

Naomi Watts

A dramatic darling who is trading angst for pranks in two comedies talks about the rewards of being “a bit reckless” both on screen and in real life.

Story by Leah Rozen
Photographed by Mark Abrahams
Styled by Isabel Dupré

Naomi Watts Up Close & Very Personal

WATTS had an epiphany years ago on a mountain in Vermont while skiing with her adored big brother. When photographer Ben Watts (20 months older) began whooshing down a treacherous, double-black-diamond ski trail dotted with moguls, the actress attempted to follow him. Big mistake. “I’m not an advanced skier,” explains Watts. She stopped in a panic midway down, much to the annoyance of a skier behind her. “This woman was like [Watts adopts a sneering tone], ‘What are you doing on this side of the mountain!’ And I’m like [she switches to a tearful voice], ‘I followed my brother!’ This is the story of my life: trying to keep up with him.” (She made it down by sidestepping the whole way while yelling at Ben.) The lesson learned? “That I’m not going to do that anymore,” says Watts with a laugh. It’s not a lesson she has applied to her professional life. When it comes to work, Watts challenges herself by taking big risks. She has earned her considerable reputation—and two Oscar nominations—playing characters who suffer through immense emotional and sometimes physical extremes in films such as *21 Grams*, *King Kong*, *The Impossible* and

Diana, last year’s biopic about the doomed British princess.

Now Watts, 46, is pulling a change-up with a rare foray into comedy in her new movies, *St. Vincent* and *Brother*. “People think of me as this risk taker, but I don’t always feel like a person who’s full of courage,” she says. Watts has a beach home in Amagansett, New York, and also lives in Manhattan and LA with her partner of nine years, actor Liev Schreiber, and their towheaded sons, Sasha, seven and Kai, five. “Maybe in the workplace I have more courage than in other areas of my life.”

Based on her two new films, that could be an understatement. In *St. Vincent*, Watts pushes the comic boundaries, playing a pregnant Russian stripper and sometime prostitute. In her very first scene, we see her sitting astride Bill Murray on a bed, ordering him to “grab up, cowboy.” “I remember telling Liev about [the role], and he was like, ‘Wow, that’s definitely not something you’ve done before.’ So, yeah, I was terrified.” Even more intimidating for her was working alongside Murray and Melissa McCarthy, whom she calls “comic geniuses.” To cope, she stayed in character at all times,

even between takes. “It’d bust into Bill’s trailer and say [she adopts a thick Russian accent], ‘I need a drink! Give me a drink!’ I had to stick with that character because otherwise my fear of being not worthy would take over.” Director Theodore Melfi, who says producer Harvey Weinstein suggested Watts for the part, was bowled over by the extensive research Watts did to nail her character. For months she obsessively watched videos on websites that featured Russian mail order brides, perfecting her accent. She even learned how to curse in Russian. “She digs in more than anyone I’ve met,” Melfi says. “I’m a workaholic, and she makes me feel like I’m always on vacation.” Watts’s other, darker comedy, *Brother*, came with its own set of challenges. Watts portrays a nervous actress making her Broadway debut in a troubled stage production. Written and directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu, who guided Watts to her first Oscar nomination in 2003’s *21 Grams* (her second was for 2012’s *The Impossible*), *Brother* is filled with dizzying, technically complex, extended takes. “It was one of the most terrifying experiences I’ve had in filmmaking,” Watts says. “The shots

would last 12 to 15 minutes with 10 or 12 people involved [on camera], and there was no room for error. If you messed up your lines, it would be such a bad feeling.”

If you could start over what would you do more of?

Have a bigger family. I should have had more kids, started younger.

What do you appreciate more as you age?

Surrounding myself with truthful people, even if it’s hurtful. I just want to hear the truth.

More women seek to age gracefully. What’s your advice?

Don’t look at the mirror too much, which is hard for me. Seeing yourself on a 50-foot screen—oh, it’s tough.

Describe a moment in your past you wish you could relive one more time.

I feel like the births of my children were so huge, but I don’t remember either of them well. I wish I could have it all back, but without the pain.