

Face Forward

Michelle Pfeiffer is that rare breed of Hollywood actress who has managed to maintain a level head while balancing fame with family life. Now, as the older-woman seductress in her upcoming film *Chéri*, she isn't afraid to act her age — and make it sexy. **By Matt Mueller**

Ever since her initial burst of stardom in the 1980s, Michelle Pfeiffer has been graced with a fitting nickname: 'The Face'. Now, at 50, entering the latest phase of her illustrious career, she looks as striking and luminous as she was at her A-list pinnacle. Those aqua-blue eyes are still piercing; and her cliff-edge cheekbones, flawless skin and pert nose still rank among the most sought-after celebrity body parts, according to polls of Beverly Hills plastic surgeons.

Meeting Pfeiffer in person at the Berlin Film Festival, she radiates an impeccably groomed lustre and a birdlike fragility, sporting tortoiseshell glasses and an open-necked grey silk blouse underneath a charcoal-

coloured cardigan. She is the definition of graceful ageing.

Thus, it seems fitting that her most significant starring role since 2000's Hitchcockian thriller *What Lies Beneath* — as a retired courtesan in Stephen Frears' *Chéri* — is all about facing up to encroaching age. The film, based on the novel by Colette, is set in the luxurious, decadent demimonde of 1920s Paris, where glamorous, powerful, wealthy courtesans were the lovers of princes, kings and heads of state — and the most influential celebrities of their day. Pfeiffer's sensual, mesmerising Lea de Lonval embarks on a doomed love affair with Rupert Friend's Chéri, who is 20 years her junior and the dissolute son of her old rival (Kathy Bates).



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Clockwise from top left Pfeiffer as singer Susie Diamond in *The Fabulous Baker Boys*; starring opposite Harrison Ford in the 2000 thriller *What Lies Beneath*; as beauty-obsessed witch Lamia in 2007’s *Stardust*; with Rupert Friend in the upcoming film *Chéri*; and in her breakout role as Al Pacino’s girlfriend in 1983’s *Scarface*. Above Pfeiffer with her husband, TV writer and producer David E. Kelley, son John Henry and daughter Claudia.

“We find Lea at a time in her life when the loneliness of her profession is beginning to dawn on her,” says Pfeiffer. She adds of Friend, “My leading men just keep getting younger the older I get; it seems that people have an aversion to casting people of the same age. But, lucky for me, I don’t mind it.”

Chéri is anchored by the actress’s evocative, vulnerable performance, qualities that she has brought to bear in her most famous roles – from gangster’s moll Elvira in *Scarface* (1983) to sultry lounge singer Susie Diamond in *The Fabulous Baker Boys* (1989) and, of course, virtuous Madame de Tourvel in *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988). No one plays beautiful suffering with more nifty and elegant flair than Pfeiffer, a quality that Frears, her director in both *Dangerous Liaisons* and *Chéri*, spotted straight away. “I knew as soon as I met Michelle that she can upset you,” he says. “She’s unnerving, as though being that beautiful contains its own tragic quality.”

Indeed, Pfeiffer’s presence has frequently scorched the screen, even though she has on occasion chosen films that did not live up to her talents (*The Deep End of the Ocean*, *Dangerous Minds*) and turned down films that went on to become classics (*The Silence of the Lambs*, *Thelma & Louise*). Not that Pfeiffer sees it that way; she says she has always responded to character first and story second.

She’s also always been fond of deprecating her own iconic beauty, comparing her face to a duck’s (pointing out the way her top lip rises towards her nose) and claiming that her beauty regime consisted of a bar of soap and eating whatever she liked. Now she religiously runs six miles a day and adheres to a classic actress’ diet, free of wheat, dairy and sugar – when she needs to, that is. “When I’m working, I take really good care of myself, and when I’m not working, I stay out of sight and let myself go,” she laughs. “But I think the fact that I’m happy and enjoy my life helps. And the fact that I stopped smoking when I was 30.”

Born, raised and still residing in California, Pfeiffer went from supermarket check-out girl to beauty pageant winner (Miss Orange County 1978) to inauspicious début (*Grease 2*) to Hollywood royalty with heady speed. In 1993, she married TV writer and producer David E. Kelley (*Ally McBeal*, *The Practice*), adopted a daughter and settled into the role of mother, putting it ahead of her career (her son with Kelley – John Henry – followed a year after Claudia’s adoption).

In 2002, the family upped sticks and left L.A., moving to an enormous ranch in northern California stocked with animal-lover Pfeiffer’s menagerie of horses, cats, dogs and miniature donkeys. It was a chance to take a

four-year break from the madness of L.A., where “the paparazzi have lost their minds,” and to become less focused on her career. Did she feel confident that the roles would be there for her on her return?

“I didn’t really think about it,” she says. “It’s not unusual for actors to take a year or two off, especially if you’ve been going strong for a long time. So I was off for a couple of years, and then that huge move with my family just became a much bigger deal than I anticipated. When the dust finally settled, I realised I hadn’t worked in four years. And I was getting itchy by then.”

Since her ‘comeback’ (a word she hates) in 2007, Pfeiffer has made a splash as a 5,000-year-old, beauty-obsessed witch in *Stardust* and an icy, racist housewife in the musical *Hairspray*. Both roles contained their fair share of comedy, a genre she has always seemed comfortable with (see *Married to the Mob* and *The Witches of Eastwick*), though she insists she prefers dramatic roles, like *Chéri*’s Lea. “I find comedy difficult, because you have the added pressure to be funny as well as being real,” she says. “I’m only ever as funny as the writing is – and sometimes not even that funny.”

Now, as her teenage children prepare to fly the coop (Claudia just turned 16; John Henry is 14), Pfeiffer expects that she’ll be significantly increasing her work load in the next few years – which is good news for her fans as well as film-makers.

“I just love having a purpose every day,” she explains. “Once you have children, that becomes the purpose that’s more important. When I didn’t have children, I really needed to work, because it fed me, and I loved doing it. Now I can wait for the right thing. But when they leave, I will probably work more.”

While many women would be daunted by the prospect of ageing in plastic-surgery-obsessed Hollywood – not to mention an impending empty nest – Pfeiffer faces her future with a grounded, laid-back confidence that is born of maturity. “If you think hitting 40 is liberating, wait till you hit 50,” she vouches. “I was surprised at how liberating it was because, as with everything, the anticipation of something is always much worse than the reality. If anything, it makes you more grateful for what you have. You count your blessings.” ■

***Chéri* opens on 8th May in the United Kingdom.**

Matt Mueller contributes to Total Film, Premiere, Grazia, The Guardian and Wonderland