

Tawk About Talent: Marisa Tomei

You can take the girl out of Brooklyn, but you can't take Brooklyn out of the girl. Or at least Marisa Tomei likes to think so. "I love that I grew up in Flatbush," the 37-year-old actress enthuses. "Brooklyn is such a huge, diverse place with so many neighborhoods, so many ethnic groups. I think it makes you a better actor being exposed to all of that." It certainly made her convincing in the Oscar-winning role of Bensonhurst babe Mona Lisa Vito in *My Cousin Vinny*. She so embodied Joe Pesci's smart-mouthed, gum-popping girlfriend in the 1992 comedy that, to this day, people assume Tomei *tawks like dis*, wears spiked heels, and sports enormous hair.

"Oh my God—*so* not me!" she squeals. "I'm pretty low maintenance." Case in point: today a friend is just "dropping by" her downtown New York City apartment to give her a haircut. "Nothing fancy—just a trim," she insists. "Sorry,

"So, yeah, *My Cousin Vinny* definitely made an impression in people's minds," she says. "I don't know—Lisa was pretty sassy. And she knew her way around a car engine. You gotta love that about her."

Engine expertise aside, Tomei is a lot more vulnerable and insecure than Lisa—and ironically, she blames it on her Oscar. For most actors, an Academy Award cements star status, but her Best Supporting Actress win for *Vinny* in 1993 was marred by controversy. The whispers began almost before she finished her heartfelt acceptance speech: How could Tomei—a novice with only one other substantive movie role under her belt—beat out Vanessa Redgrave, Judy Davis, Joan Plowright, and Miranda Richardson, the four veterans who were also nominated? Soon enough, a theory began to circulate in the showbiz industry: Jack Palance, the actor who presented Tomei with her stat-



The grass is always greener: Tomei gets tempted by Nick Stahl in *In the Bedroom*

no breaking news today. No "Marisa's New Mane!" She interrupts the interview to let her friend-cum-barber in the front door (giggles and air kisses ensue), then picks up where she left off without missing a beat.

uette, *had accidentally announced the wrong name!* It was a perfect piece of juicy gossip for conspiracy theorists to latch onto. It was also, by all accounts, utterly false.

BY SHERYL BERK

CELEBRITY DOSSIER

NAME: Marisa Tomei**DATE OF BIRTH:** December 4, 1964**PLACE OF BIRTH:** Brooklyn, New York**PARENTS:** Mother Adelaide ("Addie") taught junior-high English; father Gary is a trial attorney**SIBLINGS:** Younger brother Adam, also an actor**EDUCATION:** Edward R. Murrow High School in Brooklyn; Boston University and later New York University**FYI:** Tomei starred in playwright Nicky Silver's off-Broadway play *Fat Men in Skirts* in 1994. "I was afraid that having just won an Oscar, she'd be a big pain," Silver recalls, "but she was the opposite, really a delight to work with. I remember that everyone wanted a piece of her at that time—the demands were endless. But she let none of it go to her head."

There's no need to recount the details for her; Tomei knows the nasty rumor far too well. "It was hurtful," she admits. "I lost a lot of confidence and I still don't know if I've completely gotten it back. It was terrible to feel so unwelcome in the Hollywood community. But you gotta move on, right?" As if to answer her own question, the actress ticks off three new movies (*Happy Accidents*, *Just a Kiss*, and *The Guru*) slated for release in the next six months. On top of that, she recently played Ashley Judd's sidekick in *Someone Like You* and was precisely what Mel Gibson wanted in *What Women Want*. "Yup, I've been busy," she says. "It's a good thing."

This month, she plays Natalie, a mother of two boys torn between an abusive ex-husband and a younger lover, in the drama *In the Bedroom*. It's a small film by Hollywood standards, but one Tomei couldn't resist. "I've always felt an inner pressure to do good work," she says. "And I guess my taste isn't very commercial. For me, it's never been about proving myself to anyone. It's more about doing what I know I'm meant to be doing."

Born December 4, 1964, Tomei, a fourth-generation Italian-American, credits her family with "letting me be my own person." Her father, Gary, is a trial lawyer; her mother, Adelaide, a retired junior-high-school English teacher, encouraged her to read great works of literature long before they were assigned in class. But her Grandma Rita, who loved to dance and play all-night poker games, inspires her the



Tomei (with Joe Pesci, right, and Fred Gwynne) took center court in *My Cousin Vinny*



Service with a smile: with Mel Gibson in *What Women Want*

most. "I'd like to model myself on her," Tomei reflected in 1994. "She has this joy for life; she's so purely loving and giving and it's completely genuine."

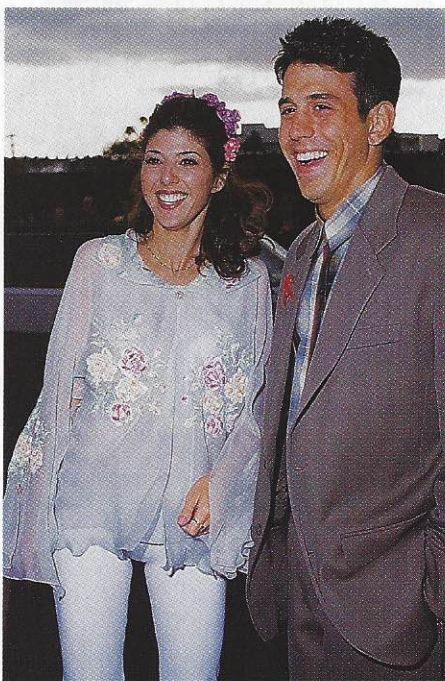
Tomei's grades were solid at local Edward R. Murrow High School, but the arts, not academics, called to her—and to her younger brother, Adam, an actor who has appeared in *Independence Day* and *The Truman Show*. "I pretty much always knew I wanted to be an actor," says Tomei. She often stayed up late watching old MGM musicals, and begged her folks to take her "over

the bridge" to see Broadway shows. She nabbed her share of starring roles in school plays before moving on to summer community theater in upstate New York, where the stage was in an old barn.

She had just finished her freshman year at Boston University when she landed a bit part in 1984's *The Flamingo Kid*. She only had a single line—the eloquently phrased "Oh my God, you're so drunk!"—but it prompted her to drop out of school and pursue acting full time. Tomei soon landed the role of eccentric Marcie Thompson on



Playing a waitress looking for love in *Untamed Heart* (with Rosie Perez and Christian Slater)



With her brother, actor Adam Tomei

the soap opera *As The World Turns*, while helping to found the off-off-Broadway theater troupe Naked Angels (other members included actors Fisher Stevens, Matthew Broderick, and Sarah Jessica Parker).

"Marisa is always curious," says Stevens, who produced *In the Bedroom* and directed *Just A Kiss*. "She's always up for doing something new. If I tell her I'm trying out a new musical, she says, 'I'll take singing lessons!' It's rare that you find someone with that kind of fire."

In 1987, Tomei enrolled as Lisa Bonet's

ditz roommate on *The Cosby Show* spin-off, *A Different World*. But she didn't last long; after the first season, she was written off. "The character really never fit in, so it wasn't like it was a huge surprise," she says. After a brief lull, she scored her big-screen breakthrough as Sylvester Stallone's spoiled-brat daughter in the dismal 1991 mob comedy *Oscar*. "It broke the ice," says Tomei, "and I was chipping away at that ice for some time." Soon she was heating up the screen in *Vinny*. "It was one of those scripts that was so well-written, the character just jumped off the page," she recalls. To prepare, she headed home to Brooklyn, where she hung out in Italian sections of Bensonhurst and Bay Ridge, soaking up the culture, accent, attitude—and plenty of pasta along the way. Whatever she did, it worked: Tomei stole the movie. ("She very nearly blows Pesci off the screen," proclaimed one typically effusive review, in *Newsday*.)

Soon, offers—and attention—came flooding in. Tomei wasn't prepared for either. "It was a little overwhelming," she admits. "I was 27, such a basic learner—I didn't have time to figure out what the business was all about."

Luckily, she was a quick study. Over the next few years, she chose a string of roles aimed at demonstrating her versatility. Most were box-office duds, but earned her strong reviews. In *Chaplin* (1992), she portrayed silent-screen star Mabel Normand opposite Robert Downey Jr.; in *Untamed Heart* (1993), her troubled character struggles to find love with fellow outcast Christian Slater; in 1994's *The Paper*, she was a newspaper reporter coping with impending motherhood; and in *Unhook the Stars* (1996), she played a heavy-drinking, foul-mouthed single mom who forms an unlikely bond with widow Gena Rowlands.

"Marisa has this amazing range of comedy and pathos," says longtime friend Lynda Obst, who produced *Someone Like You*. "She could do anything from Farrelly Brothers to Eugene O'Neill. Beyond the acting chops," she adds, "she is deeply funny, smart, and glamorous—but in an earthy way. She has an almost geisha-like shyness and humility offscreen. It's touching—and it's part of why she is able to keep her eyes open to great, juicy parts."

Tomei has no qualms about changing her appearance (or her accent) for any role: She packed 18 extra pounds onto her petite 5'3" frame to play Dottie, a Cuban sugarcane worker and former prostitute, in

1995's *The Perez Family*. "The character is very sensuous," she explained at the time. "She needed to have some nice meat on her."

Between films, Tomei has continued to hit the stage—no more barns for her—starring in *A Comedy of Errors*, part of New York City's Shakespeare in the Park series, and 1998's Broadway revival of the thriller *Wait Until Dark*, with Quentin Tarantino. "I like the magic of theater," she explains. "Every night there's an exchange of energy between you and the audience." Indeed, she's always been most comfortable around artsy theater folk—hence her three-year relationship with playwright Frank Pugliese. (Their 1995 split, she once commented, had more to do with the stress of sharing a tiny brownstone apartment than falling out of love.) Tomei, who later dated actor Dana Ashbrook (*Twin Peaks*), is currently unattached.

But she isn't particularly concerned about what the future will hold, men- or movie-wise. Instead of the starring role in 2000's *What Women Want* (which went to Helen Hunt), she agreed to the smaller part of Lola, an aspiring actress and java bar waitress who puts the cream in Mel Gibson's coffee. When they finally sleep together, Gibson is able to read every performance-rating thought that pops into her head. "It was just a funny, funny movie," she says. "And, okay, so who wouldn't want to be in a love scene with Mel Gibson? I mean, *hel-lo!*"

Still, "oddball" roles, Tomei proudly declares, appeal to her the most—not the blushing ingenues (though she's in her 30s, she can still easily pass for a pert and pixieish college coed). "I look for parts with personality," she says. Her favorite actors are unconventional choices: *The Year of Living Dangerously*'s Linda Hunt ("the day I met her felt like my lucky day") and Robert Duvall ("when I was younger, he was in *Tender Mercies*—so incredible"). And she loves Lucille Ball ("brilliant, brilliant, brilliant").

With similar enthusiasm, colleagues rave about Tomei. "The hardest part about working with her is editing," says *In the Bedroom* director Todd Field. "Each take is different—and so good—you don't know what to cut. She's incredibly talented."

"Oh *pullease...*" Tomei modestly tries to dismiss the compliment, but can't hide her obvious pleasure. "What can I say? I guess I just do what I do the best that I can do it—and I try not to forget to have fun in the process." ●

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