



GRANDE DAME

Actress **PATRICIA CLARKSON** on good scripts and the joys of being trapped in a cave with Leonardo DiCaprio.
By **OLIVIA STREN**

The mark of a true actor is the ability to bring life to silence—to fasten emotional weight to the moments in between the words, when there’s no script to serve as a guardrail. Should you question this theory, witness Patricia Clarkson’s performance in Syrian-Canadian writer and director Ruba Nadda’s film *Cairo Time* (which opened in October). The movie meanders at a poetic, languid pace befitting the heat-cracked Egyptian capital. It’s a quiet, slow-burn love story—sort of *1001 Nights* meets *Lost in Translation*—between an American woman (Clarkson) and a handsome Egyptian security guard. “I call it the adult pace,” says Clarkson of the film’s gentle rhythm. “It was a bare script, which attracted me.” Nadda’s story, often as spare as its Saharan backdrop, is mapped with Nile-long stretches of silence, which Clarkson freights with delicately shifting emotion. This is not to say that she is suited only to gentle and melancholic indie fare—next year she will appear in Martin Scorsese’s decidedly more voluble *Shutter Island*.

If *Cairo Time* unfolds in an anti-Hollywood style, so has Clarkson’s career. The Industry is inhospitable to women *d’une certaine âge* (screen actresses—minus Meryl—tend to struggle for employment after the ripe age of, say, 27), but Clarkson appears to be operating in reverse. Just shy of 50, she’s reaching her professional prime. Recently, she has enjoyed a string of small but rich roles in films such as *Elegy* and Woody Allen’s *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*. In Allen’s latest, *Whatever Works*, she turns in a hilarious performance as a salty southern belle turned headscarf-sporting Manhattan artiste in a ménage à trois. Clarkson is spoiled for choice: She stars opposite Stanley Tucci in the dark, avant-gardist two-hander *Blind Date* and—talk about choice!—finds

herself trapped in a cave with Leonardo DiCaprio in the aforementioned *Shutter Island*. On the fact that there are worse cave-mates than Leo, she purrs: “Oh, yes,” and pauses, as though savouring the memory. “Ohhhh, yessss!”

Clarkson, born and raised in New Orleans, decided she wanted to be an actress at the age of 12. Even as a child, she felt contempt for the attention-gobbling kids who confused showboating with acting. “I was a serious actor. I understood the difference between a ham and an actor at a young age. I hated

kids who were hams: That wasn’t acting.” Clarkson did what serious actors do—she attended the Yale School of Drama. She later made her film debut playing Kevin Costner’s wife in *The Untouchables*, and eventually scored an Oscar nom for her role in *Pieces of April*. “I’m lucky in that I’m still in hot pursuit,” she laughs.

“*Cairo Time* is a chance for me to carry a film, which is rare for a woman of my age. It’s very difficult, which I love, and I applaud Ruba for that. She could have easily written a movie about a 30-year-old woman.” □