



Senior sirens

Mae West

Born in 1893, she became the mistress of screen sexual innuendo, until censorship drove her back to the stage in the 1950s. Billy Wilder offered her the role of Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), but later said: "The idea of Mae West was idiotic because we only had to talk to her to find out that she thought she was as great, as desirable, as sexy as she had ever been."

Bette Davis

Born 1908, her career took off when she joined Warner Bros in 1932, but she continued to give her stylish, clipped delivery in leading roles until the late 1940s. Her heyday, with films such as *Now, Voyager* and *All About Eve*, lasted into her 40s.

Anne Bancroft

Born in 1931, she came to represent the voracious appetites of attractive older women, but she was just 36 — only six years older than Dustin Hoffman — when she took the part of his seducer Mrs Robinson in *The Graduate* (1967).

SOURCE: THE OBSERVER

Hollywood finally falls for the allure of the older woman star

As Meryl Streep and Sigourney Weaver win plaudits for their roles as older women in physical relationships with younger men, one of the most enduring barriers in Hollywood's movie-making history is at last being torn down

BY VANESSA THORPE
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When a film star seduces someone 20 or 30 years their junior on screen, the audience doesn't bat an eyelid. In fact, it is an established cinema convention. If the older star is a woman, however, public reaction is harder to predict. But now Hollywood, so long accused of sexism because of the way it treats female talent, finally seems prepared to tackle a subject once regarded as beyond the pale: sex and the 60-something woman.

Sigourney Weaver, who stars in this month's new sci-fi blockbuster, *Avatar*, has revealed that in her next film she is to play the lover of an actor little more than half her age. In *Cedar Rapids*, Weaver, 60, is cast opposite comic actor Ed Helms in the role of her 35-year-old former pupil. The actress, who made her name 30 years ago in *Alien*, said last week that she believes relationships between older women and much younger men are much more common than film producers believe. "I play his grade-school science teacher that he had a crush on," she explained last week. "Years later, we consummate our relationship and are going out, but I have to break it off because he's so serious about me."

Weaver said that *Avatar*'s director, James Cameron, cut her sex scenes from his final version of the film, although she understood the cuts were based on his feeling about the structure of the story. All the same, Weaver has also made it clear she is pleased to be appearing in *Cedar Rapids* next year and to be making the point that women in their 60s can still be attractive and sexually active.

Weaver's comments follow the success of Meryl Streep's new comedy, *It's Complicated*, in which she plays a divorced woman unexpectedly pursued by her former husband (Alec Baldwin). Last week, the part earned Streep, who is also 60, her second Golden Globe nomination this year for best comedy performance by an actress (the other is for her portrayal of the television chef Julia Child in *Julie & Julia*).

In the role of Jane Adler, a woman who, although well into middle age, is eventually more appealing to her former husband than his young "trophy wife," Streep is breaking the unspoken film industry rule that audiences don't want to see older women in physical relationships with leading men. Since 1967, when Anne Bancroft vamped it up as Mrs Robinson in Mike Nichols's



Top: Marlon Brando receives an Academy Award for Best Actor from Bette Davis for his performance in the 1955 film *On the Waterfront* at the 27th Academy Awards.

Above: Sigourney Weaver arrives at the premiere of *Avatar*.

Right: Meryl Streep and Alec Baldwin in a scene from the new comedy *It's Complicated*.

PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG, REUTERS AND AP

The Graduate, there have been few screen portrayals of sexually alluring older women. Ageing male stars suffer under no such limitations, with Larry David romancing Evan Rachel Wood earlier this year in Woody Allen's *Whatever Works* and Bill Murray beguiling Scarlett Johansson in Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* in 2003.

It's Complicated, which opened in the US on Dec. 10, is written and directed by Nancy Meyers. The screenwriter now has a reputation as a crusader in this area, following her success with the 2003 romantic comedy *Something's Gotta Give*, starring Diane Keaton. "I think there's an audience for it. We'll see if this movie does well. I hope they'll do more movies where the lead character can be close to 58 or 60 or 62 and have a life in the movie, not just play the wacky mother," said Meyers this month.

Some critics in the US have questioned the decision by Meyers to show Baldwin without his clothes on and not Streep, but the writer has defended her decision. "I thought the joke of him being naked was about him," said Meyers. "I never saw Jane [Streep's character] acting that way; she wouldn't do that, though she's nervous about being naked before him. When they broke up



she was in her 40s; now she's in her late 50s."

When the musical *Mamma Mia!*, also starring Streep in the lead romantic role, became a huge box-office hit last year, the actress expressed her irritation with Hollywood's apparent inability to make films that take older women seriously. Now the success of her new film is celebrated by *Vanity Fair*, which has put her on the cover of its US January edition. Inside the magazine, Streep expresses her surprise at the parts she is playing these days: "It's incredible — I'm 60 and I'm playing the romantic lead in romantic comedies! Bette Davis is rolling over in her grave. She was 42 when she did *All About Eve* and she was 54 when she did *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*"

Not only is Streep allowed to appear in bed with co-star Baldwin in *It's Complicated*, but Hollywood producers have also supported Goldie Hawn's plan to write, direct and star in an unconventional romantic comedy about a woman who is coping with the death of her former husband in late middle-age. Hawn, 64, had battled with the studios for three years in an effort to make the film, but *Ashes to Ashes* is finally scheduled for release next year.

A black comedy, it tells the story of a divorcee's attempt to scatter her former husband's ashes in Kathmandu, as she encounters a series of life-changing experiences. The actress remains passionate about the project, but has said it "has frustrated me

more than anything I've ever done."

Hawn has added that reaching the age of 60 was a big milestone in her career and has made it harder to sell her ideas to producers. "Hollywood is fearful because most of the films that they put their heart and soul behind are heartless films that cost about US\$180 million," she said. "But when you look at women's films and the amount of money they have generated, it would shock you. There aren't many women's films made, but the success rate of women's to men's films is much greater. Nobody is looking at that."

Until Hawn's husband, Kurt Russell, agreed to take a part in *Ashes to Ashes*, her script was repeatedly turned down by producers. "The studio reaction always was, 'Who's the man?' It's just the way it goes. You can't win," she said. "But I can feel incredibly frustrated at the state of the business and knowing that there's an untapped, unserved audience out there that will come out for the right movie."

There are other big-name, former leading ladies who are still registering box-office success in their seventh decade. Charlotte Rampling, 63, is also to star next year in a comedy all about sex. Rampling has previously condemned the treatment of older actresses in Hollywood, saying: "The system in Europe is nothing like in Hollywood. It is not so barbaric in terms of the ageing process." Now she has a lead role in *Rio Sex Comedy* alongside Bill Pullman. The film tells

of the comic adventures of tourists seeking diversion on the beaches of Rio de Janeiro.

Glenn Close, 62, won an Emmy in September for her performance as the stylishly deadly lawyer Patty Hewes in television series *Damages*. In her acceptance speech she heralded a new era of three-dimensional roles for middle-aged actresses. "I think we're proving complicated, powerful, mature women are sexy, high entertainment and can carry a show. I call us the sisterhood of the TV drama divas," she said.

Also leading the pack is Helen Mirren, 64, being talked up already as an Oscar contender for her powerful performance as Leo Tolstoy's wife in *The Last Station*. Mirren, who appears opposite Christopher Plummer, won the Oscar for best actress in 2006 for *The Queen*, and is described by *Screen International* as giving another "bravura performance." But her director on *The Last Station*, Michael Hoffman, remains gloomy about the prospects for mature stars. "Generally speaking, you probably don't think the casting of older actors is going to enhance commerciality. There is a prejudice against movies for adults, especially older adults," he told *Variety* last week.

The industry will have much to do if it hopes to correct the established bias in favor of "sexy" older male actors, however. A survey by the Screen Actors Guild found that women who are aged 40 and over landed only 11 percent of all the available film and television roles. Although this figure is creeping up gradually from a level of around 9 percent in the early 1990s, male actors who are aged 40 and above still regularly account for more than a quarter of all the roles cast in the US.

According to Hawn, she and Diane Keaton, who starred together with Bette Midler in the 1996 hit *First Wives Club*, both struggled in vain to get a sequel to the film commissioned as a prestige project. Keaton, who played the lead in Meyers's earlier film *Something's Gotta Give*, opposite a 66-year-old Jack Nicholson, has perhaps best summed up the wishes and fears of her Hollywood peers.

"It's hopeful for everyone, and I think men included, because it doesn't carry that stupid cliché, the idea of older men just wanting younger women. It's absurd to put men into some sort of category like that."