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# *La femme Tautou*

Starring opposite Tom Hanks in the much-anticipated *The Da Vinci Code* is about to elevate the actress formerly known as *Amelie* onto a whole different level of stardom. How will Audrey Tautou cope with her new place in the spotlight? By Joanne Hawkins

**A**udrey Tautou doesn't want to be famous. In fact, she'd rather prefer if you didn't remember her name, recognise her face or know too much about her. And although that may strike you as rather refreshing in these celebrity-obsessed times – where untalented yet ambitious wannabes will seemingly do anything to be famous – it would also mean that this poor journalist would be struggling to fill the next two pages.

Thank heavens then – admittedly for me rather than Tautou – that the diminutive French actor, until now probably best known for playing the title-role in the quirky French comedy *Amelie*, has signed up to star in one of this year's biggest films. Playing Sophie Neveu in the Hollywood adaptation of Dan Brown's controversial but staggeringly successful (40 million sales and counting) novel *The Da Vinci Code* will mean that the 27-year-old

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could soon be one of the most recognisable women on the planet. And, not surprisingly, the impending worldwide release of the Ron Howard-directed blockbuster is terrifying her.

“I don't think it's going to be very nice,” she explains frankly in heavily accented English. “I mean, it's not going to be terrible, of course, but it's not something I'm that excited about to be honest. [I'm] more frightened than anything else.”

Tautou has agreed to publicise – some might say share her fears about – the role in her adopted home of Paris. But it's not been without some drama; a previous round of interviews scheduled for the preceding weekend in LA had to be cancelled after Tautou's beloved grandfather fell ill and the star hastily returned to France. We've reassembled in Paris a week later, but it's touch-and-go as to whether our interview will go ahead after her grandfather reportedly died the day before.

You wouldn't blame her for cancelling again, but Tautou is a professional – albeit one of the slightly reluctant variety (more of that later) – and is now sitting demurely in a grand suite in the Ritz Hotel, waiting to be grilled about the role that she hopes won't change her life – too much. The clutch of slightly stressed-out film company PRs has finally left us alone, and only a translator is on hand to help Tautou with the more difficult questions in English. (I'm lucky in that sense; she later decided to conduct some interviews in French after complaining of feeling tired.) She seems charming and relaxed, and if she's grieving for her grandfather, she's showing no sign of it – but then Tautou won't be revealing such personal matters to a journalist.

Given her fears of appearing in such a big bucks, high-profile movie, you have to ask why on earth she agreed to play Sophie Neveu, only her second major film role in English. “Because [Ron Howard] chose me!” is the answer. “I took this role for the experience, for Ron Howard and Tom Hanks, and they are not the worst [people to work with],” she grins. “And also because I had read the book a long time before and I really enjoyed it.”

Ah, the book. For those of you who aren't among the millions who have read Brown's popular yet

much-maligned thriller (and I have to confess, I was one of them and hastily grabbed a copy while waiting to board my flight to Paris), in simple terms, it relates a conspiracy by the Catholic Church to cover up the true story of Jesus, which is unravelled by American professor Robert Langdon (played by Tom Hanks in the movie) and Sophie Neveu, a cryptologist with the French police.

Tautou beat several other French actors to the part (“I don't think it would be very elegant to say them,” replies Tautou, when asked to name names), although she didn't think she had a hope of snatching the role and, indeed, didn't stop thinking Howard had cast her by mistake until about two weeks after shooting started. “[Ron] had seen everyone before me, so I thought, he is just seeing me because I am the only one left,” she says of the casting process. “I just thought it was an experience to go to Los Angeles, to have an



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audition with Tom Hanks. So I took my camera, and, at the end of the audition, I said to Tom, ‘Can I take your photo just to keep in my album to prove to my sisters that I met you?’”

But the actor's quirky, Gallic charms were obviously what Howard was looking for because he asked to meet Tautou again in Paris. But she still wasn't convinced. “I just thought he wanted to tell me eyes to eyes that it was not me,” she remembers, charmingly confusing the English for “face to face”. “So I was very happy and excited, but scared...”

That she decided to star in what is probably going to become one of the year's biggest movies is curious given her ambivalence towards Hollywood (and her disdain for people knowing too much about her). She's previously said that

“Hollywood doesn't need me. After *Amelie*, I didn't get any [Hollywood] offers that interested me. I have very eclectic tastes, but it's important for me that a movie be sensitive, clever and subtle.”

Whether *The Da Vinci Code* is any of those things is open to debate. What isn't is the notion that Tautou might have signed up for the film because she now thinks it's time to increase her profile. “That is not something I want,” she says firmly, wrinkling her nose in a gesture that's very *Amelie*. “When I do a movie, it is not for what it is going to look like, or what it is going to bring to my career. I do it for the experience itself, and what surrounds the experience; things like whether it's going to be filmed in a foreign country or because there's going to be a new way of working. Those things attract me far more than the glory of being famous or being in the newspapers or being bankable. That is not something that is enriching for me.” Does the lady protest too much, we wonder?

But, then, Tautou didn't set out to be an actor. Born in Beaumont, Puy-de-Dôme, in central France, the eldest daughter of a dentist father and teacher mother, she originally wanted to be a primatologist. She reportedly discovered acting by chance while taking a costume-design course and was hired for a television play “by accident”. As you do.

“My parents expected me to have a very serious profession because I was a very good student,” she remembers. “And I was thinking the same thing. For me, acting was a bit of a lazy activity. I never said I wanted to be an actor. I couldn't even admit to myself that it's what I wanted to do as a profession, but I gave myself one year, and if, at the end of that time, I hadn't done what I wanted, I would do something else.”

Luckily for us, TV roles led to her becoming the darling of French cinema. She won the most promising actress César award, the French equivalent of an Oscar, for her role in the 1999 film *Venus Beauty Salon*, which in turn led to her being cast in Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *The Fabulous Destiny of Amelie Poulain*, after the director spotted her on a film poster.

“Usually I see 10 or 20 actors, but here was a very rare little miracle,” remembers Jeunet. “It only took four seconds for me to realise [Amelie] was going to be Audrey.”

Those four seconds were to change Tautou's life. Her endearing performance as an oddball woman secretly performing good deeds around Paris was a rare worldwide hit – and suddenly everyone was interested in its unique star. Subsequent parts included her first English-language film *Dirty Pretty Things* and *A Very Long Engagement*, again directed by Jeunet, who sounds as though he's rather smitten by his two-time leading lady.

“Audrey looks like a little elf with big eyes, like a deer,” he says. “She's the perfect actor for me because she's able to do both comedy and drama. That's pretty rare in France. Most French actors are only able to play realistic.”

And now Tautou is about to reach a different level of fame with her role in *The Da Vinci Code*.



“I try to protect myself by not answering any kind of personal questions... I’m a tomb when it comes to my private life,” says Tautou of celebrity

And with a higher profile, comes increased interest in her private life, something she resolutely tries to keep secret. (“I’m a tomb when it comes to my personal life,” she has said.) She denies reports that she’s engaged to scriptwriter Lance Mazmanian, but her silence on matters of the heart means that the rumour refuses to go away.

“I try to protect myself by not answering any kind of private questions,” she muses, running her hands through her new elfin haircut, done only the day before for her next French movie, based on a book by best-selling French author Anna Gavalda. “I don’t really deal with celebrity and the fact that people recognise me in the street very well.”

She copes by giving people her “nastiest look” when they recognise her. “It stresses me out and makes me anxious. I would love to love being recognised, but I don’t like the attention and that is the paradox with my work.”

In fact, she hates the attention her job brings so much that she often wonders whether she is in the wrong profession. She’s been quoted as saying she won’t be an actor after the age of 40, and today quips that she’s revised that to 30. “But it’s difficult to know what else to do,” she muses. “It’s not about me doubting myself as an actor – I’m not the best one, but I am not the worst one – that is not the question. It’s more about everything

that surrounds the acting that doesn’t make me feel comfortable. So, maybe I should go and do theatre, but I’ve been doing movies for almost 10 years now so it’s not an easy decision.”

What does make her happy are “the little pleasures in life”. “Things like sharing a dinner with friends, watching a rugby match on TV, playing piano and travelling,” she smiles. “I enjoy being outside of myself, in another country, figuratively and literally.” In fact, after filming finished on *The Da Vinci Code* last September, she treated herself to a trip to Peru and the Maldives, accompanied, as always, by her treasured Leica camera, a gift from a past director. She says she loves listening to music, too; her current faves include up-and-coming Scottish singer KT Tunstall and Ben Harper.

But, surprise, surprise, this all could be getting just a little too personal, so it’s back to that role in *The Da Vinci Code*. At the time of our interview, author Dan Brown was defending himself in London’s High Court against accusations that he had stolen the idea behind his book from another bestseller (the case was settled in Brown’s favour). And the book’s central premise – that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were not only married, but had a child whose descendants can be traced to the present day – is nothing if not controversial.

Tautou, who doesn’t go to church and only

believes in “my god”, insists she wasn’t attracted to the film’s provocative nature. “I don’t really care about that. This is not a religious movie; it is a thriller, a fiction. I don’t really want to ruin this story with my own beliefs, but I am very practical...”

Our interview is drawing to a close and Tautou is itching to get back to her life of relative obscurity in Paris. “I don’t disguise myself, but I manage to be discreet and go everywhere I want,” she explains.

I’ve read that Tautou likes to take a photograph of every journalist who interviews her so “she can remember them”. And, apparently, not so she can harbour a grudge when she reads something she doesn’t like; she doesn’t read her interviews any more. No, it seems she genuinely wants to remember the people she meets during the course of her career. “I thought I am going to meet thousands of people [in this career], and I will never have any memories of them, so this is just for me...”

And, sure enough, Tautou politely asks if she can snap my picture. You can’t help thinking it’s her way of retaining some control in a world where off-duty photos of celebrities can generate thousands of dollars. If that’s all it takes to keep the talented Ms Tautou on our screens, then I’m happy, like a certain Tom Hanks before me, to oblige. ■

*The Da Vinci Code will be in cinemas on May 18*

PHOTOGRAPHY: JEAN-FRANCOIS ROBERT/CORBIS/APL, GILLES-MARIE ZIMMERMANN/CONTOUR PHOTOS, HEADPRESS



FILM LINE *The Fabulous Destiny of Amelie Poulain* – just *Amelie* in Australia (2001); *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002); *The Spanish Apartment* (2002); *A Very Long Engagement* (2004); *The Russian Dolls* (2005)