ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

DISAPPEARING ACT

Cate Blanchett branches out.

BY JOHN LAHR

In Sydney, Australia, on the bright, blustery morning of November 10th, toward the end of Pier 4, a "finger wharf" that reaches out two hundred yards into the harbor and houses the Sydney Theatre Company, a little bit of show-biz history took place. There, inside a cavernous former wool storehouse—now a dusty gray rehearsal room—amid a cluster of cameras, lights, and local journalists, the actress Cate Blanchett and her husband, the playwright Andrew Upton, announced their appointment as co-artistic directors of the S.T.C., Australia's most prestigious theatre, which operates three stages. Theatre history is studded with examples of renowned actor-managers—Molière, Shakespeare, and Sir Laurence Olivier come to mind—but never before had a movie actress of Blanchett's calibre, at the height of her powers and popularity, made this kind of commitment to the theatre community that launched her. Blanchett and Upton will officially begin their three-year appointment in 2008, after a year of shadowing the current artistic director, Robyn Nevin. They also happened to be in the process of staging a double bill at the theatre: Harold Pinter's "A Kind of Alaska," directed by Blanchett, and David Mamet's "Reunion," directed by Upton, both of which opened to strong reviews at the end of November. "Andrew and I are galvanized by a challenge," Blanchett said. "Frankly, this is the most exciting thing that has happened to us, apart from marriage and having children."

"I feel the need to move forward," Blanchett, who is thirty-seven, told me later. "I know it's going to broaden me as a human being. I hope it broadens me as an actor." She added, "Moviemaking becomes a little pointless after a time. You think, Well, yes, that's an incredible role, and, yes, it would probably stretch me as an actor. But performance is not, and never has been, really, all of who I am." Still, it is through film that most of her fans have come to know her. Blanchett's list of twenty-seven movies is notable for both its range and its ambition. In her most recent collection of character studies, she plays a predatory Nazi collaborator (Steven Soderbergh's "The Good German"), an American tourist who is shot in Morocco (Alejandro González Iñárritu's "Babel"), a British schoolteacher who has an affair with a fifteen-year-old student (Richard Eyre's "Notes on a Scandal," a performance for which she was just nominated for an Academy Award), and a version of Bob Dylan, complete with big hair and sideburns (Todd Haynes's "I'm Not There"). "I wanted to *be* him," Blanchett said of the singer. "It's the first time I ever had that feeling. I actually wanted to be Dylan. Ultimately, he just really didn't care. He's on his own path."

At the S.T.C., Blanchett, who calls herself a "theatre geek," was following her own path. Her appointment was also a strategic coup for the company: with Blanchett and Upton as artistic directors, its productions will attract international press and talent. (Philip Seymour Hoffman, for instance, will direct Upton's play "Riflemind," later this year.) And for a theatre company that, in 2005, found itself in the red for the first time in twenty-seven years, Blanchett's stardom will draw lucrative sponsorship. None of this sense of promise and purpose, however, seemed to catch the imagination of the local press back in November. When it was time for questions, the journalists seemed nonplussed. What if Blanchett got a movie role? they asked. Would she have time, in her busy film schedule, to undertake such a job? Did this mean that she and her sons—five-year-old Dashiell and two-year-old Roman—were going to live permanently in Sydney? How would her celebrity affect the running of the theatre? "Celebrity is a by-product," Blanchett replied firmly. "If that by-product can be

harnessed to the company's name, fantastic." After the final question of the proceedings—which, like many before, was directed only at Blanchett—she put her hand on Upton's shoulder. "We're a team," she said.

Upton, like his wife, seems to know himself without insisting on himself; he exudes a sort of ironic equanimity. In 1997, the newly married couple spent three months apart while Blanchett was shooting Shekhar Kapur's "Elizabeth," and vowed, Blanchett said, to "never ever do that again." In the decade since then, they have travelled together whenever possible. The S.T.C. offer coincided, serendipitously, with their sense that they needed, for their children's sake, to settle somewhere. Over lunch, at the theatre's restaurant later that day, Blanchett turned to Upton and said, "If it wasn't for you, I think I probably would have imploded. Acting takes its toll on people. There's a kind of madness in it that's thrilling and wonderful but also can be incredibly destructive." She turned to me. "Andrew is an incredibly strong person," she said.

Strength—or the outward appearance of it—is not the first thing that comes to mind when you meet the impish Upton, who is forty-one. His sinew lies in his good-humored stability and in his allegiance to his wife's talent. Upton studied playwriting and directing at the Victorian College of the Arts School of Drama, in Melbourne, and has already done a series of successful stage adaptations for the S.T.C., including a tempestuous version of Ibsen's "Hedda Gabler" (2004), starring his wife. He and Blanchett got to know each other in 1996, while working on one of her lesser-known Australian movies, "Thank God He Met Lizzie." "We were both taken by surprise," Upton said. "I mean, it could have been a one-night stand. We just kept going. Three weeks into our relationship, Cate says she thought, Oh, God, he's gonna ask me to marry him. I'm gonna have to say yes. I asked her three weeks later." Their decisions to marry and to run the S.T.C. seemed to share an adventurous sense of optimism. "Our spirit is jump in, then just keep going until you can make the thing work or not," Blanchett said. "If it's not making sense, you pull it apart and try to put it back together again."

"Walking a tightrope" is how Blanchett once described the experience of acting. A similar metaphor came up over lunch, when Upton described his view of their family life. "There's someone on top riding a bike with a bar and a ball balancing the thing," Upton said. "I think we're in there."

"In the ball?" Blanchett said.

"Me and the boys are in there."

"Performance is not all of who I am," Blanchett says. Photograph by Ruven Afanador.

A flicker of distress showed in her eyes. "That's not true," she said.

"In a balancing way."

"You're not in the ball with the boys."

"I mean, there's balancing in it," Upton said.

The exchange, in its matter-of-factness, seemed evidence of the clarity that Upton brings to Blanchett's thinking, which, she has admitted, is "very meandering—nothing is linear."

When I asked Blanchett if she agreed with Upton about their family dynamic, she said carefully, "There's something about being an actor that is shaman-like. It can produce a great amount of superstition in terms of how you connect to it. To talk about that is very private. Before Andrew, in previous partnerships, even friendships, I couldn't go there. I didn't want to break some spell." She turned to Upton. "I met you and I finally could talk to somebody else about that stuff. I feel like every time I make a film or go into a rehearsal room I've already collaborated with you on it. The hardest thing is to get up there and voice what it is that you're

"Tell your liege it'll be in the shop for at least three days."

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feeling, for fear of being misunderstood or locked down too early or just plain ridiculous. I think that to be able to sort of air that stuff with you . . . allows it to grow," she said.

From the outset of her acting career—she studied at the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA), in Sydney, from 1990 to 1992—Blanchett exhibited an uncanny ability to enter the kind of egoless state that her former teacher the director Lindy Davies calls "transformational." In work and in life, Blanchett, whose favorite word is "fluidity," has a kind of inconclusiveness that lets her remain receptive. "I don't like everything to be tied neatly in bows," she told me. "If it's flowing, you don't arrest it." Keeping things open when you're acting, she explained, reinforces the mystery and the intensity of the moment. "I think it's important to pin questions down," she said. "Sometimes you can answer things definitively within a character, within a moment. And sometimes it's important that you don't."

"Cate is willing to throw herself into a chaotic state out of which something will arise," the director Shekhar Kapur told me. "The fluidity you get in Cate is also because of the contradictions inside her." Blanchett is both candid and private, gregarious and solitary, self-doubting and daring, witty and melancholy. It was these contradictions that prompted Kapur to cast her as Elizabeth I, in "Elizabeth," one of the films that made Blanchett an international star. "I was looking for somebody who could portray not only a reality but an ethereal quality," he said. "This ability to be both of the earth and of the spirit was very attractive to me—the ability to be both vulnerable and totally ruthless. Cate's absolute ruthlessness is with herself, an obsessive ruthlessness about her craft."

"There's something tightly wound inside her, something hidden," the British director Jonathan Kent, who worked with Blanchett on the Almeida Theatre Company's 1999 revival of David Hare's "Plenty," said. "An uncontrolled core that she's not entirely in charge of, which, when it's harnessed, makes her riveting." In "Plenty," Blanchett played Susan Traherne, a woman whose life after the Second World War is a slow diminuendo into despair. The production was controversial, and some of the reviews were catty—the *Independent* suggested that only Dame Edna could have done more to expose the weaknesses of the play. Blanchett was distraught. "She didn't weep like a prima donna," Upton said. "She wept like a betrayed woman." Since that incident, Blanchett has never read a review; Kent, for his part, has never quite believed in her apparent confidence. "That grounded self that you and I perceive—the directness, the straightness, the lack of nonsense—in a way I think that's a performance," he said. "I think the hidden chaos of Cate is so interesting."

Scott Rudin, a co-producer of "Notes on a Scandal," told me, "She's very shrewd about what capital she gives up and when. When she gives you the tiniest bit of insight into why the character's behaving the way she is, you gobble it up. I think it's a combination of alluring and elusive." He added, "It is the elusiveness that is the key." Blanchett herself made the same point. She was describing her character Lena, a Nazi collaborator in Berlin in 1945, in Soderbergh's "The Good German," which she began shooting, without any rehearsal, the Monday after she'd completed "Notes on a Scandal." The scene Blanchett filmed that day had Lena sitting on a bench with an American military attorney from whom she's hoping to get the papers she needs to leave Berlin. "I thought, The biggest thing I'm gonna do is cross my legs," she told me. "I'm not gonna give anything away to this man. I knew everything that Lena was concealing. But it was, like, I'm not going to let Steven Soderbergh know. I'm going to be completely, utterly ambiguous." She continued, "Ambiguity is not absence. It's a wildly contradicting series of actions, emotions, and intentions. There was a line where Lena said, 'No one is all good or all bad.' And I thought that she was referring to herself. So I let a tiny little bit of her own self-hatred come through." (Soderbergh got his shot on the first take.)

What Blanchett hides from her directors and her audience she also hides from herself. "I do like to preserve the mystique of the thing, for myself as much as anyone else," she has said. Over the years, she has repeatedly dodged autobiographical questions by claiming, "I've sort of forgotten my childhood." These ellipses in conversation help Blanchett to trick herself out of self-consciousness. "I'm not interested in the character I am in myself," she told James Lipton on the television series "Inside the Actors Studio." "Any connection that I have to my characters will be subliminal and subconscious." The first time Blanchett realized that she might have talent is associated in her mind with this ability to make herself disappear. She was in her second year at Melbourne University, appearing in a play by Kris Hemensley called "European Features," at Melbourne's La Mama. "My sister, Genevieve, came to see the play," Blanchett said. "My

sister's a harsh critic. She said, 'That's the first time I couldn't see you.' I understood what she meant."

Blanchett grew up in Ivanhoe, a leafy suburb of Melbourne, beside the Yarra River. She was the middle child, between an older brother, Bob, who had a mild case of cerebral palsy, and Genevieve. (Bob works as a computer programmer; Genevieve is studying architecture, after a successful career as a stage designer.) Of the siblings, Blanchett was, by her own admission, the most adventurous. "I felt very free as a child," she said. Together, she and Genevieve invented characters, which Blanchett would play, for days at a time, around the house. "My sister and I would dress me up in something," she said. "I'd pull a face or a stance; she'd give them names and an identity." When Blanchett was around nine, her enthusiasm for performance took the form of knocking on strangers' doors to see if she could talk her way inside their homes with a tall tale about a lost dog. "It was the adrenaline rush, really," she said. "My friend hid in the bushes. I remember the woman at the door saying, 'I haven't seen a dog. Come in. I'll ask my husband.' I looked at the bushes thinking, Oh, my God, what am I doing? I remember the look in this woman's eyes when she started to think, You haven't lost a dog, have you? It suddenly had become a real thing." Blanchett continued, "My whole childhood was like that. If someone dared me, I'd do it."

Blanchett's mother, June, was a jazz-loving schoolteacher. Her Texas-born father, Robert, who met June when his Navy ship broke down in Melbourne, had, according to Blanchett, "a very dry sense of humor." He had quit school at fourteen—"I went to the school for bums," he told his daughter. Robert put himself through night school, worked at a television station, returned to Australia to marry June, and got into advertising. Then, when Blanchett was ten, he died. "I was playing the piano," she has recalled. "He walked past the window. I waved goodbye. He was going off to work. He had a heart attack that day. He was only forty." The fact that she hadn't embraced him before he left haunted Blanchett. "I developed this ritual where I couldn't leave the house until I could actually physically say goodbye to everyone," she said. The ritual continues, according to Upton. "She will never forget to say goodbye," he said. "When you're going off to work, if you're going overseas, that point of departure is really important to her."

When asked about her father now, Blanchett generally brushes the questions aside. "I don't necessarily need to consciously understand my past," she said. She went on, "Drama school was a place where a lot of these things came up, but in a way that one could deal with them in a visceral sense. You move them through your body and out your fingertips. Then you keep the bits that are useful and throw away the junk." Still, the loss was clearly a transforming one, for her and for her work. She has called bereavement "a strange gift." In many essential ways, she told me, her father's death was the shadow that informed her brightness. "It's chiaroscuro," she said.

After Robert died, Blanchett developed a passion for horror movies. "I loved being terrified," she said. "It used to be a badge of honor if you could sit through 'Halloween II.'" Some of the appeal of horror movies lies in the thrill of surviving them, of, in a sense, cheating death. It's a thrill that carries over, as Upton pointed out, to acting. "You go onstage and you're alive," he said. "You walk offstage, then the character's gone. You survive the experience. It's scintillating." He added, "I think that's why Cate's not one of those Method people who carry the role offstage with them." Over the years, Blanchett has turned her appetite for this form of transcendence into a kind of life style. "You can't say no to things because you're frightened," she told a group of students in 2005.

The idea of performance first captured Blanchett's imagination when she was about five and saw a production of "The Mikado" in which an actor's long mustache fell off onstage. "You could feel the whole audience go, 'Oh, my God, something real just happened,'" Blanchett told Lipton. "He said, 'Oh, you can never trust these Japanese,' or some joke. I remember that moment—seeing the actor handling a real moment in a completely surreal and unreal production. I thought, I wish I could be up there with him." Throughout her childhood, on Saturday afternoons, Blanchett attended a drama class in a musty warehouse, with a costume box full of "things that were slightly frayed around the edges." "I would often spend the whole class by myself, or with another girl, trying on this stuff and making little things up," she told me. She was, she added, "the child of whom everyone said, 'Oh, she's gonna be an actress.'"

Still, Blanchett started out at the University of Melbourne as an art-history and economics major. After two years, she auditioned, on a whim, for the three-year acting course at NIDA. Her most celebrated performance at NIDA was one for which she wasn't originally cast. She was playing Clytemnestra in a production of Sophocles' "Electra"; two weeks into rehearsals, the woman playing Electra withdrew. The director, Lindy Davies, asked, "Who can work over Easter?," and Blanchett raised her hand. "One of the things that she can do," Davies told me, "is move into the realm of metaphor, but without being histrionic." Davies recalled Blanchett weeping during rehearsals. "She sobbed on the floor in the sunlight. She was talking about Menelaus. The sense of grief was like a waterfall cascading. The thing is that she understands loss."

"When I came out of drama school, I wasn't that hot young thing," Blanchett told me. But she gathered heat soon enough. In 1993, at the Sydney equivalent of the Tony Awards, she was voted Best Newcomer, for her performance in Timothy Daly's "Kafka Dances"; the same year, for her appearance opposite Geoffrey Rush in a memorable production of Mamet's "Oleanna," she was named Best Actress. (She was the first person ever to win both categories at once.) Three years later, Blanchett auditioned to play the role of the mercurial title character in Gillian Armstrong's "Oscar and Lucinda" (1997). The movie, which was based on the novel by Peter Carey about two obsessive gamblers, brought Blanchett's "chalky phosphorescence," as the director Anthony Minghella called it, out of the Southern Hemisphere and into the international

arena. After her next movie, "Elizabeth," the world, and every film director in it, knew her name.

At NIDA, one of Blanchett's teachers gave her some advice that she took to heart. "When you're performing, always keep your lights on," he told her. "When you're home, turn them off." Blanchett and Upton have settled down in the sleepy heart of Sydney normality, the sedate suburb of Hunter's Hill, about fifteen minutes northwest of town, where the noisiest thing in the street is an explosion of purple jacarandas. Ten minutes from their rented sandstone house, they are renovating a house on three acres of land seeded with Norfolk pine and eucalyptus trees, which hide the neighbors and muffle the sound of cars. To Blanchett, the place, which she calls her "oasis," has "a feeling of being completely in the bush." Even in her current cramped residence, Blanchett has established a sense of calm order. The living room is dominated by a television, photographs of a windswept Upton and Blanchett on the New Zealand coast, and, in the corner, a small children's table, where, on the day I visited, Roman was proudly learning how to maneuver his knife and fork over some fish sticks. Nowhere was there any sign of Blanchett's line of work. (A converted closet off the dining room serves as her office; a bevy of her awards—Academy, Golden Globe, and BAFTA among them—is pushed to the far corner of her desk by a morass of papers, books, and photographs of the children.)

When he was finished with his lunch, Roman came over to discuss the possible modes of transportation to the playground, where his nanny was about to take him. He was leaning toward taking the stroller. Blanchett listened closely to his argument, then said, "Maybe you should walk. What do you think? Walk on your little feet?" Roman considered for a moment, then agreed to leg it. Later, Blanchett negotiated with the inquisitive Dashiell, whom she'd just picked up from the local Montessori school and who had gone from voluble curiosity in her gray BMW ("What are guts? What are the guts of the house?") to visible fury over his lunch menu of soup and fish sticks: "I don't want it; they're disgusting!"

"That's his favorite word of the moment—'disgusting,' " Blanchett said, as Dashiell's complaints escalated. She leaned down to speak to him. "Hang on," she said. "You're giving conflicting messages. You're saying you don't want fish fingers, but all of a sudden you do want fish fingers." Dashiell mumbled something about wanting a sandwich and not soup. "If you start to eat your meal, darling, then we can make you a sandwich," Blanchett said.

Dashiell said, "I'll eat the bread but not the soup."

"This is the new Dash," Blanchett said, smiling. "He thinks he's living in a hotel and wants to order room service all the time."

"I don't want to," Dashiell said, and slapped at Blanchett's hands. She calmly scooped him up and took him to his bedroom at the back of the house. A few minutes later, the sound of his grievance ceased, and Blanchett returned. "There's a whole thing with my generation about having the children like you," she said. "Most parents want to be friends." Her role at home, she made it clear, was mother, not pal.

At home and at work, Blanchett has a talent for listening. When she studies a script, she often writes down everything that her character says about herself and about other characters, as well as everything that other people in the script say about her character. "You get an objective sense, within the story, of how they're perceived and how they perceive themselves," she said. "You get a sort of three-dimensional sense of what they are doing." She went on, "Each project you encounter reveals to you the way to work on it. It's all about the text. Some pieces need to be invented, or reimagined, or teased out. Some just need to be unlocked."

She has the capacity to see herself as part of a larger landscape. Her form of storytelling, therefore, lies not just in the dialogue but in the dance of the character. "She has a constantly amorphous physicality," Geoffrey Rush told me. "That's why she seems to transform from role to role." She also has the acuity to sit inside an emotion and parse it. In Tom Tykwer's "Heaven" (2002), for instance, she played Philippa, an English teacher in Italy, frustrated by the failure of the corrupt carabinieri to stop the drug lord who is selling to children at her school and whose drugs killed her husband. In an act of rough justice, Philippa plants a bomb in the drug lord's office. We watch Blanchett place the device in his wastepaper basket before escaping from the building; we also watch a cleaning lady empty the contents of the basket into her cart, which she wheels onto an elevator carrying a man and two girls. The scene in which Philippa is confronted with the news that she has killed four people, including two children, is perhaps Blanchett's greatest emotional moment on film. Her expression goes from blankness, to shock, to sorrow, to disbelief, to moral horror, to a grief so overwhelming that she finally faints in anguish.

In her career, Blanchett has played Australian, American, Scottish, Russian, English, Irish, French, Italian, and German characters. "She can do a voice in soprano, a baritone voice, a nasal voice, an adenoidal voice, a three-octave voice, or she can do something quite tinny and twangy," the dialect coach Tim Monich told me. "People use the phrase 'I'm gonna make it my own.' With Cate, it's quite the opposite; it's about adapting herself." The key to Blanchett's characterizations is not so much the imitation of sound as the penetration of syntax. "An actor's job is partly anthropological," she told me, and the character's idiom is where she does much of her excavation. "The way people speak reveals how they think," she said. "The rhythm reveals emotion, it reveals intention." When she was at Melbourne University, working part time as a waitress at the Old Homestead Inn to pay her way, Blanchett would jot down overheard conversations on her pad; those "found moments" went into a play that she wrote with another student, about life in the city and how people's conversations are often "a way of avoiding rather than communicating."

Over the decades, her methods have become more cunning and more detailed. When preparing to play the title role in Joel Schumacher's "Veronica Guerin" (2003), a portrait of the Irish journalist who was murdered for her investigations into the drug trade, Blanchett listened to every interview that Guerin had ever given. "You could hear the way she was thinking," Blanchett said. "You could hear the missteps; you could hear when she wasn't telling the truth; you could hear when she was unsure of something. I thought, Ah, she's

not sure about her own intelligence."

"Every seemingly little trivial piece of information is something that can feed her," said Monich, who worked with Blanchett on her version of Katharine Hepburn's imperious, vowel-strangled Yankee barrage of words in Martin Scorsese's "The Aviator" (2004). It was Monich who first told Blanchett about Hope Williams, a socialite and actress for whom Hepburn was an understudy in "Holiday," on Broadway, in 1928. "She was a genuine rich girl whom Philip Barry wrote a couple of plays for," Monich said. "I had this theory that Hope Williams was a role model for Hepburn as a person, as a character, as an actress. They called her the Park Avenue Stride Girl. Later, it became clear she was a lesbian. She had very short hair. . . . Cate was completely intrigued with my theory. We both became obsessed with Hope Williams." Monich and Blanchett told Scorsese, who screened for them Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's "The Scoundrel," in which Williams makes an entrance in a stylish hat with a breezy "Hello, hello." In "The Aviator," Blanchett pays homage to that scene, when Hepburn arrives at her family's New England summer lunch party. "Cate is imitating Katharine Hepburn imitating Hope Williams," Monich said.

At her first meeting with Scorsese for the film, Blanchett brought a coffee-table book containing studio stills of Hepburn. "She said, 'Look, I looked at some stills of Katharine Hepburn,'" Scorsese told me. "And she got in a certain position, sort of crouching down. Cate said, 'I think she was like this.' Sure enough, she just had it. She had the gesture, she had the body lines, the look of Katharine Hepburn." In her research, "the most fantastic resource," Blanchett said, was Dick Cavett's 1973 two-part interview with Hepburn, then in her mid-sixties. "She was older and her voice had calcified and her whole personality had become a burlesque of itself, but it was fascinating to see how she behaved, and how uncomfortable she was," Blanchett told the *Times*. Her portrayal of Hepburn, for which she won an Academy Award, managed to suggest a defensiveness behind the brusque bravado, especially in the vocal restrictions of her machine-gun laugh.

In a preproduction discussion for last year's "Notes on a Scandal," Richard Eyre says he got off to "a slightly sticky start with Cate." He told me, "She'd had one session with a dialect coach, and was she going to have another? I was worried about whether she'd be class-specific. Her character is kind of upper-middle bohemian. I wanted the distinction between her and Judi Dench's character, who is petit bourgeois, to be clear." Eyre continued, "I think she thought I was overconcerned with the externals instead of the psychology." "He was really worried about the issue of class," Blanchett explained. " 'Richard,' I said, 'I need to work on it because I'm not a mimic. I need to sit down and work on it.' So the accent became an issue, when I didn't want to focus on the accent but on the meat of things." No sooner were Eyre's words out of his mouth than he realized that he'd made a mistake. "I was sitting in my kitchen and talking. She said, 'Don't you think I can do this?' " Eyre said. "She was upset. I must have been eroding her self-confidence. I felt as bad as I've ever felt. I apologized. She didn't extract revenge."

In fact, Blanchett turned in one of her most thrilling performances, as the art teacher Sheba Hart. "She was quite ruthless in the way she approached that role," the British playwright Patrick Marber, who wrote the screenplay, said. "This was a woman whom she was not going to explain or apologize for—she was just going to play it. She never asked me to write something that would make her more sympathetic or her predicament more understandable." On the other hand, Blanchett was willing to disagree with lines that she felt didn't match the character she had in mind. In one scene, after Sheba's affair with her fifteen-year-old student is made public and she has taken refuge with her teaching cohort and confidante, Barbara, she discovers Barbara's toxic diaries, full of twisted sexual obsession with her, and taped-in mementos of the infatuation. Sheba melts down. Marber recalls, "I put this line in it, 'Where did you get my hair? Did you pluck it from the bath with some special fucking tweezers?' She said, 'I don't want to say that line. It's too funny. It will corrupt the tone of where Sheba's at.' We hammer-and-tonged it for about ten minutes. Eventually, I said, 'Oh, please, just please.' I think she felt compelled to concede to the writer, even if he was a bloody idiot. I think that's because she's come from the theatre."

On the day that Blanchett and Upton announced their artistic leadership of the Sydney Theatre Company, she assured the wary journalists, "We've got

"Yes, he has deep pockets. But I never realized how short his arms are."

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good instincts and a good eye." Her visual sophistication is apparent in her art collection, which includes works by Paula Rego, Howard Hodgkin, and Tim Maguire. After tea, she suggested that we visit a gallery that featured artists in whom she had an interest. There was a provocative show by the Chinese conceptual artist Zhang Huan, that included disturbing images of the artist buried beneath a mound of books and appearing to sodomize a donkey. At the same gallery, Blanchett studied the Chinese-born Sydney artist Guan Wei's "Echo," a series of forty-two panels painted as mythological maps of Australia, which appropriated figures from European colonial exploration, as well as Chinese landscape painting. On the periphery of another Guan painting, a wild seascape in black, were iconic emblems of Australia's past and present: galleons, soldiers, Aborigines, and kangaroos. At the center were roiling waves and clouds, in which pink figures fell from boats and bobbed in the surf. At the edge was the desert.

Blanchett scrutinized Guan's works. "He's very witty," she said. "Towns called Dread and Bathe. It seduces you with one feeling, then it undercuts it. He's got actual creatures, then mythological creatures. He's got Chinese characters, to which he's added little brushstrokes that make them not quite those characters, so it's an invented language." She went on, "It's about the way we tell ourselves stories: how we handle failure, how we handle success, how we place ourselves against the rest of the world. All these things are at the core of who I am, who we all are. It's somewhere bound up with this journey inward."

Two days later, Blanchett, Upton, and I met at the S.T.C.'s three-hundred-seat main stage, to look at the set for "Reunion" and "A Kind of Alaska," which had just been constructed. Blanchett regarded the moody, brackish gray-green backdrop and the walkway that led to an angled square in the center; she and Upton intended to flood the space so that the performing area would appear to be a floating island. "One thing I do understand is space," she'd told me earlier, and so it seemed. The design was playful and daring, poetic and timeless. "It really liberates preconceptions," she said. She said that she had seen a similar effect used at the Saatchi Gallery, in London. "I asked the curator how deep the water was. He said, 'It's as deep as you want it to be.' "

In "Alaska," which is inspired by "Awakenings," Oliver Sacks's study of several survivors of "sleeping sickness," the heroine, Deborah, after having been "asleep" for thirty years, awakens, struggles to get her bearings in this strange new world, then sinks back into darkness. "I've always been interested in the emergent consciousness—that point between wakefulness and slumber, that place where the sense of one's self is extremely malleable," Blanchett said. "She's a broken person who's trying to reassemble herself." Toward the end of the play, Deborah starts to feel her mind receding. "Oh, dear," she says. "Yes, I think they're closing in. They're closing the walls in. Yes." On the play's last beat, Blanchett and Upton planned to have the water seep upward. "It somehow formally completes the evening," she said.

Later that day, I met up with Blanchett again to accompany her to the opening night of "Keating!," a musical revue about the trials and tribulations of Australia's flamboyant former Prime Minister Paul Keating, directed by Neil Armfield. Before we left, she insisted on playing for me the soundscape she was devising for "A Kind of Alaska." "Chris Abrahams is an amazing pianist and plays in a jazz trio called the Necks. Abrahams did this music—sort of a hybrid form," she said. With her elbows planted on the desk and her face in her hands, she leaned forward, concentrating on the insistent pounding that was both funereal and celebratory, like a heartbeat getting stronger. Voices and archival sounds were layered into it: a piano played a snippet of "If You Were the Only Girl in the World"; a voice growled "piss in your face." The cursing voice was authentic—taken from a video of Sacks's patients, which Blanchett had tracked down, she said, after noticing a footnote in "Awakenings." She listened awhile longer, then hit "Pause." "The theme is good," she said, "but it's just too present. You don't want to give it all away in the soundscape. There are all these memories, inventions, planes of supposed reality. If you describe them literally, then it depletes them. The audience has to listen with their reaching ears." Blanchett shoved the CD into her bag. "We're gonna have to fuck with it," she said.

When we arrived at the Belvoir Street Theatre, a converted tomato-sauce factory, the lobby was a scrum of people, with blinking red lights strung around the low ceilings and the exuberant buzz of a beer cellar. Blanchett pushed her way through the well-wishers and news-

hounds until she ran into Gillian Armstrong. In the hubbub, it was impossible to hear what she was saying. Instead, as the cameras flashed, I watched her easy smile and thought about a story that Armstrong had told me on the phone the night before. "I ran the first answer print of 'Oscar and Lucinda' at the lab for the color grader, Arthur Cambridge, whom I worked with for many years," she said. "You sit in the dark. You watch the film at mute, with no sound at all. No one had ever heard of or seen Cate before." She went on, "We're halfway through the film when Arthur said, 'Is she a nice person? It just comes through that she is.' I thought, Isn't that great? He's the first audience."

After we took our seats, a tall, handsome older man in a blue sports coat stopped beside us. "Hello, Cate," he said. It was Keating himself. The lights dimmed. "I love it when it goes dark," she said. "It's like a slumber party." She settled back to be, for once, a member of the audience. The show had a fine set of impudent lyrics and an inventive staging; it seemed to release Blanchett's robust sense of humor. The sultry face of the glamour pages gave up its famous composure; the poised lips dissolved into guffaws. Blanchett rocked in her seat. At one point, in "Freaky," a song about Alexander Downer, the current Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, who became a figure of fun after he was photographed in fishnet stockings and women's shoes for a charity event, Blanchett was surprised to find herself part of the joke. Downer was played by the show's lyricist and composer, Casey Bennetto, a large man with a hairy back who swanned onstage in the tight-fitting garter-belted mufti of a dominatrix. He looked, more or less, like a bratwurst in heels. Bennetto worked the room with gusto:

> I'm a greasy-cheek freak
> A leader of tomorrow,
> But I won't be 'round next week
> 'Cause I'm too freaky.

As he marched up the aisle loudly lamenting his volatile career, he came upon Blanchett. He looked at her for a split second, then flopped into her lap and, invoking the singer Barry White, ad-libbed, "It's S.T.C./When you're next to me." The audience, and Blanchett, howled.

When the show was over, she made her way toward the exit. Just before we got there, Blanchett was asked to return to be photographed. When I turned around, she had vanished, swallowed up by the milling crowd. For a moment, I thought I'd lost her; then it occurred to me to follow the popping flashbulbs, which, like the landing lights of an airstrip, led inevitably to Blanchett. About forty-five minutes later, we made our way back through the theatre, through the dressing rooms, past the laundry room, the wardrobe, and out into the rain-cooled air.

Blanchett had made a reservation at an Italian restaurant she liked. From the table, she phoned home to check on the boys, which led to a discussion of parenthood. "I find it's made me more economical, more focussed, more generous, less self-centered," she said. "I'm grateful for it." She went on, "I remember embarking on 'Veronica Guerin' after Dash was born, thinking I have nothing to give this project because I'm so filled up with this creature we've created. But I've become a better actor because of it. I think parenthood is knowing what cards you've got and then throwing them up in the air. You need to let go. It's like when you experience intense grief—you often have the deepest insights because the dead wood's been cleared out. When you're absolutely exhausted, somehow the work you've been consciously trying to do gets done on a different, deeper level." Earlier, Upton had told me that Blanchett was "in a constant battle between optimism and pessimism—the futility of all the effort." As Blanchett tucked into her *fagottini di carne,* I asked her about this. "We sort of liberate one another from melancholy," she said of her husband. "At least, he certainly does with me. The only thing that gets in the way is lack of time." Nonetheless, they have considered having another child. Just that day, Blanchett said, Upton had taken a Pilates class at home with a female instructor who had a newborn baby. Blanchett held the baby while Upton ran through his stretching regime. "I was in my pajamas," she said. "I held this seven-week-old baby. He came out looking at me like 'Don't.' And I did." Blanchett looked away for a moment. "The reality of what three children would be like?" she said. She turned back to her pasta. "We like a bit of chaos," she said. ♦

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