugh, she is exhausted from months on location in unusually hot weather ("It's lonely," she says), as well as the challenge of the most complicated role she's played since her tormented lounge singer in *Blue Velvet*. And her six-year relationship with director David Lynch is over. Ask me to describe her and only one word comes to mind: vulnerable.

And when I stray too close to raw nerves, Rossellini, who is normally extremely forthcoming in interviews, is forthright with me: "I feel a little bit embarrassed to talk about these things; it's too close."

An alluring hybrid of her father's intellectual curiosity and voracious Italian appetites and her mother's radiance, beauty, and Swedish practicality, Rossellini is the progeny of one of Hollywood's great scandals.

Bergman, world-famous and well-loved for the selfless characters she played in *Casablanca* and *Joan of Arc*, fell in love with director Roberto Rossellini while she was married to Dr Peter Lindstrom. Her daughter, Pia, was soon to have a brother when Bergman became pregnant to Roberto Rossellini. By June 1952, when Isabella and her twin sister Isotta (also called Ingrid) were born, Bergman and Rossellini were married and the scandal was old news. After they divorced, in 1957, the children grew up in Rome with nannies, maids, their father, and an aunt and cousins next door. Bergman visited as often as her schedule allowed and took the children during the summer and holidays. But it wasn't always an enchanted time. When she was 13, Rossellini was diagnosed with scoliosis, and spent several agonising years being "stretched" on what her mother called a medieval torture rack, operated on, and living in body casts.

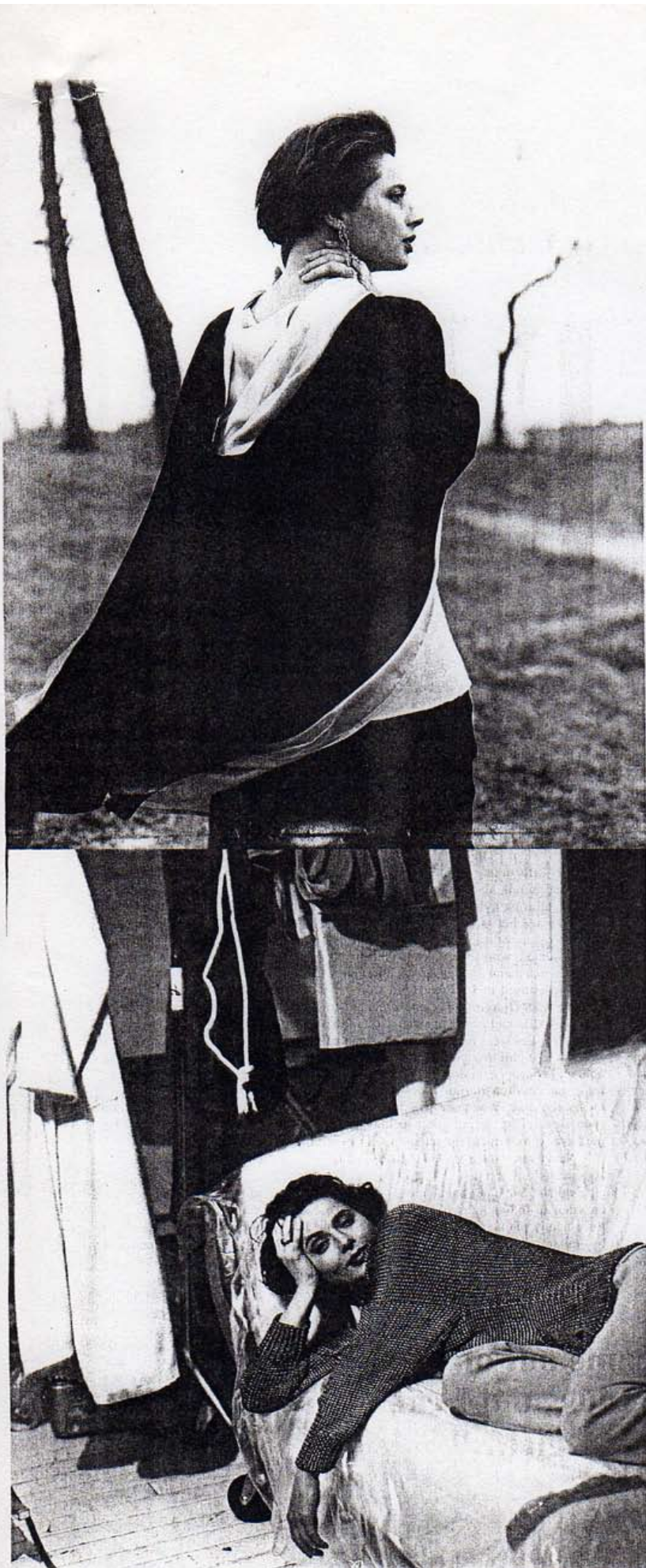
Never much of a student, Rossellini fully recovered from her back surgery and arrived in America at 19 to visit her mother. Only a few weeks after taking an English course at a language school, she was asked to teach Italian there. She also met an Italian journalist who hired her because her multi-lingual skills made for a handy phone-mate; eventually, he taught her the ropes of reporting. Hired by Italian television's RAI, she worked for nearly four years on a show called *L'Altra Domenica*, combining comedy with unusual journalism, and interviewing anyone from circus performers to Muhammad Ali and director Martin Scorsese.

The last was a fortuitous meeting. Scorsese was not only a huge fan of her

father's but soon became one of hers. They married in September 1979. When Rossellini told her mother she was going to marry Scorsese, the following dialogue, according to Bergman's autobiography, ensued:

"Does he move you?" Bergman asked.

**"David came out of
Blue Velvet a genius, and I came
out of it a fat girl..."**



"What do you mean?" Rossellini said.

"Does he move you?"

"Yes, Mother, he moves me completely."

Ultimately, he moved her the wrong way. There were long work-related separations. His was a life consumed by film; Rossellini was trying to find her niche. "When my programme went off the air, I started working as a straight journalist but didn't much like it," she says. "Then I had the opportunity to become a model. I had posed for Bruce Weber and Bill King just for fun, you know, to see what kind of work they could do. When I got the cover of *Vogue*, it became an overnight success and, within a month, my life had changed."

It could have been an agonising time, 1982, with divorce and her mother's death. But her half-joking foray into modelling put her on the March cover of *American Vogue* in what became the magazine's biggest seller in 10 years. Other covers followed. By September she'd been signed to Lancôme with a US\$2-million, 5-year contract — paying her US\$325,000 a year for approximately 35 days work.

"Isabella has turned everything around," says Bruce Weber, "making age, depth, experience and substance, attractive."

"People assumed I was 21. They didn't ask and I didn't say," Rossellini says with a laugh. "Then, when Lancôme came out, it was, 'Oh gosh — she's so old!' But I'm convinced that it's the warmth in the ads that makes them a success, not my beauty. It transcended age, transcended everything. It was a warm, good feeling, not this non-expression perfection."

Not long after she began modelling, Rossellini met Jonathan Wiedemann on a shoot in Mexico. He was working as a model to finance his film studies at New York University. They fell in love. Three months after signing her Lancôme contract she became pregnant and Wiedemann and Rossellini married. Elettra was born in 1983.

While pregnant and "fat", as she terms it, Rossellini began taking acting classes. She'd made her film debut with a walk-on role in *A Matter of Time*, with her mother and Liza Minnelli, and had starred in the Taviani brothers' *The Meadow* in 1982. She'd had her doubts about that film. Scorsese — her husband at the time — had not been helpful: "Oh my God, an actress, deliver me from an actress," he had said.

But Rossellini felt linked to the Italians, who venerated her father, and her mother was always encouraging, telling her to "keep it simple". Reviews remarked on her mysterious grace, so reminiscent of Ingrid Bergman's.

When Rossellini auditioned for Hackford's *White Nights*, he was not impressed. She threw herself into study — acting and Russian — and changed his mind. Too bad, for it was a disappointing film that did little to showcase her talent. Worse still, Rossellini had turned down the leading role in *Witness* — a part that launched Kelly McGillis with a flourish.

Enter David Lynch. When he was first introduced to Rossellini, who had divorced Wiedemann in 1985, he said, "You could be Ingrid Bergman's daughter." Ding-dong!

Another fortuitous meeting. Not only did they become a couple, but Lynch cast her as Dorothy in *Blue Velvet* — it was Rossellini's own *succès de scandale*. Although it was a brave and brilliant portrayal of a victimised woman, who was seen both badly bruised and totally nude, the vividness of her degradation was deeply unsettling. Some critics called it the sickest movie ever made. "This movie is a little bit like picking up a rock and discovering something horrible but continuing to look," said one reviewer — Rossellini's sister, Pia.

"David came out of it a genius, and I came out of it a fat girl," Rossellini remarks. "People said, 'Wait a minute. Is she disturbed? We thought she was a nice model, Ingrid Bergman's daughter. And here comes this psycho!' But I never felt exploited or abused. I am still trying to understand it."

After that came her role as a governess in *Zelly and Me*, a delicate and little-seen film. *Cousins*, a tepid remake of the French *Cousin, Cousine*, followed; the woeful *Tough Guys Don't Dance* came after that, then the incomprehensible *Siesta*, and a bizarre, wasted cameo in Lynch's *Wild at Heart*. She's also appeared in international co-productions *Les Dames Galantes* and *The Siege of Venice* as well as *The Tracey Ullman Show* (displaying the flair for comedy she'd shown as a journalist) and two made-for-the-tube flicks: *The Last Elephant* and *Lies of the Twins*, with Aidan Quinn. Not exactly box-office.

Still, it was work, and any actress in Hollywood is happy to be working these days. Even Meryl Streep is doing press junkets for *Death Becomes Her*, a black comedy in which Rossellini plays Lisle von

Rhumans, a Gothic sorceress with a vial of glittering pink potion promising eternal youth. Although she tries hard to look and act like the she-devil incarnate, there's something so inherently *likable* about Rossellini that nastiness is negated. (It's the kind of part made for Anjelica Huston.) Nor is she helped by inane dialogue, an unflattering haircut, and a jewelled bib heavy enough to sink the *Titanic*.

The *Innocent* finds Rossellini, now 40, at a crossroads. It is the most challenging role of her career — a real star turn — in a film that could finally establish her as a bankable and versatile actress. And there is a big difference between playing victim and vulnerable. Rossellini has always been willing to strip off her glamour and immerse herself in character, but none of her films have been huge hits; only her collaborations with Lynch brought her critical acclaim. "To me she's got a mysterious quality," Lynch said of her. "I think she could play women who have experienced a lot of life, women who drive men sort of crazy."

The role of Maria could do that for her. "It's difficult enough to find good parts altogether," Rossellini explains.

he relaxed into character only after intensive rehearsals and rewrites with Schlesinger, McEwen, Scott, and fellow co-star Anthony Hopkins. "I was astounded that there were people so sure of themselves and so secure in their talents that you could talk to them so openly," she says. "Before, I always felt that I was the stupid one, full of doubts; it's so embarrassing because you always assume that you're supposed to instinctively understand all about your part. I have never worked with people who came to the set each day with such clarity."

Modelling is still a major part of her life, and Lancôme has stuck by her, through pregnancy and the *Blue Velvet* controversy. "Lots of people write to me and say 'I'm 35, I want to be a model, can I do it?' and I do write back saying there was that little bit of space and I was able to occupy it, that there really isn't space at 35 to start. I was the lucky one."

Rossellini does not consider herself a sex symbol. The very notion sets her off in gales of laughter. "That would embarrass me," she says. "I don't really think I am. If there's been a corporation who's analysed me for 10 years it's Lancôme, and I've always heard from them that they're very proud that women like me, that women don't feel threatened because I'm not a sex symbol." One thing women especially respond to is her figure. Slim and trim, but with a woman's curves, Rossellini is *real*, not some semi-starved stick. "I hope the tendency is away from thin, so I can eat," she says, laughing again. "Models do have bigger breasts now, because the aesthetic of the moment demanded it. Now all we've got to get is the hips and we have it made!"

"It's strange, isn't it ... fascinating, how women respond," she adds. "A lot of it is selling dreams."

One of her own dreams has been to have her own extended family. Rossellini — the matriarch of her own clan, living in New York near both her sisters to whom she is very close, visited often by Robertino and her assorted Rossellini step-siblings — is happiest when surrounded by family and children. To be single again at 40 does not seem a thrilling prospect.

Then I tell her a peculiar story. Several years ago, I was walking through New York's SoHo, not far from the 5-bedroom loft Rossellini calls home, when I saw her and Lynch talking. It looked like they were trying to decide where to eat. "Yes, he probably wanted french fries and I said you're ruining my career," Rossellini says.

"When I looked at you I got the funniest feeling, even though I'd never met you, that you were going to split up," I continued. "I have no idea why. Forgive me for sounding like an idiot."

"No, it's not idiotic at all," she replies. "We all have intuition." And then she laughs ruefully. "I wish you had told me."

"I would like to have more children, but it's a bit late to think about it," she adds with a sigh. "Maybe it has been a problem in our generation, the demands of trying to have a career. But I have many friends in their late thirties or early forties who are wishing to have their first baby, or have never settled, or have a bad marriage. It's funny, because what society expects from us is out of our control. Everyone thinks you're so independent ... and then you find out, you look back, and you say, God, I followed so much..."



Snapshots from the Rossellini album include mother Ingrid, father Roberto (above), twin sister Ingrid and brother Robertino. Isabella's men, clockwise from below right: Martin Scorsese, David Lynch and Jonathan Wiedemann.

