

GALLIC BRED

Elsa Zylberstein Profile

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The latest wave of bosomy French starlets to invade America arrives in a flurry of creamy, tongue-twisting names that wouldn't be out of place in a Martin Amis novel about French starlets invading America — Isild Le Besco, Audrey Tautou and, fresh off the red eye from Paris to grace the Lancel store opening on Madison Avenue, Elsa Zylberstein. Merely uttering aloud these luscious names conjures up images of doe-eyed, porcelain-cheeked Gallic beauties lounging in chic, airy Manhattan boutique hotel lobbies, name-checking Martin Scorsese and Paul Thomas Anderson in broken English while their handlers scramble to contact Matt Dillon's people to extend a dinner invitation. Did the reporter catch that? He did indeed. Like Julie Delpy and Virginie Ledoyen before her — previous transatlantic starlets with exotic surnames who made the big leap into the odd English-language feature — Elsa is drop-dead gorgeous and dressed for success, damn it. "An outfit shouldn't kill you," Zylberstein affirms from the lobby of the Mercer Hotel, in a sheer, creamy Armani blouse that leaves nothing to the imagination, and a perforated Chloé dress that punctures your soul, knowing as you do that the starlet will probably have to surrender both garments.

You might have caught fleeting glimpses of Elsa Zylberstein on the margins of the art-film circuit — she played a prostitute in Maurice Pialat's *Van Gogh*, a Jewish teenager coming of age under pressure in Martine Dugowson's *Mina Tannenbaum* and a ditzzy, depressed, down-on-her-luck singer in *Portraits Chinois*, opposite Helena Bonham-Carter. She played Christian Bale's charming Parisian paramour in *Metroland*, and if you looked close enough — Elsa prays that you didn't — she had a bit part in one episode of ABC's *Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*. She'd like you to forget that little *divertissement* into American show business — keen as the starlet is to conquer the States.

With several new films in the can — including a French cop flick entitled *Un Ange*, in which she plays a parolee turned babynapper, and *Not Afraid, Not Afraid*, co-starring Dianne Wiest and Jack Davenport — it is unsure whether Zylberstein's current efforts will land release dates in the States. But the starlet is unperturbed. She's landed an American agent, she obviously knows Matt Dillon, and she'd love to work with the following directors, in this order: Paul Thomas Anderson, Woody Allen, Martin Scorsese, Todd Solondz, Terrence Malick, Sean Penn, Philip Kaufman, Francis Ford Coppola. "Woody Allen — I'm very obsessed," Zylberstein demurs in English, in an accent so intoxicating you wish it were available in a bottle. Preferably in the Mercer Hotel bar. "I think he's very European, with all his doubts and his depressions, always searching for who he is. It's very French, to talk about your feelings and about who you are."

When you ask Zylberstein if she's at all intimidated about working in a language that's not her own, the actress once again demurs, brushes away the question as if it were a stupid little crumb, and makes a cute pronouncement in broken English as only a budding French starlet can: "It give me desire. It gives me wings. Wings of desire."

If Le Besco's got the boobs and the pout and Tautou's got the gamine charm that's already distilled her reputation as the Gallic Audrey Hepburn, well, Zylberstein's got the most rarefied résumé of her sensuous compatriots. In addition to her numerous roles on stage and screen, Zylberstein's none other than a UN ambassadress for women's mortality issues in North African countries. Who's the real Audrey Hepburn of France, I ask you? In May she visited Dakar and Mali and spoke at a conference on African mortality. "It's another role to play," Zylberstein coos, "but I'm very proud of it. I want to try and understand where the money goes. It's said that 37 million francs is given to Africa from France, and you don't know where it goes!" Someone give this trooper a part in a Woody Allen movie, like, now.

At the Lancel opening in late April, Zylberstein held court in a Chloé blue chiffon dress (oh God, let her keep it) in the company of Debi Mazar, former *90210* star Tiffani-Amber Thiessen and Marisa Tomei (more Amisian names), along with a slew of Upper East Side boldfaced names. Zylberstein turned heads, as Lancel representatives knew she would, and although neither Matt Dillon nor Martin Amis made an appearance at the event, Elsa's voyage to America was hardly in vain. "The more I know myself," Zylberstein confided in me earlier that day, "the more I have food in the market." Somehow it all made perfect sense.