Venice film festival

Interview

‘I held on to what’s important’: Kim Novak on Hitchcock, Trump and her Venice lifetime achievement award

Nadia Khomami, arts and culture correspondent in Venice

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Kim Novak arrives for the Venice film festival this week, where the 92-year-old will be honoured for her acting career. Photograph: Aldara Zarraoa/Getty Images

One of the stars of Hollywood’s golden era, 92-year-old says prize as much about her refusal to be controlled as her on-screen performances

She was the No 1 box office star in the late 50s, but for decades Kim Novak, the star of Alfred Hitchcock’s masterpiece Vertigo, has lived a life of quiet seclusion. Now, at the age of 92, one of the last of the great, glamorous movie stars of Hollywood’s golden era is back in the spotlight. She is being honoured with a lifetime achievement award at the Venice film festival, where a documentary about her life and career, Kim Novak’s Vertigo, is premiering.

For Novak, it is a tribute not just to her acting but to her lifelong refusal to be controlled and manipulated by Hollywood, or anyone else.

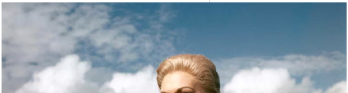
“It’s incredible to feel appreciated and to receive this gift before the end of my life,” she says in her unmistakable husky voice when we meet on Zoom. “I think I’m being honoured as much for being authentic as for my acting. It has sort of come full circle.”

The actor James Stewart flanked by two Kim Novaks, in her roles as Madeleine and Judy in the 1958 film Vertigo. Photograph: Collection Christophel/Alamy

Novak’s haunting performance in Vertigo – as both Madeleine, an enigmatic society wife, and Judy, the ordinary shopgirl hired to impersonate her – is at the heart of what makes the film the greatest of all time. The fragile presence she brought to the parts was only possible because the story felt personal.

“I identified so much with Judy and Madeleine because they were both being told to change who they really were,” she recalls. “They had to become something that didn’t represent them.”

The actor’s devotion to preserving her identity can be traced back to her shy, introspective childhood and her early years in Hollywood.



Born Marilyn Novak in Chicago to a railway dispatcher and a factory worker (both Czech immigrants), she grew up in a rough neighbourhood where she endured bullying for

Novak in the Alfred Hitchcock film, considered one of the greatest of all time. Photograph: Album/Alamy

being different. She found refuge in art, studying at the Chicago Art Institute and supporting herself with modelling jobs. It was during a trip to Los Angeles that she was spotted by Columbia Pictures, who signed her in 1954.

That's when the transformation began. Harry Cohn, who infamously ruled the film production company with an iron fist, demanded that she change her name because there could be only one Marilyn in Hollywood, and "nobody's gonna go see a girl with a Polack name" (she won a battle to keep her surname). He also shamed her into losing weight and had her teeth capped and her hair bleached.

"They hired you because they thought you have something special, and then the first thing they'd do is try to give you a new face," Novak recalls. "They'd want the mouth of Joan Crawford, the hair of Jean Harlow. So by the time you left the makeup chair, it wasn't even you any more. I needed to fight to keep my own sense of who I was."

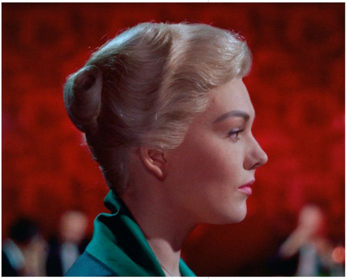
Novak is lively and energetic, with a remarkable memory and a ready sense of humour. It's easy to understand why audiences were quickly mesmerised by her. Her breakthrough came with Picnic in 1955, which won her a Golden Globe, and she followed that with acclaimed roles opposite Frank Sinatra in The Man with the Golden Arm and Pal Joey – on which she performed My Funny Valentine.

The glamorous Hollywood star is joined by Frank Sinatra at the premiere of The Desperate Hours in 1955. Photograph: Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

When Vertigo came along in 1958, Novak was 25 and at the height of her fame. On set, she found a rare creative freedom. “The thing I absolutely adored about Hitchcock was he allowed you to become the character in the way you saw fit. More insecure directors want to think for you, act for you, and therefore you have nothing to offer.”

It also helped that her co-star, James Stewart, matched her emotional vulnerability, in an era when showy, theatrical performances were common. “Working with Jimmy was the greatest thing that could have happened to me. He was a reactor, not an actor, just like me. We bounced off each other.”

By contrast, she found other actors difficult. Kirk Douglas, for example, was “constantly using moves and looks … he’d say: ‘I’ll show you the rhythm of the scene.’ It threw me. It was unnatural,” she recalls.



Kim Novak enjoyed the creative freedom she was given on the set of Alfred Hitchcock’s Vertigo. Photograph: TCD/Prod.DB/Alamy

Novak’s struggle to maintain her sense of self extended into her personal life, too. With Sinatra, work blurred into a romance that was heavily covered in the gossip pages. As was her clandestine love affair with Sammy Davis Jr, which ended after Cohn threatened Davis with mob violence, insisting it would be “bad for business” if Novak were involved with a Black man. Nearly 70 years later, a new film, Scandalous!, directed by Colman Domingo, will dramatise that relationship, with Sydney Sweeney playing Novak.

Novak does take issue with the title. “I don’t think the relationship was scandalous,” she says. “He’s somebody I really cared about. We had so much in common, including that need to be accepted for who we are and what we do, rather than how we look. But I’m concerned they’re going to make it all sexual reasons.”

Despite Cohn’s coerciveness, or because of it, Novak feels the Columbia boss played a crucial role in Hollywood dynamism at the time. After his death in 1958, she began receiving substandard scripts, which she describes as “painful and humiliating”.

She made a few more quality films, including Bell Book and Candle, and Strangers When We Meet, but by the mid-1960s she had grown weary of the industry’s relentless pressures. “I feared becoming ‘Kim Novak’. Every time I played a role, I took on part of it. I was beginning to lose myself and what I stood for.”

Novak starring as Madge Owens in Picnic, the 1955 film directed by Joshua Logan. Photograph: Silver Screen Collection/Getty Images

When her home in Big Sur was ravaged by fire and later destroyed in a mudslide, she took it as a sign that it was time to step away entirely. She relocated to Oregon, where she met and married Robert Malloy, an equine veterinarian, in 1976. “He was very authentic,” she says. “My mother said: ‘You should marry this man, he could ground you.’ And that was true.”

Away from the glare of cameras and gossip, Novak also finally returned to her first love: painting. It became a lifeline during bouts of depression (Novak was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in the early 2000s) and after the death of Malloy in 2020.

The actor attends an LA event with her husband, Robert Malloy, in 1976. Photograph: Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

"Art is the thing that saved me, I paint at least eight hours a day," she says. "I miss Robert a lot. But living alone is satisfying for me. I learned from my mom that I had to be the captain of my own ship."

She has also found solace in her animals. "They could tell me more about me than I could. Like my goat: if I would dare wear a scent, he'd take his horns out and want to bite me, because he felt that it wasn't me."

She has largely stayed out of the public eye, except for a rare appearance at the Oscars in 2014 when she presented two awards. But the experience was a painful reminder of why she had left Hollywood. For the event, Novak had fat injections in her cheeks, and the online reaction to her appearance was swift and cruel. Donald Trump joined the onslaught, tweeting that Novak should sue her cosmetic surgeon. (Coincidentally, the US president recently hailed Sweeney after it emerged she was a registered Republican).

Novak was devastated by the criticism, but instead of shrinking she spoke openly about bullying and mental health. How does she feel about all of that now?

"I've always had a strong feeling against bullies," she says. "How I feel about the president has got nothing to do with what he said about me at the Academy Awards. I didn't like what he said, and that's when I spoke up about bullies. But since then he has become way more than just a bully. While I tolerated what he said and didn't speak back to him on that, I will not tolerate what he's telling me and everyone else to do."

The acting legend in Venice, where a documentary about her life will premiere. Photograph: Daniele Venturelli/WireImage

“Dictatorships are taking over the world, including in the US,” she adds. “Too many people are not standing up for their rights and for what matters in life, like truth and honour and decency. For our democracy and freedoms.

“I cannot tell you how strongly I feel about this. People are afraid to speak out, and I understand. But we’ve got to stand together and make ourselves heard.”

That instinct that drives Novak to speak out now was present in the ways she challenged the system at the height of her career – including creating her own production company and going on strike over a salary that was lower than that of her male co-stars. Announcing her award, the Venice film festival director Alberto Barbera called her “a rebel at the heart of Hollywood”.

Does she believe progress has been made for women in the industry today? “We make progress, but unfortunately then we always go back,” she says. “It inevitably always goes back to sex appeal. It still matters too much how we look. Social media and AI are able to show all kinds of stuff that isn’t real. They’re today’s bad directors, trying to remake women.”

The actor with Hitchcock, with whom she enjoyed working for the creative freedom he allowed the performers. Photograph: Hulton Archive/Getty Images

In Alexandre O Philippe’s new documentary, Novak revisits the shadows of her past. If her life has been one long journey of self-discovery, I wonder if it’s safe to say she has finally found herself. “Yes,” she says firmly. “I’m proud that I held on to what’s important. Of course there are many things I wish I had done differently, but they’re little things God and everyone else can forgive me for.”

And how would she like to be remembered? She pauses. “I would like them to think that I was true to myself. That I kept my standards high and lived by them.”