

Super Wonder

Elizabeth Olsen on fame, selfhood, and the flourishing force of her Scarlet Witch character.

By David Saric

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RIGHT Top by Versace by Fendi; necklace and bracelets by Tiffany & Co.





Authenticity,
the unpretentious
(even if conscious)
ability to present
an unvarnished
image and
likeness of oneself
to the world, is
one of the most
appealing qualities
of social media.

Full look by Alexander McQueen.

Especially for celebrities whose command over their public image has been greatly usurped by tabloid journalism and incessant paparazzi, social media may present an advantageous opportunity to win back a sense of ownership over their narratives while also expressing their individual truths. At the same time, however, these public displays of a more candid nature can become a perfect means of commodification, their naturalism a salable asset in a market that favours honest interactions.

Elizabeth Olsen, speaking over Zoom from Los Angeles, confirms that her short stint on Instagram was, by most measures, a business endeavour. “I’m not going to be coy about it: you try social media as an actor because there’s a financial gain—that’s why we are on these platforms,” she admits with tongue firmly planted in cheek. “I don’t feel comfortable selling things but thought I might as well give it a go. It didn’t make me feel great, even if it was something I believed in. I don’t think of myself as a salesperson or a personality, so it didn’t really suit me.” Where most Hollywood celebrities are steadfast in crafting an identity that juggles candor and commerce for the world to witness, it is refreshing to see an individual with such well-established cultural cachet recognize that this balancing act is more tedious than edifying.

But before quitting Instagram altogether, the actor admits, she may have discovered the *raison d’être* for her online presence. “I think I found my niche during the pandemic, at the beginning, before I deleted it, which was my gardening videos,” she reveals. “I was like, if I were to present myself as anything, it would be the wacky lady that I am, who just shows people things that they don’t care about at all!”

Olsen’s ascent in Hollywood was a gradual process that drew on her educational discipline. Besides attending New York University’s famed Tisch School of the Arts, which counts Academy Award winners Chloé Zhao and Lady Gaga as alumnae, Olsen also spent a semester training at the Moscow Art Theatre School, where she honed her craft as an expressive storyteller. From there, the actor scored her first role in the indie film *Martha Marcy May Marlene*, a complex thriller that paints a harrowing portrait of a young woman’s psychological disillusionment after escaping a cult.

In the wake of *Martha Marcy May Marlene*, and the glowing acclaim Olsen received for such a raw and uncompromising performance, her résumé began to diversify dramatically, as she appeared in both independent and blockbuster titles alike. However, her prominence within the entertainment industry reached its apex when she was cast in the omnipresent and zeitgeist-consuming Marvel Cinematic Universe, where she portrays Wanda Maximoff, a.k.a. the Scarlet Witch. After first appearing in an uncredited post-credits teaser in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, Wanda, a Sokovian refugee, made her proper debut within the franchise in *Avengers: Age*

of Ultron, and has subsequently appeared in a bevy of productions as part of the titular team of illustrious militants battling catastrophe.

Upon being cast as the Scarlet Witch, Olsen was immediately enthralled by the character’s moral ambiguity. “From day one, with *Age of Ultron*, you could never put her on a side of being a good guy or a bad guy,” she notes. “Wanda’s always questioned other people’s principles and had an opinion that can seem ethically conflicting.” Wanda is the first character she’s portrayed on both the big and small screens, and Olsen feels blessed to be able to inhabit an individual who endures a series of unsettling events and ultimately demonstrates an affecting humanity, especially for a sorceress. “We get to experience her grief, a conflict of self in harbouring her immense power, as well as her quest in finding a family with her Avengers clan.”

For Olsen, Wanda’s quest for self-actualization reached a new level of nuance in the Disney+ original miniseries *WandaVision*, in which she starred alongside her onscreen love interest Paul Bettany, a.k.a. Vision. Olsen notes that throughout the show’s nine episodes, which traversed various epochs both cultural and temporal, audiences were able to get a clearly delineated portrait of her character. “The show got to expand on her inner life, thrusting her into the fore so audiences can have a better understanding of her than was previously alluded to,” Olsen says. As an aside, the actor also reveals that, for weeks after shooting, some of the mannerisms she had to pick up during production stuck with her even when she was out of character, most notably “Oh, honey!,” which she says in an amusingly enthusiastic manner reminiscent of Audrey Meadows in *The Honeymooners*.

As the new addition to fellow occultist Doctor Strange’s cinematic cosmos in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*, Wanda gets to flaunt a robust sense of agency in her first post-*WandaVision* outing. “With *Doctor Strange*, we really get to see her as a grounded person and with a lot of clarity. While she may continue to have a difference of opinion from others within the film, that is exactly what makes playing her such a special privilege,” Olsen notes. While Wanda often fumbled with the immensity of her supernatural might in previous additions to the Marvel canon, the actor notes how amazing it is to witness “how much ownership she has over her witchcraft now, and how she is able to harness it in newly empowered ways.”

As soon as shooting wrapped on *WandaVision* in late 2020, Olsen relocated to England to begin production on *Doctor Strange*, which she admits was a fulfilling creative experience that really enabled her to stay within Wanda’s mindset. Once she received the final script before filming, the actor was able to use her years of experience inhabiting the Scarlet Witch to streamline her portrayal into a more coherent whole. “I hadn’t even finished *WandaVision* when

Full look by Louis Vuitton.
RIGHT Full look by Miu Miu.





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Full look by CHANEL.
LEFT Full look by Dior.

I heard the story that they were pitching to me for *Doctor Strange*,” Olsen reveals. “There was quite a bit of collaboration between me and the crew. I would give notes about Wanda’s characterization—I know how she talks, the certain syntax elements that, if you are speaking with an accent, you just wouldn’t say, while also removing some of the colloquialisms for American dialogue that didn’t make sense. I do feel more ownership now that it’s been such a long time.”

A through line that is evident in the various characters Olsen has had the opportunity to portray, from Martha to Wanda, is the chance to showcase people who can, at times, have a questionable moral compass. “That’s the thing that gets me going,” she exclaims. “How do we play people who maybe seem to be doing things that are bad, or wrong, or we disagree with, and how can we have empathy for them



and see their point of view?” Olsen continues to note, “I think that, as a society, we could all use a bit more understanding of where people come from when we don’t agree with them. So that’s something in characters that I look for, and with Wanda, I’ve always been able to tap into that, especially when she’s taking over an entire town and their minds.”

Olsen just wrapped the HBO Max miniseries *Love and Death*, written by *Big Little Lies*’ David E. Kelley, which she describes as “a truly cinematic and expansive world” that allowed her to “build [the kind of] character that I haven’t been able to play in a while, so that felt really satisfying.” Elsewhere, the actor is also interested in exploring “funnier shit,” a welcome creative reprieve from the harrowing psychological depths that have become her calling card onscreen.

However, there is certainly a bit of ambiguity

to what lies ahead for Olsen. She has previously discussed the idea of moving away from a big city and flipping houses or going back to school to become an architect. “I think it’s something that I want to be open to so that I don’t feel beholden to being an actor or a public person in some way,” she reveals. “I’m always really moved by people who have big life transitions with jobs, because it’s one of the scariest things we can do, to recognize that maybe something isn’t working for us anymore and then to fully invest in a whole other direction that doesn’t have as much protection or security. That doesn’t mean failure at one thing—it just means time to move on.”

Perhaps in this next phase of her life, she can revive the eccentric garden lady persona she briefly brought to life on Instagram. Whatever path Olsen chooses, she will surely bring to it the intense dedication that has become a hallmark of her luminescent acting career.