

BLAKE MAGIC

She's best known for playing a spoilt Manhattan princess on TV, but can Blake Lively silence the rumour mill and enjoy big-screen success?



Blake Lively loves *The Wizard of Oz*. Adores it, in fact. "I love the magic, the fantasy, the happiness and sparkle [in the film]. That's what I hoped my life would be like."

At times, it must feel as though Lively simply clicked her designer heels three times and arrived in her very own technicolour world of money, fame and fortune.

From the hit teen franchise *The Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants* to her role on the cult TV show *Gossip Girl*, the 23-year-old has been caught up in her own tornado of success, resulting now in critically acclaimed films and a blossoming fashion icon status.

Even her new project was a fantastical experience. Lively plays love interest Carol Ferris (who later becomes super-villain Star Sapphire) in the comic-book action flick *Green Lantern*, starring Ryan Reynolds.

"As a kid, I'd walk out of superhero movies doing karate chops and pretending to fly," says Lively. "So the idea of being in one was thrilling."

While she has a life many of us dream about, the actor also has her share of nightmares. In late May, nude photos of someone resembling Lively were leaked online, putting her good-girl image in jeopardy. Lively called

the pictures "100 per cent fake" and threatened to sue anyone who says differently.

Despite the scandal, she comes across as focused and unassuming. She doesn't seem the type to get her kit off to maximise her fame and insists she has no desire to spend her nights falling in or out of nightclubs.

"If that's what people want to do, great, but it's not for me," she says. "I do go out occasionally, but I work really hard and I don't want anything to screw that up."

To spend time with Lively and not like her would be a challenge. Sitting in a sparse studio furnished with a modern lounge suite and a catering table packed with food, Lively is willowy, statuesque, and younger than she appears onscreen. She's open and gregarious and, unlike most actors these days, she doesn't have an army of BlackBerry-punching chaperones sitting in on the interview, quick to jump in if the questions veer too near the personal.

Aside from the bigger and better film roles that just keep coming, Lively has also become something of a fashion darling. She peppers her conversation with references to "Karl" and "Anna" - that's Karl Lagerfeld and Anna Wintour to the rest of us.

Last year, Wintour took her to the Paris shows ("My idea of Oz," admits Lively), flaunting her to the fashion elite, and Lagerfeld fawned over her, thrusting a Chanel handbag from a store's shelf into her hand when she mentioned she loved it. He later named her the brand's newest ambassador and she's since become the face of Chanel's Mademoiselle handbag.

These days, Lagerfeld sends her hand-written notes from his home in Paris, while Wintour dispenses fashion advice.

"She'll say, 'Wear this,' and next thing you know, it's all over the runways," says Lively of the formidable US *Vogue* editor.

Aptly, when we first meet, New York Fashion Week is in full swing, and Lively has spent the better part of the day shooting a campaign she can't - or won't - divulge.

"I could tell you, but I'd have to kill you," she says, deadpan.

By the time we talk, it's early evening and the star has retreated into all-black civilian attire (if you can call Chanel boots and a Tory Burch cardigan civilian).

Fashion was always big at home, and her mother and two sisters have all worked as models. "It's a world that inspires and excites me," she says. "Some people don't love clothes >



(inset) Lively plays Ryan Reynolds' love interest in *Green Lantern*.



Lively and DiCaprio caught up in Cannes, fuelling rumours they're dating.

– they hire stylists and leave it to them. I've never hired one and I don't plan to."

Ask her if she thinks her rise as fashion's latest 'It' girl has overshadowed her day job, and she shakes her head.

"I have a pretty good understanding of what I've been able to put out there so far. I'm on a show 10 months of the year that's in people's homes once a week, and the show is defined by its fashion, so that's what people know me most for already," she says.

Drawing some impressive comparisons – *Gossip Girl's* stylist Eric Daman declared, "She's a teen icon of high fashion and we haven't really seen something like it, she's the Jackie O of her time" – Lively has appeared on the cover of *US Vogue* three times, and rumours have been flying around the internet that she'll play Carrie Bradshaw in a *Sex and the City* prequel. It would seem an inspired choice, but unfortunately, according to the lady herself, it's "not true".

Reports also suggest she's dating fellow actor Leonardo DiCaprio, after the pair were snapped embracing during the Cannes Film Festival. (They later visited Disneyland together after the MTV Awards.)

Lively, who's 13 years younger than DiCaprio, split with her *Gossip Girl* co-star Penn Badgley last year after a three-year romance.

"I don't comment on my relationships," she says. "My anonymity is something I treasure. Wanting to be an actor and wanting to be famous are different."

She does however credit Badgley with helping her through some tough times when they were both new to the kind of fame that came with the success of *Gossip Girl*.

"Nobody understands how drastic a change it is," she says. "Unless you experience it, you don't know. It's nice to have people by your side who know what you're going through."

Lively grew up in LA, the youngest of five children, describing herself as "shy", which, frankly, she appears anything but.

"I was so shy in school," she maintains. "But then I was voted class clown in my senior year, so it doesn't make any sense."

While the women in her family influenced her fashion sense, it was Lively's brother, Eric, who encouraged her to act. Her whole family has worked in the entertainment industry, and Lively says that made it the closest thing they had to a family business.

"I HAVE ANXIETY WHEN I STEP ONSET. ONCE FACED WITH A CHALLENGE, I'M LIKE, 'OH, CRAP'"

"My brother thought I'd love acting. He knew I was creative, and I had a certain understanding of the business having grown up in it," she says. "He was determined to help me find [my calling]."

When she was 17 and in her final year of high school, she gave in to her brother's pestering and went to an audition.

"Eric made his agents call me. He said, 'If there's ever anything that's great, call Blakey.' He was so bossy."

Surely to the irritation of other struggling actors, Lively's big break came quickly. After just a few months of auditioning, she nabbed her first film role in the teenage favourite *The Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants*. It was a hit, and the sequel was even bigger. Lively soon decided to put all her efforts into the craft, deferring university, figuring she could go back if the "acting thing didn't work".

In 2007, she was cast as Serena in *Gossip Girl*. The unexpected success of the show, she says, changed her life overnight.

Like the cast of *Sex and the City* before them, rumours have been rife that Lively and her female co-stars Leighton Meester, Taylor Momsen and Jessica Szohr can't stand the sight of each other. She exhales, clearly irritated.

"It's ridiculous, and it's not true," says Lively. "But people don't like to see women being friends, loving and supporting each other, because that doesn't sell. They always pit women against each other. Never the boys – the boys are always buddies, and that pisses me off."

A fan of old Hollywood, Lively lists Paul Newman, Audrey Hepburn, Grace Kelly and Jean Seberg as her heroes. As for contemporary role models, she points to Daniel Day-Lewis, Cate Blanchett and Annette Bening. Actors of that calibre have the sort of career she covets and, given her cinematic output so far, you wouldn't put it past her.

Her performances in *The Town* and *The Private Lives of Pippa Lee* have pegged her as a dramatic actor to watch. When she auditioned for the *The Town*, Ben Affleck – who directed and starred in the film – thought she was a Boston native, having never seen *Gossip Girl*. ("I'm sure Ben Affleck has better things to do than watch television," she smiles.) Her performance as a troubled drug addict surprised many, and Lively admits that although she fights for tough and complex roles, when she gets them, panic takes over.

"I have anxiety when I step onset. I love challenging roles, but once faced with the challenge, I'm like, 'Oh crap, I have to do this now.'"

Away from work, she indulges in her "real talent", cooking. She plans to open a string of restaurants. "None of them will be called Blakey's," she groans. "I want the restaurant to speak for itself."

"My life is cooking and seeing my family and friends. It's important not to blur the line between your job and life, and fame is so fleeting – if it's pulled away, you can lose your foundation."

Whatever way it goes for Lively, you get the feeling she'll always keep a bit of the magic with her.

"I live a very enchanted life." ■ **STORY: TIFFANY BAKKER**
Green Lantern is in cinemas August 4.

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