

THE ZEITGEIST



PHOTOGRAPHY, ALEXI LUBOMIRSKI/AUGUST

Calling the Shots

IN AN UNFILTERED, EMOTIONAL
INTERVIEW, HOLLYWOOD ICON
JAMIE LEE CURTIS GOES FULL
MAMA BEAR WITH SHANDA DEZIEL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW ECCLES

Curtis is lending her star power to *The Sticky*, a uniquely Canadian story based on the real-life Quebec maple syrup heist - and the tree farmers who'll do anything to keep the liquid gold flowing.



ello, I'm Jamie, your airplane spouse."

This is how Jamie Lee Curtis introduces herself to a seatmate when she's flying alone. We are not on a flight now, but rather sharing an afternoon snack of chicken skewers and fries at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Toronto.

And Curtis is talking about the red-eye she took the night before, and how she "proposed" to the guy sitting beside her. "I do it because, if we're going to die, that's the last person I'm going to be holding hands with," she tells me. "We're intimately sitting with each other for hours. We're going to sleep together. They're going to watch me sleep right next to them."

This endearing travel quirk is just one of the many ways that Curtis is constantly making connections, with strangers, castmates, fans and friends. "I'm very much a feeler. I've always been an emotional human being – not an intellectual," she tells me. "And my sensitivities, my antenna are just very attuned." And now I'm basking in her empathetic glow. At the 80-minute mark of what was supposed to be a 60-minute interview, Curtis has taken my hand from across the table and is holding it very tightly.

I've just told her how affected I was by *The Bear's* Season 3 episode where her character, Donna Berzatto, rushes to the hospital to be with her estranged daughter, Sugar, who's just gone into labour. It's an intense 30-minute two-hander between an alcoholic, narcissistic mother and a broken, people-pleasing daughter as they tentatively work through some of their painful history – in between contractions – before another little Berzatto is brought into their family. I'm compelled to share with Curtis how, as a Sugar-like daughter of a narcissist, I found the scene excruciatingly resonant and deeply cathartic (explaining that my own mom died before we had closure).

"My children are adopted," says Curtis, who has two daughters, Annie, 38, and Ruby, 28. "So I did not go through that birth experience personally." But the actress, who was once addicted to opiates, does know a thing or two about making amends. "When we see Donna in the hospital, I think she's been sober six months,"

Curtis says, drawing on the meticulous timeline she has created for her character. "She's still Donna, but she is in recovery, in the throes of self-awareness, and she is starting to really unpack her life. Which is why, when Sugar says, 'You don't talk about your mom to me,' Donna's response is, 'You don't want to know.' It tells you how awful Donna's childhood was and that she has replicated that. She had nobody in her life show her how to mother."

Curtis remembers watching *The Bear's* first season – blown away like any other fan – when the Berzatto matriarch was referred to but not shown. At that point, Curtis said, "Oh, I'm going to play her.' I just knew I was going to be in the show." The creators called her out of the blue soon after. (That is not the first time Curtis has had a premonition – she similarly manifested her marriage to *Waiting for Guffman* filmmaker Christopher Guest. But more on that later.) And now, at our meet-up, she's just days away from winning the Emmy for her ferocious performance in the series.

"My favourite aspect of the hospital scene," Curtis continues, "is when [Sugar's husband] Pete comes in and Donna just quietly leaves the room. She doesn't make it about her. It's a beautifully realized bit of filmmaking and I am absolutely gobsmacked that that's what I get to do in my life right now." Curtis looks me directly in the eyes, still holding my hand, as she goes in for the connection kill. "It was a profound, once-in-a-lifetime experience for me, and your being moved by it moves me." >





The actress has been blessed with a joyous laugh, and has a wicked sense of humour and a penchant for wordplay. While she's not an improviser, like her husband, she did ad lib the memorable and memeable line "make good choices" in *Freaky Friday*.

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Let's just say, if Curtis started a cult, I'd guzzle the Kool-Aid. And so would the ladies two tables over.

Enjoying afternoon tea, these four friends can't believe their luck – seated close enough to us to recognize Curtis' grey pixie cut, oversized black glasses and loud, joyous laugh. Eventually, one of them gets up the nerve to approach. "I apologize for interrupting," says the fan, who looks to be at least a decade older than the 66-year-old actress. "I just wanted to say how much my friends and I admire your work on and offscreen, and ... I have a story where I met your dad."

Curtis takes the bait: "Uh oh, did you sleep with my dad? I just need to know. Am I calling you mommy?" Not missing a beat, the woman replies, "No, you can call me Cathy ... we were at the Peninsula hotel in L.A. and he was wearing a cowboy hat in the pool. It was very cute. I told him I was there with my husband, Jerry, and as we were sitting and talking in the pool, I pointed out my husband walking up. Right away, your dad goes, 'Hello. Hello, Jerry.'"

Now, it's Jamie's turn to interrupt. "No, excuse me, I know exactly how Tony Curtis said 'Hello.'" Then the A-list star raises her hand in an exaggerated wave, lowers her voice and booms, "Hello, Jerry. Come over, it's Tony. Come over here, you beautiful man.' Believe me, Cathy, I know. I lived it."

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arly in her career, Jamie lived in the shadow of her famous parents, Janet Leigh (*Psycho*) and Tony Curtis (*Some Like It Hot*); had her success in *Halloween* distilled to the phrase "second-generation scream queen"; and, in the '80s, was saddled with the disturbing nickname "The

Body." But right now, she's having what Curtis, herself, describes as "a creative moment." It's resulted in both a Screen Actors Guild Award and an Oscar for her hot-dog-fingered trip through the multiverse in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, and the Emmy for *The Bear*. And the rave reviews continue to roll in for her next scene-stealing turn as a seasoned Las Vegas cocktail waitress opposite Pamela Anderson in the film *The Last Showgirl* (Jan. 10). "I'm 65 years old," she said backstage at the Emmys in September, "and I just never thought in my life I'd get to do work at this level of depth, complexity and intelligence.... But I'm very patient and this [holding up the statue] is most indicative of my patience."

Looking back at Curtis' oeuvre, she was often underestimated, underused and objectified. And yet, she became a huge star, smirking and sparkling decade after decade in zeitgeisty classics. Right out of the gate, she scored a '70s

TV hat trick with guest spots on *The Love Boat*, *Charlie's Angels* and *Columbo* before ushering in the slasher horror genre with her big-screen debut as the hunted-but-resourceful babysitter Laurie Strode in 1978's *Halloween*. In the '80s, she was a playful weapon of mass seduction in iconic comedies *Trading Places* and *A Fish Called Wanda*, and gave Jane Fonda a run for her legwarmers as an aerobics sensation in *Perfect*. Curtis earned her action bona fides in the '90s with *True Lies*, pumping up the laughs alongside Arnold Schwarzenegger. And in the new millennium, she struck body-swap comedy gold with Lindsay Lohan in *Freaky Friday* (the sequel arrives next summer) and helped bring the whodunit genre back to life, as *Knives Out*'s entitled heiress wielding zingers in an expensive pantsuit. Whether you're a boomer, gen-X, millennial or gen-Z, Curtis has made a generational touchstone that you've watched over and over again.

"Everyone my age grew up worshipping her," says Ed Herro, the 47-year-old co-creator of *The Sticky* (Dec. 6), a new Amazon series, which boasts Curtis as an executive producer and guest star. "We worshipped her in *Trading Places*, in *True Lies*, and in *Halloween*." When Herro and his creative partner Brian Donovan, who are both from the U.S., first met with Curtis in 2018 about their uniquely Canadian show – a *Fargo*-esque caper about a stranger-than-fiction maple syrup heist in Quebec – her record-breaking *Halloween* reboot had just been released. "She was blowing up!" says Donovan, 46. "And I guess she was probably interviewing us more than we were interviewing her. But she comes in full energy, the nicest, most genuine person, but also 120-per-cent enthusiasm and love. And she's so direct in a great way. Like, there are so many A-list actors like her who it's hard to get a straight answer out of, and what Jamie says she means."

Her no-bullshit reputation, Curtis acknowledges, comes from years of "walking a walk and talking a talk, being up front and answering things honestly and clearly. And I've navigated some personal stuff very openly without any of the Hollywood filtering." She's been frank about her complicated relationships with her famous parents, her marriage to mockumentary great Guest, her experience with plastic surgery and addiction, and, most recently, her adult daughter's gender transition. But what has really struck me – and likely the women sitting near us – is the way she's challenged Hollywood beauty standards and embraced aging naturally, while seriously leaning into feminism and female solidarity.

The unfiltered Curtis first emerged in a 2002 issue of *More* magazine. At the time, all photos of female stars were airbrushed and Photoshopped to an extent that readers really had no idea about. And in a radical and shocking move, Curtis pulled back the curtain: "I was promoting a children's book I had written about self-esteem, and I felt weird perpetuating the very thing I was talking about by putting forward airbrushed photos

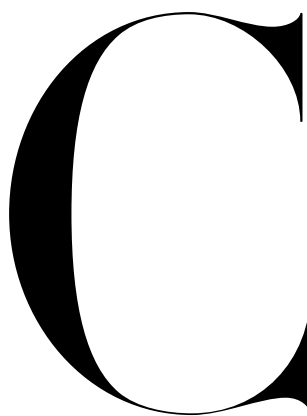
of me, the best version of me.” She went to the editor with her own title for the article, “True Thighs,” and set out the parameters of her photoshoot. “I will take off my clothes and be photographed in shitty lighting with zero makeup, zero hair styling, in a pair of gym shorts and a sports bra – not a push-up bra, not a Miracle Bra,” she recalls saying. “And I insisted that next to that picture was one of me all glammed up with information about how long it took to achieve that look, how much it cost and how many people were involved.” Her point, she says, was misinterpreted at the time. “It wasn’t about how brave I am or that I thought it doesn’t matter how you look. I was saying, ‘Do not compare yourself to the airbrushed me because this is what I really look like, and I struggle with it.’ And I knew that many women would be like, ‘Oh wow. I look like that. Oh OK. I don’t have to hate myself because I don’t look like that glam version.’”

Twenty-two years later, she’s still letting it all hang out, from revealing her own wonderfully big belly in *Everything, Everywhere All at Once* to welcoming *The Bear*’s close-ups on her deep, unconcealed wrinkles, to a fake facial scar and walking cane that she suggested be a part of her mob enforcer character, Bo Shea, in *The Sticky*. “I said, ‘If she’s been a hit woman for 35 years or more, she’s been broken. She’s broken her leg a couple times. She’s blown her knees out a couple times. She may have had hip replacement. She’s been in a couple knife fights. So we have to address that.’”

This commitment to an authentic outward appearance is matched by Curtis’ ability to fully immerse herself in the role, says Michael Dowse, one of *The Sticky*’s Canadian directors.

“Jamie has such a fierce gear that she can get to as an actress, which you’ve seen in so many other performances,” he says. “And this was just another shade of it – where she’s just so mean. There’s no fear in her, that’s what I see. She’s not thinking, ‘Oh, am I going to make a fool of myself?’ If she’s in, she’s completely in.”

That goes for the “process” of filmmaking too. “She told us she’d probably spent more of her awake hours in life on a set than off,” says Herro. “And when she came to our set, she was very busy: COVID had moved everything around, strikes were coming, and she’d just won an Oscar. Contractually, we had agreed to certain hours, certain days, but she got there and said, ‘Forget all that. I am here. I will work day and night. Literally, I will just stay up all night and do whatever it takes to make sure we get it.’”



never been my friend. So, I’ve struggled with what to wear and how to wear it, and what to look like.” And the “trunks of free clothes” that celebrities get sent don’t appeal to her. She points to her all-black outfit. “I buy my clothes. I bought this suit [*Ed note: it’s loose and comfortable*]. I bought this shirt [*understated cashmere*]. I bought these shoes [*sensible chunky heels*]. I will wear them to a premiere tonight. I will wear my own clothes.” That may be the case for the opening of someone else’s film – that evening, she was attending the latest from her *Halloween*-reboot director, David Gordon Green, at the Toronto film festival. But the next day, expectations were higher as she arrived at her

own TIFF premiere of *The Last Showgirl* in a long black leather skirt, fishnet stockings and a red sheer top with matching bra. “You see a picture of me on a red carpet, I am not in my mind and body,” admits Curtis. “I may say, ‘Oh, I look pretty.’ But nobody is waking up in the morning looking at a picture of me on a red carpet and going, ‘Oh, come on.’”

That is the exact phrase that Curtis uses when friends like Cate Blanchett or Nicole Kidman are killing it. “I mean,

my God, they’re gorgeous. Did you see pictures of them at the Venice film festival? They are living it and loving it and fully embracing who they are and what they’re doing and fully in their mind and body – it’s exciting. I am not that girl. And I fully own that.”

There was a time, though, when she put more pressure on herself. In 1985, while making *Perfect*, the director of photography (an Oscar nominee for *The Godfather*) said he couldn’t shoot her one night because her eyes were too puffy. After that, she tells me, “I went to a surgeon and had some pouches underneath my eyes taken away. But what they don’t tell you, in all this greed and avarice of preying on this unattainable fountain of youth, is that it doesn’t work. I still have pouchy eyes – watch *The Bear*.”

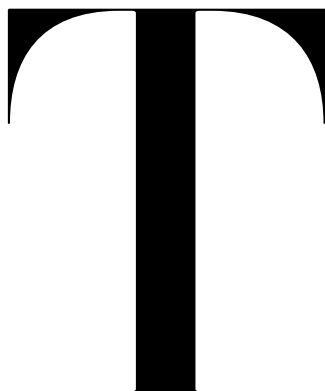
She’s distraught over how the cosmetic industry has “disfigured a generation of women” and how >

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young girls are now filtering and airbrushing their own images on their phones. “I hope we have a pendulum swing,” she says, “where people are drawn back to natural hair, natural skin, natural makeup.”

Like her *Last Showgirl* co-star? “Exactly!” Curtis says, swooning over the thought of Pamela Anderson. “She has come out as a natural beauty and has eschewed the normal amount of styling and ‘schmoozling.’ And I really applaud it.” Curtis pulls out her camera to show me a photo of Anderson, looking take-your-breath-away radiant in very little makeup and a cosy sweater. “We were doing a scene and as they were moving a camera, I looked at her and said, ‘Don’t fucking move.’ I grabbed my camera and took this picture of her.”

Curtis says she signed on to the film to get to know the Canadian star. “I just think she’s amazing. I wanted to play her best friend. And we’ve become friends.” But the rest of us benefit too, as there’s pretty much nothing cooler than a “scream queen” and a “*Baywatch* babe” united in rewriting the beauty rules.



his JLC renaissance is very much a female-centred one. In the scenes that she’s knocking out of the park, she’s acting opposite other women – and it’s spilling off the screen into gorgeous friendships, allyships and moments of pure joy. One of the lasting memories of the 2023 awards

season is how Curtis and her *Everything Everywhere All at Once* co-star Michelle Yeoh would lose their minds whenever the other one picked up an honour. “Michelle Yeoh,” Curtis said onstage at the SAGs, “I love you. I love you. I love you.” While the actress spends an inordinate amount of time hyping up her female peers during her acceptance speeches, on Instagram, on the red carpet and in the press, there is a quiet, unassuming and hilarious man behind the powerhouse that is Curtis. In fact, she likes to joke, “I’m still married to my first husband.”

This December, she and Guest (a U.S.-born British baron) will celebrate their 40th anniversary. And their meet-cute remains Hollywood lore: In 1984, Curtis first saw a picture of Guest in *Rolling Stone* as he was promoting *This Is Spinal Tap*. She told the friend she was with, “I’m going to marry him.” Fortuitously, that friend knew that both parties shared a management company. So Curtis left a message for her crush there – but heard nothing back. Six weeks later, they happened to be at the same restaurant and, from across the room, Guest mimed an apology for not calling. The next day, he did. And they married just five months later.


I ask Curtis if the fact that her own parents had eight

failed marriages between them gave her any pause as she and Guest were racing to the altar. “I don’t think you think about much when you’re 26, you’re in lust and love,” she says. “But I’ve thought about it over these 40 years many times.” The secret to a long-lasting union, she says, is a mantra she borrowed from her recovery journey (Curtis earned her 25-year sobriety chip in February). “Stay on the bus because the scenery is going to change,” she shares. “You may have a shitty feeling. You may be having a really bad day. You may be wanting not to be sober. But if you stay sober and you wake up the next morning, all of a sudden the clouds and the storm that were outside the window are gone. Now it’s a sunny day, birds are chirping and you’re still on the bus. It works the same way for marriage. Just stay – because the scenery will change.”

Two years ago, Curtis and Guest’s bus entered uncharted territory when their youngest child, Ruby, came out as transgender. It caught them by surprise, and Curtis’ instinct to love, protect and learn kicked in. “But it’s not my journey, it’s hers,” she says adamantly. “The focus has to be on her and not on me. The problem with being a public trans parent is you get a lot of, ‘Hey, you’re so great – you accept them.’ And my answer is, ‘I’m not great because I’m accepting. I’m lucky they are my child.’ The only job I have is to support and defend my daughter’s right to exist in a safe environment, or in as safe of an environment as I can provide and control. Period, end of story. The rest is her life.” That explains why the star took to Instagram the day after the U.S. election to tell gay and trans people – among others who fear their rights will be denied – “There will be those who will help you. Me included.”

Her tireless dedication is appreciated. Not only did the LGBTQ+ magazine *Advocate* name Curtis Advocate of the Year in 2023, but Ruby asked her mom to be the officiant at her 2022 wedding. (Curtis has married eight couples and, she says, all of them are still together.) But more than the honour of performing Ruby’s ceremony, what really surprised and touched Curtis is that both of her daughters wanted to get married at her and Guest’s home. “The thing is, I’m not from a particularly close family. I love my family, but we are not enmeshed. There are six kids from Tony, and they’re all over the place. None of us were raised with each other. Even my sister and I, she lives somewhere else, and we’re not enmeshed,” says Jamie, referring to her older sibling Kelly Curtis, Janet and Tony’s first child. “So the fact that in our adoptive family, my two children – not born from me, but to me – chose to get married in our backyard, their childhood home, meant more to me than anything. That is an absolute high point for me.”

And with that, I’ve changed my mind: I don’t want to join a Jamie Lee Curtis cult, I want her to be my mom. Or, at the very least, the last person to hold my hand if things are going south on a red-eye. ■



Curtis is a self-described autodidact and a late-in-life learner, who is not afraid to speak up for others or apologize when she gets it wrong. Stylist, Jane Ross; Hair, Sean James / Aim Artists Agency; Makeup, Grace Ahn / Day One Studio; Photography, Andrew Eccles / August