



THE
ANATOMY
OF
SUCCESS

Miss World to box office powerhouse, PRIYANKA CHOPRA has always made winning her business. Now, with her Hollywood debut, her transcontinental takeover seems complete. AARTI VIRANI meets the trailblazing actor who is wooing audiences from Mumbai to Montreal

Photographed by CHRIS CRAYMER

Styled by PRIYANKA KAPADIA



Cashmere pullover,
cashmere trousers,
bangles; all **Chanel**

A

constellation of Hollywood stars sparkled across Los Angeles's storied Dolby Theatre, making their way to the 88th Academy Awards this February, but my eyes stayed glued to a beguiling Indian import as she sailed into view. In her sheer ivory Zuhair Murad gown and 50-carat diamonds, a winning combo that's earned her a coveted spot on various best-dressed lists, actor Priyanka Chopra, slated to present an award that evening, fielded a dizzying range of red-carpet queries. On several occasions, she made sure to mention that she'd work the after-party circuit, then hop on a red-eye to Miami, where her latest Hollywood project, a 2017 *Baywatch* reboot, beckoned. She remained poised and unflappable, punctuating all her answers with an incandescent smile—surely, a learning from her Miss World days—and a healthy dash of self-deprecation. “I just don't want to screw up anyone's name, you know?” she told *E! News's* Ryan Seacrest, who appeared visibly disarmed by that admission. >





On Priyanka: Lace dress, jacket; both **Alexander McQueen**. Crystal star brooch, **Erickson Beamon**. Black star brooch, circle crystal brooch; both **Reine Rosalie** at Boutique Lyla. Ring, **Uncommon Matters**. Peep-toe booties, **Giuseppe Zanotti Design**.

On Karina: Jumper, **Karen Walker**. Leggings, **American Apparel**. Necklace, **Lanvin**. Sandals, **Rupert Sanderson**

Sequined dress,
Lanvin. Crystal star
brooch, **Erickson
Beamon**. Black star
brooch, **Reine Rosalie**
at Boutique Lyla

Daddy's lil girl...

“I’M AN EDUCATION PORTAL FOR THOSE WHO DON’T KNOW WHAT INDIA IS. I HELP PEOPLE UNDERSTAND OUR MOVIES—NO, WE DON’T JUST RANDOMLY BREAK INTO SONG AND DANCE, THAT’S AN IMPORTANT PART OF OUR STORYTELLING”

I was catapulted back to a Manhattan press conference, circa September 2015. I’d sat just a few feet away from Chopra (who was in town to promote her then brand-new American television show, *Quantico*) and was basking in the actor’s second-hand stardust while the voice recorder in my hands trembled slightly. As she hopped between Hindi and English, confessing a deep love for Burger King Whoppers while recapping a childhood that included shuttling across various cities in India (her parents were military doctors) in addition to a four-year stay in the US as a teen, it occurred to me that the powerhouse and I, a freshly-minted Indian-American who had arrived by way of Japan, shared an unlikely trait: we were both unable to neatly gift-wrap our histories and hometowns when prodded about where we were “really” from, comfortably residing outside the traditional conventions of nationality. It’s partly why I’ve rooted for her since.

“THERE IS NO STRATEGY”

Her résumé mirrors a steady build-up to a crescendo—with the occasional wrong note, of course. After all, it’s hard to forget that Chopra’s fledgling Bollywood career, the obvious next step for Miss World 2000, consisted of a clutch of bland rom-coms. It was only in 2008, when she snagged the lead in Madhur Bhandarkar’s *Fashion*, a film that captured the murky warts-and-all underbelly of glamour, that she leapt towards the big leagues. At a time when female-centric storylines were considered the ultimate swan songs in testosterone-riddled Bollywood, Chopra’s uninhibited performance as a small-town beauty with supermodel ambitions swivelled heads for its stark vulnerability, resulting in

a National Film Award for Best Actress and meatier subsequent roles.

Then she veered West in 2012, recording a track with Black Eyed Peas singer will.i.am and subsequently producing an earworm of a single, ‘Exotic’, joining forces with international rapper Pitbull. While the tunes themselves were lukewarm at best, they spurred bigger things, including a sultry stint in a Guess ad campaign and the lead role in *Quantico*, a terrorism-themed mystery that made her the first Indian actor to bag top billing in an American television drama when it premiered on ABC last September.

“There is no strategy,” insists the 33-year-old, who carved out the time for an early-morning phone call from Montreal, Canada, where she was logging superhuman hours shooting for *Quantico*. Chopra plays Alex Parrish, a fearless Indian-American FBI recruit framed for executing the deadliest attack on New York City since 9/11. It’s easy to see how that twisty role, the first part Chopra ever had to formally audition for, served as the unofficial try-out to the aforementioned *Baywatch* remake, where she’ll play a badie, single-handedly taking on an elite crew of lifeguards, starring heavy-hitters like Dwayne Johnson aka The Rock and Zac Efron. “Let me show you how slow-motion running is done, Hollywood!” she quips with a throaty giggle. For a moment, I’m unsure of where her cinematic loyalty lies before reminding myself that rather than claiming just Hollywood or Bollywood, she’s on a trailblazing mission to embrace both.

Though Chopra is quick to summarise a 16-year entertainment career through a few fortune-cookie-flavoured phrases—“when man proposes, God disposes,” she says—her professional

trajectory reads like an overachiever’s playbook. While she may passionately deny the existence of a grand future vision, Chopra is never without an immediate game plan. The latest in her growing list of accolades are a 2015 Padma Shri and a People’s Choice award she scored in the US for her debut on *Quantico*, the ultimate vote of confidence from a stateside audience.

“ABC pushed a totally unknown face to mainstream America,” says Aseem Chhabra, a New York City-based film critic and programmer for the New York Indian Film Festival. He is alluding to the publicity blitzkrieg the network launched last fall. Chopra’s face was splattered on buses and billboards across major American cities, ensuring no one’s morning commute, including mine, was devoid of a PC sighting. “It’s pretty remarkable for them to show so much faith in her and invest in her that way,” Chhabra adds.

THE AMERICAN DREAM

“I’m an education portal for those who don’t know what India is,” Chopra admits, only half-joking. “I help people understand our movies—no, we don’t just randomly break into song and dance, that’s an important part of our storytelling.” Thankfully, there’s a palpable sense of camaraderie that streams through *Quantico*’s multicultural ensemble, evident in the nicknames they’ve assigned each other—Chopra’s is “Priyonoccupied” for her incessant multitasking. “Out of any of us, [Chopra’s] the most displaced, the furthest away from home,” says Johanna Braddy, her roommate on the show. “But she’s so endearing. She helps people even when she doesn’t have to, whether it’s offering rides to airports or giving advice on how to be a strong woman.” >



On Priyanka: Denim cut-out blouse, **Ashish**. Bodysuit, **American Apparel**. Studded leather platform pumps, **Gucci**. Rings, both **Uncommon Matters**.
On Ann-Sophie Mongeau, Karina, Kathy: Turtleneck blouse, pleated skirt; both **American Apparel**. Sneakers, **Converse**





Dress, jacket; both **Prada**.
Briefs, **La Perla**. Bra,
Marks & Spencer. 'Moon
And Star' leather sandals,
Aquazzura. Earrings,
Karen Walker

Hair: Julie Saint-Laurent/
Next Canada using Label.m
(Priyanka); Nisha Gulati/Folio
Montreal (cheerleaders)
Make-up: Hung Vanngo/The
Wall Group (Priyanka);
Alexandre Deslauriers/
Folio Montreal (cheerleaders)
Models: Karina Savoie/Dulcedo
Management; Ann-Sophie
Mongeau/Agence France
Dionne; Kathy Maguire
Photographer's agency: Sarah
Laird and Good Company
Photographer's assistants:
Dong Loga; Pablo
Calderón-Santiago
Assistant stylist: Rima Chahine
Hair assistant: Alexandra Muñoz
Digital imaging: Alex Dow
Production: Eloi Beauchamp,
Karyne Bond, Nicolas
Chabot/l'Éloi; Julia Ferrier;
Divya Jagwani

“I FEEL THE MOST LOCAL ON A FLIGHT, WHERE NO ONE
CAN GET IN TOUCH WITH ME, THOUGH HAVING A
NOMADIC LIFE WASN'T ALWAYS MY CUP OF TEA”

Chopra's careful not to gloss over the challenges that come with the groundbreaking role: “People think I'm just waltzing on set and practising an American accent but it's so much more than that,” she asserts. “I'm embodying someone whose spirit is American and it's all very out of my comfort zone.”

Her current comfort zone is difficult to pinpoint, even for Chopra, though she jovially claims it features high altitudes. “I feel the most local on a flight, where no one can get in touch with me, though having a nomadic life wasn't always my cup of tea,” she says, describing the draining 17-hour haul between Montreal and Mumbai. It's the inevitable price she pays for being a transcontinental sensation. The second half of *Quantico's* first season premiered on March 6, while *Jai Gangaajal*, director Prakash Jha's high-voltage crime drama, hit theatres on March 4. “If Priyanka's decided she wants something, she will do all the possible things to get it—within 15 minutes of my narrating the *Jai Gangaajal* script to her, she declared no one else could play [the lead role],” Jha recently said in an interview. For the film, which features her as the first female police superintendent in a corruption-laced district in Bihar, Chopra allotted a whirlwind 30 days before jetting back to Canada.

“I was concerned about [*Quantico*] because there hasn't been a precedent for this—I'd never seen Indian actors in the West leading television shows,” explains Chopra. *Quantico* isn't ABC's only current programme that showcases a minority lead. The network is

responsible for a cavalcade of recent shows—*Scandal*, *How To Get Away With Murder*, and *Fresh Off The Boat*, to name a few—that reflect the demographic changes sweeping America. It's the sort of dynamic television that serves as the perfect antidote to the social media maelstrom surrounding this year's Academy Awards, which were accused of being woefully tone-deaf in the race department. Chopra, in all her cosmopolitan glory, couldn't have planned her US entrance at a more appropriate time.

But Chopra's trepidation surrounding her great American experiment isn't completely unwarranted. At 12, after spending much of her young life in various north Indian cities, she tried her luck at a local high school while visiting cousins in Iowa. To hear her recap her initial tryst with the US is reminiscent of some of the more cringe-worthy scenes from the teen flick *Mean Girls*: navigating impossible-to-befriend cliques, scarfing down lunch solo in a bathroom stall and enduring juvenile taunts like “brownie” and “curry.” I can't help but wish that her high school bullies are gawking, slack-jawed and sheepish when Chopra dominates their TV screens today—the ultimate revenge fantasy—gracing red carpets and late-night talk shows.

When our conversation shifts towards the Indian cinema scene—after Chopra's award-winning portrayal of Kashibai in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's 18th-century warrior romance, *Bajirao Mastani* (2015), there are faint rumours about her taking on his next untitled opus alongside Irrfan Khan—she brightens up. “I think it's a great

time for female actors in [Hindi cinema],” she says. “But it took a big fight from performers like Vidya [Balan] and Kangana [Ranaut], women who have taken cinema forward and enabled audiences to have faith in the fact that whether a story is told by a male or female, ultimately, just watch it because it's a good story.”

Chopra's willingness to credit her peers makes her an anomaly in an industry that is somewhat stingy with its praise. But maybe shaking up convention is one of the perks of being a perennial outsider. It's hard to imagine any of her Bollywood contemporaries so at ease on American primetime—who can forget her breezy appearance on *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, where she regaled the audience by revealing her childhood crush on rapper Tupac Shakur? On a recent episode of *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, she challenged the host to a chicken wing-eating contest, winning all too gracefully. Then again, she's equally at home on *Koffee With Karan*, battling it out with Deepika Padukone (also soon to make her American movie debut) for that notorious gift hamper.

Chopra's blueprint for global domination isn't an easy one to decipher. As far as I can tell, its identifying marks include an inimitable hustle, the constant need to shatter stereotypes and a borderline obsession with uncharted territory. “For me, it's about surpassing what I've done before—how do I become bigger and better?” she divulges as her voice trails, momentarily. “I just put my head down, keep working and make sure I'm the best person for the job.” ■