

The enchanting Elizabeth Olsen

BY BROOKE THEIS / PUBLISHED: 05 MAY 2022

Elizabeth Olsen is ready for me. In a cosy room of a London hotel, she gets up from her chair to greet me, refreshingly bright-eyed for a Monday morning. She introduces herself warmly as “Lizzie” and asks if I want anything to drink. It’s immediately clear that there aren’t many parallels between her and her antiheroine alias, the Scarlet Witch (also known as Wanda). For one thing, Olsen is very funny; she’s also supremely likeable. But she does hold herself with a certain soft power, today dressed in a grey Barbara Bui suit, an acid-pink knitted rollneck and chunky black lace-up shoes from Clergerie.





Silk pyjamas and matching robe, Olivia von Halle; leather mules, Giambattista Valli; Akoya pearl necklaces; white gold, Akoya pearl and diamond necklace; white gold and diamond tiara, all Tasaki

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“I love playing characters whose actions people disagree with,” she says, tucking her cropped blonde hair behind her ears. “In a world where we don’t really care to understand other points of view, I feel like if we as an audience can have empathy for people we don’t agree with, that’s a good thing.” One of the most powerful figures in the Marvel Universe, Wanda straddles the morally dubious line between good and evil, and this is what interests Olsen about her; the characters she is most drawn to are the complex, knotty ones that need untangling. “Then I can kind of be their lawyer and defend them. I get behind their actions, even if I don’t agree with them,” she explains. She has recently wrapped an HBO series called *Love and Death*, which follows the true story of Candy Montgomery, who murdered a woman with an axe and acted as though it didn’t happen. “I adored playing her,” she says. “People would ask: ‘Are you going to play her as a sociopath?’ And I was like, ‘No, why would I do that? I’m going to try and understand how someone would be able to compartmentalise this until they were caught.’”



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However, in her latest film, *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*, Olsen reveals that Wanda has found some kind of resolve, no longer overwhelmed by the strength of her powers of chaos magic, or the trauma she suffers in *Avengers: Endgame* following the death of her husband, Vision. “It was so fun for me because all these years I’ve been playing a character who is struggling; now, she has clarity for the first time – she knows exactly what she wants, and she doesn’t want to apologise for it,” she says, adding, “I think there’s a womanliness that comes with that: a strength in feeling completely entitled.”



Guipure lace dress and leather pumps, both Prada; train puff sleeves, Miscreants; yellow gold and platinum ear clips, Tiffany & Co; rose gold bracelet and yellow gold, malachite and diamond ring, both Cartier

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A benefit to being part of the Multiverse was working with Benedict Cumberbatch, an opportunity she very much relished. “I’m such a fan of his. He’s one of the greatest actors around right now and I wanted to see his process. I hope to work with him in a non-Marvel way as well, because I would like to have another, more heady experience with him.” It’s likely they’ll encounter each other within the Marvel Universe again too, because although she hadn’t anticipated working on this many Marvel projects, she says, “I think Wanda’s always around the corner, so I don’t feel bad saying goodbye to her.”

Olsen has always been compelled by complex stories, and growing up in Sherman Oaks California, she would watch “disturbing” films, such as *Return to Oz* (a twisted take on Dorothy’s adventures). “It’s so weird because there’s

a woman who literally has a hallway of heads of other women that she takes on and off. Why was I obsessed with that movie?" she says, laughing. "I loved feeling scared, but then I also had nightmares – so I'd watch movies like *Tremors* and *Terminator*, followed by *Pal Joey*, so there was a lot of different kinds of stimulation."



Silk chiffon and feather dress, Taller Marmo; cotton body, Wolford; yellow gold, platinum and diamond ear clips, Tiffany & Co; platinum and diamond necklace and rings, all Harry Winston

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She's the youngest of four: a brother called Trent, and twin sisters Mary-Kate and Ashley, who happened to be two of the most well-known kids in the world when Olsen was small, starring in the beloved sitcom *Full House* and coming-of-age films including *Passport to Paris* and *When in Rome*. "I always felt that having older twin sisters was an advantage," she says. "I felt very clear about how I was going to navigate lots of things because of watching them. I also felt very protected." Being just two and a half years apart meant that they were a tight trio, but as she notes, the bond between twins is unrivalled. "There's something that I'll never experience of that connection, but I feel lucky to be witness to it. I actually think it's an amazing feeling, being the younger sibling to twin sisters. If I was spoiled by one, the other wanted to match it. I loved it."





Embroidered silk dress and nylon boot leggings, both Richard Quinn; mesh gloves, Miscreants; platinum and diamond bracelets, earrings and necklace, all Harry Winston

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While her sisters pulled away from the film industry as they got older, going on instead to establish their luxury fashion label The Row in 2006, Olsen was set on acting. “I always knew that it was what I wanted to do, I just had a lot of insecurities about wanting to do it,” she says, noting that she never felt inclined to join her sisters on the global stage as a child “because I really liked school”. But her sisters’ early success impacted how she approached the job: she studied her craft meticulously, enrolling at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts, where she took classes at the Atlantic Theater Company and spent a semester abroad studying at the Moscow Art Theatre

School. “I’ve always felt that presence, which made me work harder, and maybe have a chip on my shoulder to be over-prepared and disciplined, so I could feel like I was earning it,” says Olsen. “That feeling definitely settled five years into working, but I had this need to be the hardest-working student when I was in school.”



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After making her film debut in 2011, starring in the thriller *Martha Marcy May Marlene* alongside Sarah Paulson, she hadn't settled on what types of project she most wanted to explore, but found the experience of working in different countries invaluable. "You learn a lot about yourself in those vulnerable situations and how you handle yourself," she says of travelling alone as a young woman. Olsen has also looked to a number of role models throughout her career, including Naomi Foner Gyllenhaal (mother to Jake and Maggie), who directed *Very Good Girls* and "became a maternal figure for me", she says. The most important lesson she learnt is how empowering it can be to understand the things that drive you – your taste and inspirations. "That was something that took me so long to get to," she reflects. "It's hard to find that confidence, but I'm happy I eventually did."

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Silk and net dress, Alexander McQueen; White gold, emerald and diamond necklaces; yellow and white gold, diamond and emerald bracelet; white gold and diamond rings; yellow and white gold, diamond and ruby ring, all Bulgari

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This self-assurance is essential when it comes to producing, which she first delved into for her 2018/2019 series *Sorry for Your Loss*. “I’m addicted to it; and when I’m not even producing, I pretend I am – I’m probably awful to work with! I say ‘awful’, but people say that it’s fine...” She adds light-heartedly, “But I really overstep as an actor. I want to know about full plans.” Right now, she is searching for projects that resonate with her, particularly smaller, localised plots that have the power “to make people feel something larger than everyday life”.

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Last year, Olsen was nominated for an Emmy for her mini-series *Wandavision*, and for the awards ceremony, she wore a white dress designed by her sisters. “There’s something about it that feels like women holding hands and family standing together or something,” she says wistfully. “I just love clothes that make me feel confident and strong. It’s like armour.” Usually opting for comfortable, neutral pieces “because I like blending into walls”, Olsen doesn’t usually enjoy flashy, red-carpet moments. “It’s kind of fussy. I don’t really know how to pose for a picture, so I’m always standing like a stick person or I’m kind of moving my body through space awkwardly because I don’t know how to make clothes look cool on a red carpet.”



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Olsen also shies away from events that are unrelated to her work, “even though they could be potentially good for my career”. “I just don’t feel comfortable in those situations, so, I don’t put myself in them,” she says, matter-of-factly. When she isn’t working, Olsen lives a very laid-back home life with her partner Robbie Arnett, catching up with friends and family, gardening, making pottery and cooking (“every holiday I make my mum’s signature dish, which is a very Seventies salmon ball”). These are moments she tries hard to keep private. “I don’t think of living my life as a public person, I just think of living my life and then I have this job,” she explains. “It’s always weird for an actor to complain about being in the public eye, because that means maybe something’s going well for you. But the privacy thing is something I think about a lot with the potential of having children and being very protective of that thought...”



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Cotton tank top, leather bra and embellished silk skirt, all Givenchy; leather sandals, Manolo Blahnik; white gold, Akoya pearl and diamond earrings; white gold, diamond and Akoya pearl rings, all Tasaki

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This is also the reason why she didn't gel with social media; having dabbled with Instagram between 2017 and 2020, she says she has deleted the app for good. "I thought, 'What am I trying to say? What am I trying to share?' You have this influence, and there's financial power in that kind of influence. That didn't make me feel great," she shares. Olsen does, however, see the benefit of an online presence to shed light on good causes, as she works primarily with two charities: the Latitude Project, in aid of Nicaraguan communities in need, and Stuart House in Los Angeles, which cares for victims of sexual assault under the age of 18. Of the latter, she says, "It's an amazing space, covering everything from forensics to therapy. You're with these kids at the same appointment every week, so you get to see their growth."

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It is rare for someone as prolific as Olsen to remain as down-to-earth as she is, but knowing what she wants – and, equally importantly, what she doesn't want – has given her the wherewithal to forge her own path. "I'm not trying to stop anyone from going into my bubble," she says, "but I also have some barriers." This is her superpower – more understated than magic, but no less potent.

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Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness is out in UK cinemas from 5 May.



Dress, scarf and platform shoes, all Gucci; earrings, Harry Winston; rings and bracelets, Cartier

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Photographer Josh Shinner

Styling Rosie Arkell-Palmer

Hair Daniel Martin

Make-up Mary Wiles

Nails Michelle Class

Location The Dorchester