Jessica Alba has accomplished a mission impossible in Hollywood: transitioning from big-screen bikini babe to bona fide fashion icon.

VIEW FROM THE TOP

By Christine Lennon Photographs by Tesh
Fashion editor: Laura Ferrara

Dress, $2,750, Gucci; gloves, $375, Carolina Amato; earrings, price upon request, De Beers; necklace, price upon request, Dior Fine Jewelry.

On hair: Bumble and Bumble Prep.
“THERE ARE SOME WOMEN WHO DRESS FOR MEN. I DRESS FOR MYSELF. IT TOOK ME SOME TIME TO GET HERE.”

This page: Dress, price upon request, white, S 4,260, Galvan; necklace, $350, Givenchy; earrings, $450, Repossi; shoes, $1,290, Salvatore Ferragamo; belt, $435, Antonio Berardi; bracelet, $2,500, Harry Winston; bracelet, $2,000, Macklowe Gallery.

Opposite page: Top, $1,490, Oscar de la Renta; bra, $295, Dolce & Gabbana; pants, $1,298, Ralph Lauren Collection; cummerbund, $510, Giuseppe Zanotti Design; earrings, $5,300, Tiffany & Co.; necklace, price upon request, Harry Winston; veil, $5.50, Manny’s Millinery; lipstick, Estée Lauder Pure Color Long-Lasting Lipstick in Scarlet Siren.
When it comes to really famous people, the ones we identify in our brains as belonging to a special breed of superhumans—glossy, glam, and perpetually camera-ready—it’s easy to forget that, to those in their inner orbit, they’re actually just normal, regular people. Somebody somewhere sees George Clooney’s number pop up on the caller ID and says, “Him again?” Or, as is the case today, when a visitor arrives at a small, modern Los Angeles building in an industrial part of town for a meeting with Jessica Alba, the guy she shares an office with shrugs indifferently and mumbles, “I think she’s upstairs?” before returning to his feverish typing.

These nondescript offices are the headquarters of The Honest Company, a kind of Amazon for nontoxic, environmentally friendly baby products and household supplies that Alba launched earlier this year. Alba loves coming to work here, a paparazzi-free zone where she’s absolved of having to preen and pose. It’s obvious as she bounds down the stairs to meet me that she savors the regular-ness of having an office, replete with coffeemaker and a fridge filled with yesterday’s lunches. To the cubicle jockeys who inhabit the space, she’s “just Jessica,” another clock-puncher who parks her SUV (outfitted with two car seats for daughters Honor, 4, and Haven, 9 months) alongside everyone else’s, and who shares mommy war stories without feeling exposed or judged—like the time she and her husband, film producer Cash Warren, found Honor lying in her crib eating particles of her diaper, which had fallen apart. The event crystallized Alba’s interest in safe, sustainable products, including disposable diapers, which The Honest Company delivers monthly to subscribers for upwards of $80 per month.

“I started working on this three and a half years ago,” Alba tells me. “I took a year off from acting when I had Honor, and I was home with her, diapering her, cleaning up after her, and I had a real frustration that I couldn’t find healthy, nontoxic, and affordable products that actually worked. So I decided I needed to do something about it while my family and friends have young children.”

Yet despite Alba’s best efforts to come across as just another mom, she is—let’s face it—anything but. As she leads me to a conference room, I can’t help but stare at her enviable form and wonder: Is that what jet-black J Brand skinny jeans are supposed to look like on a human body? Would those Margiela for Opening Ceremony black boots make my legs look that long? If I ran out and bought an identical rose-gold channel-set diamond ring that spans two fingers, would that technically make me a stalker or just an admirer?

Though Alba clearly relishes being a businesswoman, her latest role is as a fashion darling, a woman whose every ensemble, whether for a movie premiere or sandbox playdate, is photographed and quickly dispatched to celebrity magazines and blogs that feverishly monitor her unique sartorial choices. Despite what the tabloids suggest about the symbiotic relationship between celebrities and the fashion world, actresses like Alba—true trendsetters—
are rare. It could be argued that the fashion flock are harder to impress than the Hollywood machine. But thanks to her infallible Cali cool style and fluid transition from streetwear to couture, honed from years of red-carpet scouting, Alba is a favorite among the most revered of designers—Albert Donatella, Narciso, to name just a few—who decide whom they dress (and not the other way around). She’s managed to totally remake her image, trading her postpubescent-boy fan base for fashion’s liberated style arbiters and the legions who follow them. “She is an extraordinary beauty,” says Narciso Rodriguez. “Her style is her own, and it has made her someone to watch.”

“She has a perfect body, sexy with curves,” effuses Donatella Versace. “She is true to herself. She always looks fresh, never vulgar.”

Alba, 31, has come a long way. Early in her career, she was often showcased in Minnie-ready looks, from jeans and halter tops to body-hugging dresses, that played up her lean yet impossibly curvy 5’7” frame to eye-popping effect. “I had a show [Fox’s Dark Angel] that premiered when I was 19,” Alba explains. “And right away, everyone formed a strong opinion about me because of the way I was marketed. I was supposed to be sexy, this tough action girl. That’s what people expected.”

Even when she dressed demurely, her killer body always took center stage. “I felt like I was being objectified, and it made me uncomfortable,” she concedes. “I wanted to be chic and elegant!”

In recent years, owing to marriage, motherhood, and the maturity that comes from more than a decade in Hollywood, Alba has grown more assured of herself and how to work her figure in her own way. “Now that I’m older, I’ve learned how to own it, but I’m still not very overt,” she says. “There are some women who dress for men. I dress for myself. It took me some time to get here. Being a mom and feeling grown-up have helped. Now if I’m going to wear something short, it has to have a high neck or a little sci-fi toughness to it, an edge.”

Case in point: the sequined, buttoned-up Tory Burch cocktail dress she wore to an awards dinner last winter (“Totally irresistible,” gushed one blogger), followed by a sleek black Armani Privé gown with sexy side cuts and floral trim for an event in Milan days later (“Total glamazon,” offered another fashion scribe). “I like to get positive attention,” she says warmly. “But if I have a choice between someone noticing in a negative way what I’m wearing and going, What was she thinking? or someone not noticing what I’m wearing, I would rather not make a statement at all and just have a good conversation instead.”

Not that she’ll ever go unnoticed. Unless you’re one of her coworkers—and even then, I think, they might just be faking it. Wearing. Clothes can help you feel one way or another because you carry yourself differently in them.”

Many people who speculate on such matters have credited Alba’s recent style evolution to Brad Goreski, the stylist perched in Hollywood and San Francisco who’s turned reality star (It’s a Brad, Brad World) on whom she began working with 18 months ago. Is there anything she doesn’t look good in? “Mustard yellow can be tricky on her, but that’s it,” says Goreski, whom Alba describes as “really trustworthy and positive.” Her latest experiment: “She was made to wear color. I encouraged her to play with it. We started with denim, then bright coats and floral pants, and they all look great on her. Now she’s even going with bold color on the red carpet.”

But the most profound influence on her wardrobe has been motherhood. “Since I’ve become a mom, I always think about what’s practical first. So I’m not going to wear stilettos, for example—even kitten heels are kind of pushing it—during the day,” she says. “On a day-to-day basis, I wear boots, ballet flats, and sneakers, but mostly heels. They’re stable, easy to wear.” For this, though, she has received a hefty amount of “yeah, right” criticism, mostly from other mothers suspicious that these chic outings must be part of a PR campaign to prove Alba’s just like them, only infinitely more stylish. In her defense, this is the way moms in these parts dress, even the civilians. And, in fact, Alba seems to have figured out a style formula that really works. “I have so many scarves. When the weather changes, you can layer them for instant warmth,” she says. “And they’ll cover everything—the vomit, the food that’s been flicked on me, everything.”

Hard to believe that this is the same woman who built her career strutting her tauty, toned body in skimpy two-pieces (the wetter, the better). These days you’d be hard-pressed to spot her in anything remotely revealing. “I’m not a huge fan of super low-rise,” she offers by way of example. “That was a fashion faux pas for me in the ’90s. I never thought it was a good idea—every time you bent over, it was a problem. And now, with the kids, forget it. I’m always bending down.”

As a mom clashing after kids, an entrepreneur, a movie star whose latest project is Escape From Planet Earth (an animated flick also featuring the voice of Sarah Jessica Parker), due out next year, Alba has more than changed her image—she’s changed her life. She acknowledges her former self with a broad, sunny smile. “I like to get positive attention,” she says warmly. “I’m all about the fantasy aspect of fashion and getting dressed to express how I’m feeling,” Alba says. “Some days I feel more tomboy, some days I feel more feminine, some days like a warrior, some days a little freer, like a hippie. You can embody a different persona in whatever you’re wearing. Clothes can help you feel one way or another because you carry yourself differently in them.”

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