



Giorgio Armani Si
EDP, 100ml for \$135.

Saying yes

CATE BLANCHETT lends her *star power* to the LAUNCH of a *new fragrance* from Giorgio Armani.

WORDS: SIGOURNEY CANTELO

The irony of the fact that I am flying to Milan to interview Cate Blanchett, when we both live in Sydney, is not lost on me. But this is no run-of-the-mill interview. As part of Blanchett's fragrance contract with Giorgio Armani (rumoured to be worth \$10 million), the actress is playing a starring role in the international press launch for its newest fragrance, Si. Being a project particularly close to Mr Armani's heart, it is also set to be the first beauty launch the 79-year-old is attending in 10 years. Naturally, there is a spectacular PR machine in motion. Three hundred journalists from all over the world are being flown into Milan to attend the launch, held at the ultra-chic Armani hotel. Blanchett will be granting only a few

media interviews, and *Vogue* Australia has been given the exclusive for her hometown. A coffee at the local is clearly not an option.

The first thing you notice when you step into the Armani hotel is the smell: the spicy, smoky scent of pine trees and pepper mingling with a curl of church incense. It's Bois d'Encens, from the Armani Privé fragrance collection, and it's Mr Armani's signature scent (he carries it with him and sprays it on the models before shows). The perfume is used in the hotel's full-sized Armani Privé toiletries and misted subtly through the air conditioning into rooms.

Inside, everything gleams with a kind of polished perfection. Checking in, I watch as a black-clad man emerges and mops my footprints off the high-gloss black floor. The rooms are beige on beige with soft

textured walls, flattering lighting and Armani Casa furnishings. A plate of chocolates waits on the desk with a handwritten note from management and an invitation to the party. So far, so stylish.

Mr Armani's attention to detail is well known. He casts his exacting eye over even the tiniest minutia in his empire, from the hotel shower caps (which are black and close-fitting to the head, like little cloche hats) to the paper G-strings in the spa (which are laser cut with lace designs). His hotels – there is one in Milan and one in Dubai – are pantheons to perfection.

"It's complete. It's like every little thing Mr Armani does is so complete," says Blanchett, the next day when I meet her in the Armani Signature Suite, a serene cream space with a sweeping staircase.

"You look at this room and you think this has probably been redesigned about five times until it was exactly how he wanted it. That's why he has created the empire from chocolates to fragrances via couture, and you know he has signed off on every detail."

Blanchett's ivory shirt, slate wide-leg pants and grey leather blazer (all Armani and custom-made for her, of course) perfectly complement the plush cushions she is poised against. Her skin is luminous yet looks free of make-up. Her hair: creamy Hitchcock blonde and parted in the centre, just so. I get a sense that Mr Armani art-directed this moment exactly.

"One of his staff said that working for him is like trying to please a parent," I tell Blanchett, recounting what one of his PR girls told me yesterday at the press briefing.

"What he creates, and we all felt this when we were doing the campaign, is you want to live up to his expectations," says Blanchett, her deep voice so distinctive, her diction so exact. "But he's incredibly generous. He's such a graceful, gracious man," she adds quickly, hastening to paint him in a warmer light.

Blanchett has long been an advocate of the brand, frequently wearing the label to events (who could forget the siren-red sequined Privé gown she wore to the AACTA Awards earlier this year?). and the feeling is mutual, as Mr Armani told *Vogue* Australia earlier this year: "Cate Blanchett epitomises the woman for whom I design. Her graceful figure shows off my clothes as they are meant to be seen and worn. With her growing maturity, she has come to embody the ideal Armani woman: serene, confident, elegant, and at ease with herself and with the world."

When Blanchett became artistic director of the Sydney Theatre Company, Armani signed on as a patron. In 2007 he flew to Sydney to visit the STC, and he went on to design the costumes for the play Blanchett directed, *The Year of Magical Thinking*.

At the time of our interview Blanchett is in rehearsals for *The Maids*. It's been a hectic year for the actress. She gave a riveting performance as an unhinged socialite in Woody Allen's new film *Blue Jasmine*, and starred alongside Christian Bale in Terrence Malick's latest, *Knight of Cups*.

And then there is the performance she gave for Armani. I ask Blanchett what it was like to work with celebrated French director Anne Fontaine (of *Coco Avant Chanel* fame) and cinematographer Darius Khondji (*Midnight in Paris*, *Evita*) on the TV commercial. "It was serendipitous. Darius is a cinematographer I'd wanted to work with and Anne and I have been speaking about making a film together and so to have the three of us thrust in that space ... we just fired off each other," she says enthusiastically.

Blanchett shot the ad in Sydney in April. In an emotional joyride of a commercial, she is shown intimately, experiencing a staggering array of emotions and saying "si" to them all: "*Si* to dreams, *si* to freedom, *si* to emotion, *si* to seduction ..."

They filmed a whopping 17 different scenes in two days, then siphoned it all into a one-minute spot. "I was daunted by it, as in, could we achieve it? But I think we were fuelled by Mr Armani's incredible work ethic and we got it done," she says.

Not many actresses could have nailed it like Blanchett. How does she bring herself to tears in one scene and madly tear her dress off in another? "I suppose the responsibility was that it's trying to represent all different facets of women. You know, often you think about beauty, and particularly in the world of fashion, where we can feel quite intimidated by [it]. This fragrance celebrates that women are so many things. Some days we feel incredibly sexy and some days we feel really playful."

It was this duality of strength and emotion, masculinity and femininity, that was rendered in every facet of Si. From the flacon, which features Armani design motifs such as the "stone" bakelite cap and the blush pink of the juice, right down to the notes. Mr Armani worked closely with perfumer Christine Nagel to express these polar opposites in the perfume. To represent strength, he selected a strong

chypre (pronounced "sheep-ra", this is perfume-speak for a scent with a citrus top note and mossy/musky base note). For the feminine softness, he chose rose de Mai and cassis (a blackcurrant nectar), which gives the scent a delicious sweetness. The result is sophisticated yet enticing, intriguing yet warm, and something that Blanchett is clearly very comfortable wearing and talking about.

"I'm so thrilled with it. Because it's very flattering when [Mr Armani] says that he



“SCENT IS PART OF OUTWARDLY EXPRESSING THAT INNER ALLURE THAT WOMEN HAVE”

was inspired by me to create it, but I feel like there is something of me in there, because it's always those woody chypre notes that I'm drawn to. I love the way it lingers on your skin. There's a beautiful sweetness to it, which I think, not being a nose myself, must be the cassis. It's not sickly sweet; it's a beautiful subtle mysterious sweetness," she says.

Her responses are considered and intelligent and delivered with the suspenseful timing of a performer. As we talk, I get the sense that Blanchett is inhabiting another role, that of brand ambassador, the exemplary perfume poster girl.

"I love spraying it on my clothes as well," she continues animatedly, "... because I remember the perfume on my mother's clothes. Like you open her wardrobe and you would ..." She stops now and closes those eyes, breathing in languorously, as if remembering the scent of her mother.

"I'm probably not the first person to have ever thought this, but [scent] contains memory. And the scent of my grandmother, you know, that sort of powdered violets or the smell of cooking, really reminds me of my childhood. I was trying to explain to

someone yesterday the smell of a bushfire coming. You know that tense sort of excited danger that you feel when you smell wood burning ... and the smell of eucalyptus. I remember Andrew and I had been away in England for almost a decade and we'd been returning to Australia and we came back in summer, and I wept because it was that smell of eucalyptus and sunshine, and you suddenly felt home ..."

She pauses for effect, letting her memories wash over us. The room is as silent as a theatre.

"There's a lot of emotion bound up in scent, and I think when women harness that emotional power then they fully express their femininity. Scent is part of outwardly expressing that inner allure that women have, and it's very sensual and it's very private."

And with that pithy, perfectly measured response, my time is up. Blanchett repositions herself on the couch and I'm led back out into the dimly lit corridors.

That evening, the launch for Si is held underneath the Armani hotel in the trendy Nobu Lounge. The chic beige space is dressed in blush and black, with giant Armani logos embossed on the walls. The room is buzzing with beautiful young things, Italian models and TV hosts sparkling in Armani couture. Handsome tuxedoed Milanese boys hold trays of blush pink Ruinart rosé champagne and delicate bite-sized canapés (no threat of mess on your couture).

Suddenly a hush descends and all eyes fall on the door as Mr Armani and Blanchett enter, amid camera flashes and a sea of iPhones held up by guests. Mr Armani flashes a set of blinding white teeth and gently guides Blanchett, who, in a white tuxedo, floats serenely through the melee. They are quickly led to a banquet in the middle shielded by a glut of gatekeepers: buffered from social-media hounds and quote-hungry journalists. But after just a few minutes, I'm ushered through to meet Mr Armani and greet Blanchett. Mr Armani kisses me on both cheeks, and says something in Italian I don't understand. We pose for a photo and they sit back down, talking softly to each other. The legendary designer and the superstar actress: both inhabiting their roles perfectly. In the air between us, I can detect a mingling of two perfumes: a deep, smoky incense emanating from him, and a sweeter scent of cassis wafting delicately from her. ■