JESSICA ALBA

Motherhood prompted the actress to find the adult within her and see the world through the eyes of her children. Along the way, she saw the environment from a new angle.

By Allan Richter

If, at age 31, actress Jessica Alba already seems an old hand at her craft, it may be because she has been at it for years. Alba made her film debut at age 12, in the comedy "Camp Nowhere," and has since tackled light comedies, tough dramas and physically demanding action roles that show off her lean and fit body.

Though many of those roles were adults, Alba confides that she never quite felt grown up herself. "I always felt like a girl in a lot of ways," Alba tells us. "I didn’t really feel like a woman but I was always put in these situations where I was supposed to embrace my womanhood, and I wasn’t ready for it. I just wasn’t connected in that way." Motherhood, she says, changed that, connecting her to her womanhood and boosting her confidence. It also widened her perspective by allowing her to view the world through the eyes of her children.
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Alba’s first pregnancy prompted a reality check. Knowing she would soon be caring for a young life, her attention turned to the products—diapers, wipes and the like—that would become a big part of her new baby’s world. What she found scared her. Products that should have had only the purest and most benign ingredients were instead produced with chemicals and toxins.

Alba had read the work of environmental activist Christopher Gavigan and, seven months into her pregnancy, met him at a book party for his book Healthy Child Healthy World: Creating a Cleaner, Greener, Sofer Home (Penguin/Dutton). The two clicked and decided to become partners in The Honest Company (www.honest.com), which markets plant-based, eco-friendly home cleaning products, diapers and wipes, in addition to other personal care items.

Energy Times: How environmentally conscious were you up until your first pregnancy, when you became more really make you sick.” So my whole perspective on what being eco means completely changed.

ET: As you were doing your research, what surprised you the most?

JA: The thing that was the most shocking, and still is, is that people in charge of the chemical companies know about how bad this stuff is, and the government, whoever is overseeing that sector in business, I mean 1,100 toxic chemicals are banned in Europe and fewer than 10 are banned here. We all know that all these things are so harmful yet we’re still doing nothing about it.

ET: What one or two products in particular were you shocked by that you had assumed were safe but you found perhaps posed risks?

JA: Baby shampoo. Baby diapers. Carcinogens are in the shampoos. Chemicals are in them to numb their eyes. And in the diapers, they wouldn’t even disclose what’s in them, but it’s all petroleum-based products. Your baby is sitting in that and then when it mixes with their urine, and that’s acidic, what is that combination and how is that being absorbed and how is that affecting their reproductive health? I look around and many of my friends have these reproductive problems, and basically every one of my mom’s friends have full hysterectomies. I don’t feel like that was a problem 50 years ago.

ET: In addition to raising your awareness about chemicals in the plastic, how has motherhood changed you?

JA: It’s changed everything for me. I was incredibly... I guess my whole identity revolved around my career. That after the first child, everything became secondary to the health and happiness of my kid. That priority shift itself was a big change for me. I hadn’t lived in one city for a whole year since I was maybe 15 or 16 all the way to 27 or 28 because of work. Now it was, “Oh my God, I live in one city!”

ET: How is it that you didn’t feel connected to your womanhood until you became a mother?

JA: I was kind of a tomboy as a kid, and I learned how to wear high heels and dresses by going to awards shows.

ET: You didn’t have a bunch of boyfriends. My first boyfriend was a guy who was in a TV show with me, and that lasted four years. Then I’ve been with my husband for eight years. I got to play roles where I pretended like I was grown up but I wasn’t. People projected that onto me. And so they expected that of me in real life. I was, “No, no. This is me. This is why I’m an actor. This is just a character.”

ET: And I was a mom really did become a woman in a lot of ways, and I understood all of that. And it became a time of reflection because I was setting an example for my daughter and I wanted obviously to be a positive role model for her.

ET: How has that confidence and heightened sense of self-esteem manifested itself? In starting your own company, projecting that onto your daughter and onto women in general.

JA: Yeah. Certainly pursuing things [that satisfy me] instead of me doing things to prove to people. Like with my career, my family’s attitude was, “No way you can be an actor. Nobody [in our family] is in Hollywood. That’s so bizarre.” I was like, “I’ll show them.”

ET: I was always trying to prove myself. It was about other people in that way versus me knowing something and having conviction about it and wanting to do what was right. And if I was going to best utilize the platform that I was given and that I’ve been blessed with, the shaping aspect of being a successful actor, how was I going to do that in a responsible way and in an effective way to support whatever it was that I was talking about. That’s something that I probably wouldn’t have done prior. I wouldn’t have connected all those things together.

ET: It was more about what other people felt, what they projected onto you.

JA: “Oh I can’t do this,” and “You

Alba’s most rigorous workouts come before she shoots a film, as evidenced here in Frank Miller’s “Sin City.”

reinforcing a stereotype about a Latina woman that didn’t feel positive to me or feel like it was moving that identity forward and in a progressive way of thinking. So I just wanted to reinforce positive and strong, if nothing else, not make a big deal about it and let someone who is Latina just exist.

ET: That’s something that Robert Rodriguez [who directed Alba in the movie “Spy Kids”] and I really bonded on. It wasn’t an issue that this person is playing a Latino; they just happened to be Latino. It just wasn’t something to even talk about. They were spies and they were cool. That’s just what it was. I just loved that Robert felt Latinos do everything, because in their family they do everything. They’re business people and lawyers and doctors and scientists and creative people. To him it was, “Those are Latinos that I grew up with.” It was the same with me. That to me was more aligned with how I identified with being Latina.

ET: The heightened consciousness you experienced about the environment when you became a mom must extend to your diet and your family’s diet.

JA: We eat mostly everything. The biggest thing we stay away from is highly processed foods. We don’t have any high fructose corn syrup in our diets. We really try to limit preservatives as much as possible. Usually it’s natural preservatives. No highly refined oils or sugars. But other than that we eat a lot. This morning we had breakfast burritos with sausage and eggs. Everything is organic.

ET: I read that you became a vegetarian at age 12 through age 16. Not only that, you were cooking your own meals, unlike the rest of the family. Tell me about that.

JA: I saw a movie called “Faces of Death” [which depicts graphic scenes of cattle in slaughterhouses] and I just got freaked out. Me and all of
my friends at the time decided to be vegetarians after that because it was a really brutal movie. I was grossed out.

**ET:** I also read that you like to cook.

**JA:** I cook everything. In the summer, we do a lot of French and Italian summer foods, grilled meats and veggies and salads. I use all produce that’s in season and local. We have a delivery service of fruits and vegetables from local farms. Almost everything is organic. I cook roasts and chicken. I cook Indian food and Thai food, Mexican food. I can kind of cook everything. Food tastes better when it doesn’t have the highly processed ingredients and when it’s organic. It tastes fresher. When you eat a fresh tomato that’s organic, it’s sweet and

**ET:** What’s your regular fitness regimen like?

**JA:** I haven’t really exercised regularly since my youngest was maybe eight weeks old. She’s eleven months old now. I’ve been working at the company and running around. When I come back from China in about a week and a half I’m going to get back into working out because I’m going to do a movie, “Sin City 2,” where I have to be fit. I like circuit training and I like spinning. Those two things are my favorite. It’s a lot of core work. Crossfit is a popular term. I’ve been doing circuit training since I was 17 or 18. I play golf but that’s not really exercise unless you walk the course, and I don’t. Golf is more being competitive with yourself and trying to focus.

**ET:** You once observed that the movies you do are physically demanding in one way or another, and that that’s a good way to keep your health on track.

**JA:** Yeah, I think the reason I haven’t worked out regularly is because I haven’t had a reason to, but now that I have a movie that I need to train for and be fit for I’m going to start working out again.

**ET:** You obviously have more control over your diet when you’re home. How do you meet the challenge of maintaining a healthy diet when you’re away, travelling overseas for a movie, for instance?

**JA:** Weirdly I feel like we [in

the US] consume the highest amount of super-processed food, and we in this country are really big on pesticides and things being genetically modified. But when I go to other countries, everywhere from China to Japan to Europe, for some reason the local food always tastes better.

When I’m in France, this farm over here makes that cheese, and I may get to meet the local butcher. They don’t really have the same rules that we have here as far as pesticides and GMOs go. It’s always pretty fresh. I think that’s why everyone says you can go to Europe and eat bread and cheese and drink wine, and you don’t get fat. I just eat local.

**ET:** Now that you have two daughters, and you’re in a very image-conscious industry, are you concerned that young women still have to face negative self-image issues because of marketing that tells women who they should be?

**JA:** Yeah, I think there’s always that, but I think more than ever, especially with social media, there’s this truth [that emerges], and people can kind of have more discussions around image. People are now global citizens and have access to the world through the Internet, so I think we’re moving in a good direction. ✤