

Cruz control

Her role in 'Vicky Cristina Barcelona' proves Penelope Cruz is as much of an actor as she is a star

BY HELEN PIDD
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PHOTO: AFP

In the basement of a five-star hotel in London, just before Christmas, Rebecca Hall — one of the stars of the latest Woody Allen film, *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* — is holding court before an audience of the British film industry's biggest cheeses. The people in the room are captivated by the 26-year-old, who is seen as one of the brightest lights coming through in cinema, until an excited whisper comes from the back of the room: "Penelope's coming, Penelope's coming." From that moment, Hall might as well only be on stage to fill the water jugs. She is ignored as flashbulbs go off and necks strain towards the door. Penelope Cruz has entered the building.

There is something about Cruz that makes people forget their manners. When I ask ordinarily sensible friends what I should ask the 34-year-old Spaniard when I meet her, a month later, to talk about her Oscar nomination for her supporting role in *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, they all fail to offer a question, and instead swoon over her extraordinary beauty.

And she is stunning; in the flesh she almost looks like a character from a Japanese manga cartoon, with her disproportionately big brown eyes peering out from her tiny little face. Even wearing ripped jeans, a sober black shirt and jacket, and wearing thick makeup that fails to disguise a few reassuring spots, there is something terribly sexy about her — particularly the thicket of dark, messy hair that looks as though it has been roughed up on a pillow all afternoon. Then you have the accent. It's still audible — she struggles sometimes with the "d" in "Woody," so that it sounds like "woolly" — but it has certainly mellowed since the days when she first went to Hollywood and had to learn her lines for *The Hi-Lo Country* phonetically, never really understanding a word she was saying.

Cruz's sensuality was what got her noticed, aged 17, in the very raunchy Spanish film *Jamon, Jamon*, in which she rolled around alongside Javier Bardem (now her real-life boyfriend), and it plays a crucial role in her latest film, too. In *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, Cruz plays the manic and murderous ex-wife of Juan Antonio Gonzalo, played by Bardem; she returns to the marital home to taunt his new lovers, American tourists played by Hall and Scarlett Johansson.

For the film to work, you have to believe that a man really would risk messing things up with the pouting, gorgeous Johansson by sleeping with his unhinged ex, an artist who had tried to kill him on numerous occasions. But when you see Cruz as Maria Elena, wearing the skimpiest of playsuits (of all things), and painting like a woman possessed, suddenly Allen's implausible plot doesn't seem so ludicrous after all.

Cruz doesn't enter the film until halfway through and can't have more than about 15 minutes of screen time. But her tremendous performance — plus the much-talked-about kiss with Johansson (currently being perved over by thousands of horny teenagers on YouTube) — steals the show. Without her, the film would just be another one of the sad ageing-male fantasies in which Allen increasingly specializes.

Not that Cruz will hear a word said against the 73-year-old director. Doesn't it make her feel uncomfortable, I ask, how he latches on to stunning young actresses such as herself and Johansson, and makes lascivious remarks about them as he drapes himself around them for photos? Absolutely not, she insists. "He is so ... he is so charming and so funny and so respectful and so smart, too smart for that," she says, adding that he only makes pervy comments to make people laugh. "On set he would say something completely wild and I would say, 'I can't believe those words came out of your mouth!'" Allen, she says, is "very peculiar — but I love him."

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[TECHNOLOGY REVIEWS]

WITH CLARIFI, IPHONE IS READY FOR ITS CLOSE-UP

It's a good thing the Apple iPhone is pretty, because its 2-megapixel camera sure won't help you look good. Griffin Technology is hoping to remedy that.

The company has created the Clarifi iPhone 3G protective case that not only keeps your phone safe from the elements, but also comes equipped with a close-up lens to help you snap more detailed camera shots.

The lens slides into place over the iPhone's own lens and can let you get as close as 10cm to your subject (do that with the standard iPhone lens and you'll get a blurry, grainy image).

The new lens can be slid aside if you're shooting a picture at medium range or farther away. Just be advised: As you zoom in on the details, the Clarifi may also pick up dust and other stray particles (to say nothing of other things best left blurry, like wrinkles and gray hairs), so the company has provided a cleaning cloth for good measure. As for the wrinkles and such, well, isn't that what Photoshop is for?



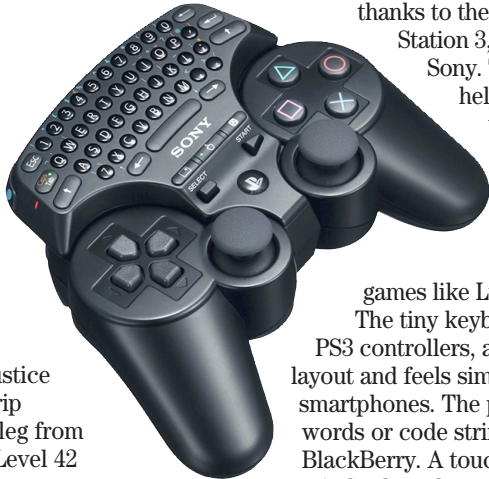
Griffin Technology's Clarifi iPhone 3G protective case. PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Alesis TapeLink USB. PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



Left: Epson's MovieMate 55 projector. Right: Wireless Keypad for PlayStation 3.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



CASSETTE TO CD

It's time to bury the audio cassette. Actually, it was time to bury the cassette a long time ago. The format is essentially dead, and the cassette tape player is now as obsolete as the Edison wax-cylinder player. But what if you still have a few tapes clattering around in your closet? The Alesis TapeLink USB could wring one last bit of music out of this expired medium.

The TapeLink is a dual cassette deck with a USB plug. You connect to a computer, play a tape and the included software cleans and categorizes the audio automatically. It outputs audio at CD quality — although the audio coming off the tapes might be at lower quality — and includes noise-reduction systems to ensure a clean transfer. It has a list price of US\$299, but can be found for less online and at music specialty stores.

The deck works with Macs and PCs and comes with software called SoundSoap SE that will help clean up the audio. The entire system is

retro-styled enough to do justice to your collection of road-trip mixes and your prized bootleg from that Terence Trent D'Arby/Level 42 doubleheader.

EPSON'S MOVIEMATE BOTH PLAYS AND PROJECTS DVDS

Sometimes, combining gadgets is a bad idea (Internet-enabled refrigerators come to mind). But every once in a while, something comes along that is, if not inspired, at least a practical and reasonable merger of products.

All-in-one video projectors — an LCD projector joined to a DVD player and speakers — fall into that category. Throw a unit in the back of your car and you have a one-box entertainment center wherever you go — all you need is a white wall and a power outlet.

Epson's MovieMate 55 projector is one of the latest all-in-ones. At just over 3.6kg, the US\$700 MovieMate 55 can project a 60-inch image from 1.8m away or a 120-inch image from 3.7m away.

You can play movies using the onboard progressive-scan DVD player (and control them with the included remote), or through a device connected to the MovieMate via its VGA port. You can also connect an iPod, a Wii, a PlayStation 3 or an Xbox 360. Life-size *Rock Band 2* concerts, here we come.

A KEYBOARD FOR TYPING IN THE PLAYSTATION UNIVERSE

Entering text with a PlayStation controller is one of those weird skills that may soon be obsolete, thanks to the Wireless Keypad for PlayStation 3, available this month from Sony. The tiny keyboard may help the uninitiated avoid the teeth-gnashing tasks of entering passwords for your wireless network or search terms into YouTube or chatting with other players in games like LittleBigPlanet.

The tiny keyboard snaps onto recent PS3 controllers, and has a curved qwerty layout and feels similar to those used in many smartphones. The process of thumbing-in words or code strings is the same as on a BlackBerry. A touchpad mode turns the main keyboard area into a touchpad, so you can slide your finger to move a screen cursor, and shortcut keys provide instant access to the PlayStation Network's message system.

When connected via a USB cable (not included), the keyboard charges and syncs automatically, and it can be used with other Bluetooth-enabled devices. Fast, skinny thumbs are also helpful.

ECAMM OFFERS A WIRELESS WEBCAM FOR MACS

If the Mac versus PC ads are to be believed, it's the tie-wearing PC that is rigid, not the more flexible denim-wearing Mac. Unfortunately, this mobility doesn't extend to Apple's built-in iSight Web camera, which is fine if your video needs are limited. But for those looking to flex their filming range without having to position their

laptops atop various household objects, Ecamm Network has created the BT-1 Wireless Webcam for Macs.

Though not as aesthetically attractive in its design as an Apple product, the BT-1 is equipped with Bluetooth technology and can stream H.264 video (640 by 480 pixels) and 48 kHz Advanced Audio Coding stereo audio for up to four hours of wireless, cable-free video conferencing. Compatible with iChat, Skype, Photo Booth and most other video applications, the wireless Webcam works in a range of 3m to 9m and comes with a mini-tripod and USB charging cable. The BT-1 will ship next month for US\$150.

Webcam auteurs can now realize their artistic vision with no limitations.

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Ecamm Network's BT-1 Wireless Webcam. PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE