

Big Screen Stories



Madonna made full use of her street urchin appeal in *Who's That Girl* as Nikki Finn

Is Madonna only ever playing herself? That was the cliché about Madonna's acting. Looking at her disparate roles, it's a criticism that bears little scrutiny. **Elizabeth Aubrey** speaks to Madonna's directors **Susan Seidelman**, **James Foley** and **Abel Ferrara**, plus *A League Of Their Own* writer **Lowell Ganz**, to learn of the reality of Madonna's big-screen talent, while Madonna expert **Lucy O'Brien** assesses whether Madonna was always destined to prioritise music over movies.

Film director Susan Seidelman lived just three blocks away from Madonna in New York when she was casting for her second movie, *Desperately Seeking Susan*, in 1984.

She'd heard of Madonna, then a young creative exploring the worlds of dance, music and cinema, and decided to audition her for a part in the film. "At the time, we were looking at all the up-and-coming young actresses," Seidelman remembers. "I'd heard Madonna was interested in movies. She had a very interesting look and style, and I thought she just had a quality that was really special."

Seidelman cast her in a main role not long after her audition, beating major stars of the day "including Melanie Griffith, Ellen Barkin and Jennifer Jason Leigh," the director states.

Released in 1985, *Desperately Seeking Susan* became an instant cult classic. The comedy-drama followed Madonna's Susan – a bohemian drifter – and bored, lost housewife Roberta (Rosanna Arquette), whose lives cross unexpectedly via the personal ads in a newspaper. By stepping into Susan's shoes, Roberta finds purpose again, in a film carrying a subversive feminist message.

Seidelman remembers Madonna's audition well. They went to New York's Union Square Park, where Madonna read with Tim Ransom, who played a bellboy. Seidelman had seen a small part Madonna had in *Vision Quest* as well as early music videos. She was impressed by how "comfortable" she was in front of the camera. "What struck me most when Madonna auditioned was that she was incredibly confident," she recalls. "She was a kind of cheeky street urchin: playful, quite sassy, flirtatious and charming – all of which were great characteristics we needed for Susan."

Seidelman first had to convince studio executives to cast an unknown. Luck came into play. The teenage son of an executive had heard of Madonna, who had just released her debut album. "He really liked Madonna," Seidelman laughs. "He kind of pushed his mom, who was the Vice President of the studio, to agree to casting her."

Of the early filming around New York, Seidelman remembers: "We just filmed it with just a very small group of people – nobody paid much attention – but that was to soon change." Madonna started on set as a relative unknown, but released *Like A Virgin* before shooting finished. "When we started filming, the first day was with Madonna in

Photo: Alamy

Madonna on the set of *Desperately Seeking Susan*, with director Susan Seidelman (left) and Rosanna Arquette; (below, right) Seidelman directing the film



"MADONNA WAS A KIND OF CHEEKY STREET URCHIN: PLAYFUL, QUITE SASSY, FLIRTATIOUS AND CHARMING" *DESPERATELY SEEKING SUSAN* DIRECTOR SUSAN SEIDELMAN



the scene where she's walking down the street eating a bag of Cheetos, in her little white gloves. People stopped to look because there was a film crew, but we weren't attracting a huge amount of attention. Nine weeks later, we needed security guards to control things. It was fascinating to see how Madonna went from an artist some people knew in New York to suddenly exploding in just a short period of time."

Seidelman believes the film was about everything Madonna stood for in her career and her life: in particular, expressing yourself. "The theme of the movie is about getting in touch with your inner Susan," she muses. "Susan represents the kind of person you want to be, the freedom you want to have, the adventurous person that's somewhere within all of us. It's about finding a way to get that out, to be the person you want to be. Don't we all want to live other lives at times? And Madonna is of course the master of reinvention."

Seidelman says Madonna was a joy to work with, often putting improvised touches to scenes. "The scene where she's in the toilet, washing her face, Madonna turns the hand dryer around to dry her armpits," the director laughs. "She did that, that was all her. It became one of many quirky little moments she added."

"When I first met Madonna, she knew she was going to be a star, I think. You got that sense. Her first big hit album and a first hit movie coalesced. That doesn't happen very often."

After the success of *Desperately Seeking Susan*, Madonna was soon in *Who's That Girl*, directed by James Foley and co-starring future husband Sean Penn.

The director vividly remembers meeting Madonna. "I'd worked with Sean, who had no place to stay at the time. He'd lost his apartment and ended up staying on my couch for two years," Foley smiles. "A friend of Sean was working on a video with Madonna. He asked me to come with him to go see the set. We arrive and she's in full Material Girl outfit. I was introduced to her first. She shook my hand and was so sweet and when she talked, she talked in her working-class accent. There was nothing Material Girl about her beyond the costume."

When Madonna was introduced to Penn, she didn't let on she knew him. "He'd just been on the cover of *Rolling Stone* for his Broadway play, *Slab Boys*," explains Foley. "She knew exactly who he was, but she just looked at him like: 'Who are you?' Her accent changed and she didn't blink. They started courting soon after."

Foley also directed the videos for *Live To Tell*, *Papa Don't Preach* and *True Blue*. He too remembers Madonna being a pro on set and bringing her own touches, revealing: "The Italians Do It Better T-shirt in *Papa Don't Preach* was all her. She looked to a lot of her own Catholic upbringing for the video, putting that in the character she was playing. She had a brilliant eye for image and music, and how the two worked together."

The video for *Papa Don't Preach* was shot on Staten Island – where Foley was from – and at first Madonna wasn't sure about the location. "She was always eating hard candy, and I remember telling her that I wanted to shoot back on Staten Island where I was from, so all the people I went to high school with would know who I am after shooting there with her," he laughs. "She thought it was the funniest thing and literally spit out her candy – and then agreed on the spot." Foley remembers Madonna as "a character" and "very funny".

Madonna was also an astute professional, as Foley says: "I later found out Madonna paid for the videos herself, telling Warner it was because she wanted to own the copyright. Madonna had total creative freedom, which meant I then had total creative freedom too."



Madonna and *Who's That Girl* director James Foley stop the traffic

"She told Warner it was none of their business what we were doing, that they were forbidden from coming anywhere near the set or the editing room. I don't think it's a coincidence that it's the video I'm most proud of in my entire career, because of her decision to do that."

Foley says Madonna was keen to be directed and didn't interfere "at all" with his instructions, noting: "I was always the director. Often you have to make compromises, but working with Madonna ensured there weren't any. I look back now at pictures from the set that I'm tagged in on Instagram and often you can see us smiling, laughing – but there are lots of pictures too of Madonna listening to me, following, taking it all in. She was incredible."

Foley had his first critical success with *At Close Range* and *Papa Don't Preach*, which won MTV's Best Female Video in 1987. He was subsequently sent the script for *Who's That Girl*, initially called *Slammer*, asked by the studio if he could persuade Madonna to

appear in the film. He could. A few script changes and a title change later – to reflect the song later used on the soundtrack – and production was on.

The screwball comedy starred Madonna as a wrongly convicted street-smart urchin alongside Griffin Dunne. It wasn't as successful as *Desperately Seeking Susan*, with critics panning the script. "I remember my dad reading *The New York Times*, and they'd named it one of the worst films of the year," Foley grimaces. "My dad didn't even notice what they'd said about it, he was just thrilled to see his son's name in the paper." The criticism stung both Foley and Madonna, whose performance wasn't received well. "I felt like I'd let her down," Foley says.

Over time, however, *Who's That Girl* came to be regarded as another underground favourite. "It's strange to see your movie go from being a flop to a cult classic," smiles Foley. He believes part of the issue is that Madonna's work – both in film and music – was starting to attract the attention of

patriarchal reviewers. "My blood begins to boil thinking about some of the criticism she had back then," Foley says. "It was so negative, so relentless too."

Madonna expert Lucy O'Brien, author of *Madonna: Like An Icon*, says she was staggered by the animosity Madonna's work drew during this period. She tells *RC*: "When I was looking at the reviews of different films for the book, many had an almost gleeful tone to them. It was often male reviewers just really, really going to town on her and criticising her abilities as an actress. I do think Madonna has a point when she says: 'I feel like people are out to get me.'"

"As time has gone on, I do think there is a lot more respect for her art and who she is an artist, and how she combines all the different media."

One frequent criticism of Madonna's acting is that she just plays herself, something both Seidelman and Foley disagree strongly with. "Some people think



(left) Madonna and Harvey Keitel in Abel Ferrara's *Body Of Evidence*; (below) Madonna expert Lucy O'Brien believes the singer's real ambitions initially lay in film

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MADONNA EXPERT LUCY O'BRIEN



she's not acting," Seidelman says. "But what you see on screen with Madonna is absolutely acting. She's saying lines that are totally scripted. She's having to hit marks and stand in the light and act naturally when there's 30 people in the room with her. She did that every time."

Foley agrees, saying: "Aside from Madonna's film work, you only have to look at her stage shows and all the different characters she has embodied there, night after night. She's always playing different roles, acting out different parts or personas."

According to Foley, critics loved to build young female stars up to knock them back down, especially at a more patriarchal time, adding it's unsurprising critics took aim at her film career when her music was taking off. "Her music was aggressively derided, unfathomably, by some," reasons Foley. "If that was the case with her music, why would anyone think they were going to accept her in a movie?"

O'Brien says Madonna was one of the first to "really understand the power of the moving image" alongside music and see her music and film projects cross-pollinating.

"I think Madonna's films have been a huge source of inspiration for her," O'Brien explains. "Where she's been really successful is where she's transferred that inspiration to video. She was one of the first pop stars to use video as storytelling."

The author points out Madonna's music videos – where, again, she is acting out many characters – received critical acclaim, unlike

some of her film acting. Madonna worked with a host of famous directors on her videos, including John-Baptiste Mondino and David Fincher.

"I think the point about her not being good at film just isn't true when you look at those videos in particular," O'Brien continues. "We all have mediums where we work best. Madonna's wasn't really the straightforward feature film. It was more where music and the visual image work together. Video is her art-form. There's such a consistency and quality to all her video work."

"There's an aesthetic that runs through pretty much all her videos, and that takes incredible talent. That's not relying on producers or anyone else – she's the one thread going through the whole thing."

Madonna always wanted to be a movie star, says O'Brien, first and foremost, because: "All her big influences were Hollywood icons, like Bette Davies, Marilyn Monroe. I think Madonna did have more of a movie career in mind when she first started out and saw music as a way of getting herself noticed."

Indeed, in *Who's That Girl* reviews noted the parallels between Madonna and Monroe. *The New York Times* described her character, Nikki Finn, as: "A fast-talking amalgam of Bo Peep, Marilyn Monroe and Calamity Jane."

Lowell Ganz, one of the writers of the Penny Marshall-directed *A League Of Their Own*, remembers Madonna fondly as her

film career started to blossom in the early 90s when critics were, for a short time at least, a little kinder.

The film is a humorous biopic of the All American Girls Professional Baseball League, following a group of women trying to be treated as seriously as male players. Ahead of its time, it was a critical and commercial success, making \$132.4m and seeing Madonna go toe-to-toe with talent such as Tom Hanks and Geena Davis.

Speaking of Madonna's turn as centre-fielder Mae Mordabito, Ganz believes:

"Madonna was perfect for the part on more than one level. There was her performance, which was full of fun and a graceful naughtiness. But there was also her persona, which preceded her into the film and created a delight among audiences, getting to see Madonna have fun with her reputation."

"She was utterly professional. Madonna worked hard under very difficult conditions. It was hot, humid, the women were playing baseball in heavy uniforms. Madonna helped choreograph the big dance number at the roadhouse. I have only good things to say about her contribution."

Ganz says Madonna understood her part straight away: "As one of the writers, what was really important to me was how she put over the material. She got the humour and she bonded with Rosie O'Donnell, making their relationship one of the highlights. She brought increased attention to the movie too. We were lucky to have her and she was a more than capable actress."

Photo: (Madonna with James Foley) James Foley

Photo: (Body Of Evidence) Alamy; (Lucy O'Brien) Chris Frazee-Smith



Madonna's acting stood up to Tom Hanks' in *A League Of Their Own*

Madonna then experimented with darker films including *Body Of Evidence* and *Dangerous Game*, exploring sexual expression at a time when she was also doing so in *Erotica*, *Sex* and *Bedtime Stories*.

Abel Ferrara directed Madonna in *Dangerous Game*, noting the links between Madonna's film and music career. He tells *RC*: "The script was presented to her first as a producer when she connected to the character – or both characters, as the film was a film-within-a-film. It's the story of a woman finding Christianity while dealing with a physically abusive relationship."

Madonna already knew Harvey Keitel through working with him on stage in 1986's *Goose And Tomtom*, as well as James Russo through Sean Penn, with whom, Ferrara states, Madonna "was going through a difficult time" during filming.

While Madonna was "very into the script", she was vocal afterwards about not liking Ferrara's finished result. The director reflects: "What may have thrown her was our style of shooting a lot of things, then reshaping and finding the film in the editing. In the end, *Dangerous Game* was more about a director losing his family in pursuit of his movie and Hollywood lifestyle, which reflected what I was going through at that moment in my life."

Ferrara respected Madonna's honesty, insisting: "It obviously doesn't help when the star of the film says what she said, but it was her honest reaction. That's what you are going to always get from Madonna, that

honesty, which doesn't change her performance or the quality of the film.

"I knew Madonna from when she first arrived in NYC. She was Italian-American, working class and from the other side of the tracks, with no one but herself to take on the dream of showbusiness. That's where I came from, so I can always relate and I always admired her."

Part of Madonna's reaction to *Dangerous Game* could in part relate to her own trauma: in one scene, Madonna's character Sarah Jennings recounts an experience of being raped. Lucy O'Brien believes: "Madonna was processing a lot in the film. There's something quite powerful about *Dangerous Game* – it's not covered very much because it's quite dark in its subject matter, and it's very adult."

It's perhaps no surprise that, later in the decade, Madonna turned to films married with music, possibly as a release from her darker, experimental movie. *Evita* became a career-defining role, earning Madonna the Golden Globe for Best Actress. Madonna had dabbled with music in film previously, including as the sultry Breathless Mahoney in *Dick Tracy*, but *Evita* was on another level.

In an essay about his experiences directing *Evita*, Alan Parker recalled receiving a long letter from Madonna during Christmas 1994. They'd worked together previously, developing an eventually abandoned remake of *The Blue Angel*. Parker remembered: "Her handwritten, four-page

letter was extraordinarily passionate and sincere. As far as Madonna was concerned, no one could play Evita as well as she could. She said that she would sing, dance and act her heart out, and put everything else on hold to devote all her time to it."

Evita was undoubtedly the most demanding film Madonna had worked on. She began by recording vocals for the challenging score with composers Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice. As Parker recalled: "Over a period of four months, seven days a week, we did over 400 recording hours, preparing the 49 sections that were required for playback on set."

Parker wrote about how Madonna worked with esteemed vocal coach John Lader, "determined to sing the demanding score as Andrew had written it, and not to cheat in any way. Within three months, she expanded her vocal range, finding parts of her voice she had never used before in her own songs."

On top of this, once word of Madonna's casting got out, admirers of Eva Peron were concerned Madonna shouldn't play the part, due to *Erotica* and run-ins with the Catholic church. Parker recalled arriving in Buenos Aires with Madonna to signs that translated as "Piss off Madonna." Everywhere the crew went, "We were stalked by convoys of paparazzi, who at the time had more cameras than we did." One journalist accosted Parker in the toilet, asking him: "What do you think of the disgraceful sex whore playing Eva?" Parker retorted: "She'll do just great."

Photo: Alamy

Madonna wasn't put off by the criticism, carrying on meticulous research of Peron with various communities in Argentina, while also busily undertaking fittings for over 80 costumes. Parker was meanwhile trying to navigate political issues with President Carlos Menem, including trying to obtain the use of the famous Casa Rosada balcony for Don't Cry For Me Argentina, but he wasn't getting far.

At the same time, Madonna was seeking out a network of Peronist elderlies, which resulted in getting a meeting with Menem. A week later, she was invited back, this time with Parker, who remembered: "After much small talk and diplomatic tap dancing, Madonna suddenly said to the President: 'Let's cut to the chase here. Do we have the balcony or don't we?' Menem smiled and nodded: 'You can have the balcony.'"

Of filming the balcony scene, Parker remembered: "It was impossible not to be moved when we were standing in the same

spot where Eva stood looking down at thousands of adoring crowds. Suddenly it wasn't just the illusion and replication of film. It was strangely real. We had overcome the media bombardment, as many wished – and expected us to fail."

The shoot lasted 84 days and was an extraordinary achievement, one of the greatest of Madonna's career. "She was excellent in the film," Parker said, admiring her work ethic and acting. He was, however, disappointed when Madonna was "snubbed" by the Oscars academy. Nevertheless, Madonna sang Don't Cry For Me Argentina at the ceremony.

After *Evita*, Madonna appeared in a handful of other films. There was a brief appearance as cutting, feminist fencing trainer Verity in *Die Another Day* and a sadly more forgettable appearance in *Swept Away*. After that, Madonna went largely behind the screen, turning instead to directing and producing.

"I think Madonna has a natural acting talent. But I suppose acting is like any profession, you've got to do it full-time to be really good at it," O'Brien says. "It's very difficult to dip in and out of, the same way you can't really dip in and out of a music career."

Seidelman thinks Madonna's fame may have played a part in her moving behind the camera: "It's true for a lot of actresses, especially when they become iconic, that it's hard for you to forget who they are, or for them to forget who they are in their role."

"AFTER MUCH DIPLOMATIC TAP DANCING, MADONNA SAID TO THE PRESIDENT: 'LET'S CUT TO THE CHASE. DO WE HAVE THE BALCONY OR DON'T WE?'" EVITA DIRECTOR ALAN PARKER

Madonna films the emotional climax of *Evita*



Photo: Getty

"When we were filming *Desperately Seeking Susan*, Madonna wasn't yet iconic. When there's not a team of people around, it makes filming more authentic. There's not people looking over your shoulder, there's not a whole entourage standing around the monitor giving their feedback. I was lucky to have worked with Madonna at that time, when there was an innocence to her about the filmmaking process. There was an element for both of us of 'Hey, let's just make a movie!'"

Over time, Madonna's film career has come to be viewed much more favourably, excepting the odd wrong turn, most notably *Body Of Evidence* and *Swept Away*. In recent years, Madonna's films have been celebrated, forming a retrospective season at New York's Metrograph cinema in 2016 to showcase her "calculated, cohesive canon." Indeed, movies such as *A League Of Their Own* have been selected by the Library Of Congress for preservation in the US National Film Registry as "culturally, historically or aesthetically significant."

"The big popular culture form Madonna grew up with in the 20th century was the Hollywood film," concludes Lucy O'Brien. "That was always the absolute peak in that culture, to be a movie star. For someone as ambitious as Madonna, that was something she held onto for a long time as her ideal – music was just a vehicle to get to that. Ultimately, she's a cinephile, she loves film – and that's what drove her."