



Venice film festival

Review

Kim Novak's Vertigo review – the dizzying demands on Hitchcock's leading lady



Venice film festival

An intensely personal interview of the 92-year-old Hollywood star delivers showstopping moments for fans of the golden age of movies



A consciously created enigma ... Kim Novak's Vertigo



Peter Bradshaw

Mon 1 Sep 2025 08.01 EDT

At 92 years old, Hollywood movie star Kim Novak – legendary of course for her doppelganger starring role in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* – is a vivid and, in fact, yearningly romantic and demanding presence in this gallant, cinephile documentary-interview filmed by director and Novak superfan Alexandre O Philippe. She is one of the very few golden age stars still with us, and maybe the title of this film is a playful pun: at the very apex of Hollywood history, perhaps Novak feels dizzy looking down from her mythic height.

Philippe himself is more than qualified for this kind of intensely personal exegesis, having in the past made intriguing films about *David Lynch's debt to The Wizard of Oz* and about the *Psycho shower scene*. With a touch of mischief and misdirection, he begins his film by simply playing a voice note that Novak has sent him, in which she talks somberly about her health issues and about how much time she has left. She does sound poignantly frail. Then you see her in person and she is sensational; articulate, vibrant, youthful in ways that have nothing to do with cosmetic work, very engaged with the questions that Philippe puts to her – but concerned also to discuss her own life and personality, particularly her interest in painting and what she owes to her parents. And, of course, she has something to say about the most germane issue of all: how Hollywood, and society in general, imposes its male views on how a woman should look and behave, a trope famously embodied by Novak in *Vertigo*.

Novak conducts her interview with Philippe at home, a conversation interspersed with clips and home-movie archive footage – but what makes it so absorbing is that Novak has been persuaded to open up boxes of personal material, live on camera, that she has not looked at for 60 years. And the climax comes when she gingerly prises off the lid of a box to find inside the *grey two-piece suit that she wore* for James Stewart's Scottie in *Vertigo*. She even sniffs it to “find out if it smells of me”. For old Hollywood fetishists, that's a real showstopper.

Novak, who is of Czech heritage, began her career in her early 20s at Columbia Pictures, under the whip of studio chief Harry Cohn, who used an ugly racist epithet about her. (Cohn himself was reputedly subject to an antisemitic outburst from Walt Disney.) Cohn was irritable about any residual foreignness in the new acting name that would be assigned to her. Originally Marilyn Novak, she was renamed Kim with Cohn's agreement and, perhaps oddly, the film does not talk about the other Marilyn. Novak herself talks about her passionate admiration for Greta Garbo, though two more different personalities can hardly be imagined.

In the 1950s, Novak made the noir *Pushover* with Fred MacMurray, the romantic romp *Phffft* with Jack Lemmon, *Pal Joey* with Frank Sinatra and the stridently dramatic *Jeanne Eagels* with Jeff Chandler. Later, before her retirement in the 60s, she made bold and interesting choices with *Of Human Bondage* with Laurence Harvey and Robert Aldrich's *The Legend of Lylah Clare*. For each of these (relatively) lesser-known films, it is possible to make the case that she gave a more animated and more interesting performance than the one she was most famous for: the tormented leading lady of Alfred Hitchcock's great mystery thriller, who is often eerily still and trancelike. Novak herself has felt the corseted pressure of being a consciously created enigma.

This is a very watchable and pleasurable film, though I was disappointed that Novak, despite speaking a lot about Stewart, had so little to say about Hitchcock himself. (Perhaps Philippe will now want to interview those other legendary Hitchcock survivors: Eva Marie Saint, 101, and Tippi Hedren, 95.) Either way, Novak shows herself to be a fierce, even heroic, figure.