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COOLEST STRAIGHT PEOPLE

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COOLEST STRAIGHT PEOPLE

Cate Blanchett QUEEN OF COOL

She's been Kate Hepburn and Queen Elizabeth and Galadriel. In *I'm Not There*, the great Cate Blanchett steps across the gender divide to play Bob Dylan—and reminds us that however we try to catch her, she'll always be a step ahead By Michael Giltz

SO AS FAR AS OUT DIRECTOR TODD HAYNES IS CONCERNED, calling Cate Blanchett the coolest straight woman of 2007 is an understatement. "She's just so cool she calls 'straight' completely into question," he laughs. "You can quote me on that."

Haynes caught the full force of Blanchett's mojo as she prepared to play a character modeled on Bob Dylan in Haynes's new movie *I'm Not There*. "I knew in my gut

physically that it was going to be startling and effective," says Haynes from his home in Portland, Ore. "I knew she would actually look like Dylan. But it's not until you stand opposite her in complete costume. The first time she put it all on, I went to see her in her trailer and we both just sat there staring at each other."

We can relate. Cate Blanchett takes our breath away. She defies the categories by which we measure smaller stars. She's brilliant enough to take on Queen Elizabeth I and Bob Dylan in a single moviegoing season. She's mysterious enough to make us believe her in both roles. What can we say? She's cool.

When I meet her, Blanchett is both pleased and amused to receive *The Advocate's* recognition. "I heard I was going to be the coolest straight person. How kind!" she says. "There's a lot of us to choose from."

Our conversations take place in New York City, where →

ADDITIONAL PROFILES WRITTEN BY KYLE BUCHANAN, KERRY ELEVELD, AND NEAL BROVERMAN

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Blanchett is doing press for both *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* and *I'm Not There*, and again by phone as she drives through Southern California's canyons on her way to guest on *The Tonight Show*. Lovely looking in person, she is focused, direct, friendly. Regarding her life on-camera, she communicates in a rushing flow of ideas. About her life off-camera, she gives notice that she won't be giving us juicy details.

"You make a decision when you walk onstage into this arena—the public arena—about what you're prepared to wholesale and what's not up for sale," says the actress, who is married to playwright Andrew Upton and has two children. "And the lives of the people I care about are not up for sale." Celebrity culture, she rightly observes, is "a circus. It's being led by the media. It's not being led by the 16-year-olds being chased around in cars. It's junk. I don't want to fill my mind with junk."

Pursued as she is by the press, Blanchett couldn't help but feel a kinship with the enigmatic Bob Dylan. In *I'm Not There* she plays Jude, the coolest, most iconic character in the film; it's her silhouette that dominates the movie poster. The character is inspired by the electric Dylan of the *Don't Look Back* era; the Dylan who was turning and vilified; the Dylan who was turning out a series of brilliant masterpieces like *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, and *Blonde on Blonde*; the Dylan who one-upped the Beatles with press conferences filled with sly remarks and combative answers that showed him to be John, Paul, George, and Ringo all rolled up into one.

"The questions that he kept being asked by the press!" exclaims Blanchett, who studied the complete interviews Dylan gave to the media in Stockholm, Paris, and London, thanks to footage provided by Dylan's manager. "The level of vitriol and passion with which he'd been labeled and claimed! What I really admire—not only [about] him in that period but over the course of his career thus far—is that he's constantly said, 'I'm not going to be dictated by your love or your hate of what I do.' I'm sure it doesn't mean that that level of vitriol didn't affect him. But he had to be bigger than that. It wasn't going to prevent him from continuing to experiment."

The first time she caught our eye,

Cate Blanchett was floating in a lake.

White undergarments clung to her body, and as she rose to the surface, she began to chat merrily away in French to the sky. Who was this lovely creature in 1997's *Oscar and Lucinda*?

There was a wonderful queerness to the 28-year-old Australian. With her amorphous nose and pale eyes, she didn't look like a starlet, or, for that matter, like anyone else. But there was no self-doubt in her. She didn't seek our approval. Tall and lithe, with an intelligence that leaped off the screen, she was the essence of cool. She inhabited that territory we all hope to reach—*I'm different, and I wouldn't have it any other way*.

One year later the entire world took notice when Blanchett shot to fame in *Elizabeth*. Focused and fearsome, she dominated the screen, growing from a young woman in love with Joseph Fiennes to a queen who loves only her country. As we watched her red locks shorn in the film's final scenes, Blanchett ascended to movie stardom before our eyes. *Elizabeth* garnered her an Oscar nomination, but she refused the copycat leading roles the movie brought her way.

"After *Elizabeth* I was given the same character arc in different guises," she recalls. "Often in corsets. I thought, *I really don't want to do this; I'd rather die on page nine*. So I chose something that probably didn't interest very many other people, a Long Island housewife [in

"At school I was always cast as a man. My gender has always been the last thing that I've thought about. I don't think of myself as female, male, hermaphrodite, or whatever."

1999's *Pushing Tin*] which on the page wasn't much of a role. But it was a challenge for me. It was playing an American and playing someone completely outside my experiences and it was very different from *Elizabeth*."

She spent the next 10 years nailing everything from a marvelous supporting role as a hapless heiress in *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (with Matt Damon as a gay-ish killer) to her Oscar-winning turn as lesbian icon Katharine Hepburn in *The Aviator*.

For Haynes, Blanchett's smaller roles have been as fascinating as the big-stroke triumphs. "I almost couldn't

believe it was the same person in *Mr. Ripley* as in *Elizabeth*," he says. "Of course, Cate can just carry any film that she leads. But when she's in a smaller role there's always an element of genuine surprise about what she does."

Her next queenly role after *Elizabeth* was the elf Galadriel in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Blanchett has joked that she took the part so she could wear pointy ears (a prop she reportedly kept). She's that rare actor who can play a working-class hero or a monarch. I wonder: Which is the real Cate, the ordinary joe or the queen? "When you've got two children, you can hardly say that you're the center of attention," Blanchett rejoins.

Her on-screen interaction with gay characters has been pungent. As the forbidden object of Judi Dench's affection in 2006's riveting *Notes on a Scandal*, Blanchett delivers the rejection to end all rejections. ("You think this is a *love affair*? A *relationship*?" she roars, her voice dripping with disgust. "You want to roll around the floor like lovers? *You want to fuck me, Barbara*?") "It was a lot of fun," Blanchett says of shooting the scene. "It was huge fun. The only thing I was worried about—Judi's a powerhouse, but I worried about slamming her into the bookcase a thousand times."

Offscreen, of course, Blanchett's got all the gay connections you'd expect from a lifetime in the theater. After she →

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floated out of drama school in 1992—and almost immediately achieved major success on the Australian stage—she and her husband moved around the globe on various projects and invariably found themselves situated exactly where lesbians and gay men decided to live.

"We moved to London, and my husband and I said to each other, 'What is it about us and gay communities?'" laughs Blanchett. "Because we moved to Islington, to North London, which is between that and Soho is the gay center of London. Then we moved to Brighton, which has a great gay population as well. And I'm from Melbourne originally, but I've lived my adult life in Sydney, which is a fabulously gay city."

I ask if she'd care to share something cool about the gay people in her life. Blanchett politely demurs: "In the end it's a connection, whether you've got people who are straight or gay. You can't generalize about anyone." But she does

mention her friendship with playwright and director Michael Gow, who guided Cate during her early triumph onstage opposite Geoffrey Rush in David Mamet's *Oleanna*. "He's got a very constructive critical eye, and he's not afraid of conflict. It's the antithesis of a theater luvvie."

On the day she would win the Oscar for playing Kate Hepburn, Blanchett was already moving on. That's when she first met with Todd Haynes about starring as one of the six Bob Dylan figures in *I'm Not There*. She says she didn't think twice about playing a male role. "At school I was always cast as a man. My gender has always been the last thing that I've thought about. I don't think of myself as female, male, hermaphrodite, or whatever. When I think about a character..." She grapples for the words.

"When people talk about Elizabeth, they describe her as strong. I play strong women, and they say it as if I play them with male attributes, and honestly it's as if they're speaking Mandarin to me. People do certain things, and they have certain components, and that makes up their character."

Fair enough. As for Blanchett, her character continues to move her in intriguing directions. Despite the fact that we'll soon be seeing her in ultra-Hollywood projects including *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal*

Skull, Blanchett has committed to life in Australia for the next three years as co-artistic director of the Sydney Theatre Company alongside her husband.

"I think if people describe it as a sacrifice, it says more about them than it does about me," says Blanchett. "This is the theater company where I got my first big job after drama school. It's had a huge place in my development—and the prospect of being involved with the company's development? I'm really, really excited about it."

And Dylan has taught her the necessity of striking out in new directions, no matter how applauded you are for sitting still. "Praise is harder to deal with than criticism," she muses. "Criticism you can do something with. It can often galvanize you, give you a reason to keep moving forward. Praise can place you in a stranglehold, and I think it's important to accept the good bits of that and not let it arrest the flow. When people start needing you to be something, they're shortly not going to want you to be anything else."

I keep losing Blanchett on the cell phone during our last conversation. Finally, I manage to tell her what my editors and I have decided: She's far too cool not to have flirted with a woman at some point or other. Blanchett laughs and says, "You might not be too far from the truth."

And then she's gone. ♦