

SHOOTING STAR

Sexy, campy, and slightly crazed, David LaChapelle is the Fellini of photography. His subjects seem to enjoy the circus. By B. J. Sigesmund

DAVID LACHAPELLE HAS A VISION. THIS ONE INVOLVES rotten fruit, black crows, a glass box, and—oh, yeah—Daniel Day-Lewis. It's a gloomy October morning in LaChapelle's expansive East Village studio, and VH-1's newly-crowned Photographer of the Year is plotting a dream scenario for his unsuspecting subject. "There's such a rawness to him," says LaChapelle. "I want him really open and giving and exposed . . . I want him *naked*."

No one doubts that he'll get what he wants. It was David LaChapelle, after all, who persuaded Pamela Lee to pose as a Barbie doll in a dime store window; he got k. d. lang to put on makeup and a dress; Brooke Shields let him slip a camera between her and her Calvins; and Leonardo DiCaprio did something so compromising the young actor called after the photo session and begged LaChapelle never to publish the shot. (Reluctantly, he agreed.) "We would look at a picture that came in and say, 'How the hell did he get them to do that?'" says James Truman, who was editor of *Details* in 1992 when the magazine first gave LaChapelle a forum for his mesmerizing stills.

The photos—shot against expensive, fantasy sets—are hallucinatory riots of sex, humor, and style. Think Annie Leibovitz on ecstasy. By turns hilarious and extreme, soaked in colors that don't appear naturally in this or any other world, LaChapelle's best photographs have been collected in a new 150-page book, *LaChapelle Land*. The 32-year-old's work now appears everywhere from no-budget entertainment magazines like *Detour* to the lavish *Vanity Fair* (which spent more than \$62,000 for his classic 1995 shot of television's most famous sitcom moms).

Playful and slightly perverse, LaChapelle pushes his celebrity subjects into caricaturing their carefully tended images. The results range from stunning to grotesque. Tori Spelling—made up to look like a cross between a prostitute and a prom queen—was so distraught during her shoot that she ran to the bathroom in tears. But somehow, LaChapelle—a grown man who em-

braces his inner club kid—gets his subjects to play along. "I don't do nudity, usually," says actress Jennifer Tilly, "but you feel trust with David. Before I knew it, I had nothing on and was holding these tiny fans on my private parts."

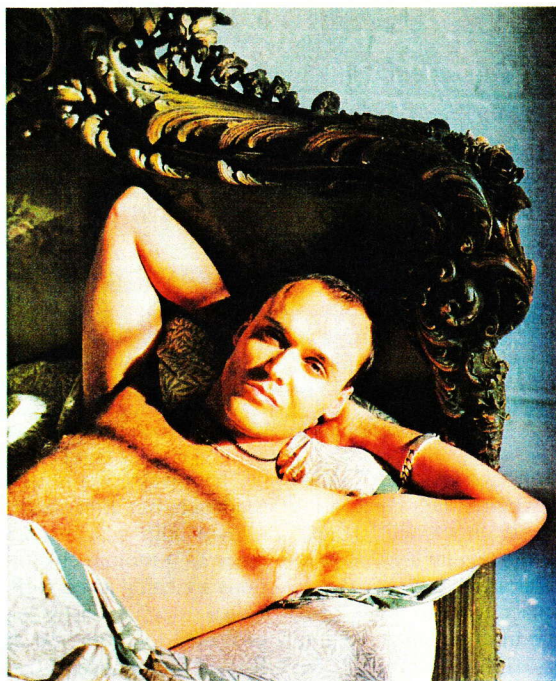
LaChapelle can also spot an ego in need of massaging. During a *Vanity Fair* shoot of Faye Dunaway—whom he photographed sprawled out atop a limo, surrounded by dozens of fans, police, and journalists and a giant Oscar—he had the crowd screaming "Faye! Faye!" until the notoriously needy actress was enraptured. "She got so into it," he remembers, "she was crying."

Increasingly, celebrities invite LaChapelle's bite. His six-minute film *Salvation Armani*—which satirizes Giorgio Armani, Donatella Versace, and other sages of style—was commissioned by Armani himself. "Whatever else you say about his photos and videos," the designer says, "you must admit they are great fun and don't take themselves too seriously." Nor, it appears, do Madonna and Courtney Love. Neither of them objected to LaChapelle's wicked 50-second parody of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, which featured likenesses of the divas and ran on MTV earlier this year. The two shorts are LaChapelle's first forays into pictures that move—the next phase in a career spent shooting the stars.

According to LaChapelle, a flair for fantasy runs in his family. The youngest of three children, he was raised in Farmington, Connecticut, by a businessman father and a bored mother with a campy theatrical bent. For his baby pictures,

she adorned her young son in paper wings and photographed him as an angel. A few years later, she dressed the kids in elaborate costumes from *The Sound of Music* and posed them in front of strangers' mansions. Still, life was not all fun and games for the flamboyant teen. Tormented mercilessly in school for his clothes and behavior, he dropped out and moved to New York at 16.

Soon after his arrival, he was working, inevitably, as a busboy at Studio 54. One night, he found an earring on the floor, and he hawked it to pay for his first camera (the jewel, he later



Laid-back lensman: LaChapelle (above) sweetly skewered Courtney Love and Madonna in a *Baby Jane* take-off for MTV (right).





Evening shade: Tori Spelling turned out.

learned, belonged to Paloma Picasso). After finishing high school at the North Carolina School of the Arts, he moved back to Manhattan to shoot for his old club pal Andy Warhol at *Interview*. "Do whatever you want," Warhol told him, "as long as they look beautiful." He worked constantly—shooting up to eighteen pages an issue—until Warhol's death in 1987.

"At 23, I was old *Interview*," sighs LaChapelle, who was unceremoniously dumped when the new editors arrived. He spent the next two years learning to work color negatives to produce the magnificent spectra that are now his signature. When he returned to the business, he couldn't even get his portfolio shown. "People were like, 'He's done. He's finished. He's no longer 19,'" remembers LaChapelle. For a time he was relegated to photographing society affairs ("I survived a year on what I made shooting the Jon and Laura Tisch wedding"). He also dabbled in advertising, which he still does occasionally—most famously with a send-up of the classic V-J Day photograph, featuring two burly male sailors locking lips while wearing Diesel jeans. Eventually, LaChapelle's vision found a match in the brash *Details*, for which he's shot fashion, features, and hundreds of celebrities.

The day of the Day-Lewis shoot, LaChapelle's spartan studio is occupied by the small army he calls his family—a Factory-like clique of stylists, carpenters, technicians, hairdressers, and costumers who have followed him around for years.

On most occasions, LaChapelle navigates the chaos with Zen-like serenity, but today, the photographer is *pissed*. First, the phone booth he rented for the shoot got stuck on 13th Street. Then the extravagant, custom-designed costumes he ordered especially for Day-Lewis were detained in British Customs. "Maybe we should have *more* people standing around doing nothing," he snaps. His chain-smoking minions blithely ignore him.

Known to show up to a shoot in full cowboy regalia, LaChapelle has opted today for an understated navy sweat suit



Welcome to the funhouse: LaChapelle's Leonardo DiCaprio.

and scuffed Air Jordans. But his surly demeanor perks up as soon as Day-Lewis walks into the room. Chattering brightly, LaChapelle leads his recalcitrant quarry through the stained-glass-filled studio. The actor remains polite but untalkative, looking rather like a priest in a bordello.

Anxiously, he goes through the motions as LaChapelle sings out commands. Teams of craftsmen have labored for days on the sets: a Dutch still life with bug-infested fruit, a wheat field surrounded by crows. Prodded by LaChapelle, Day-Lewis finally begins to relax. An hour later, he is happily seated underneath a pink table wearing a glass box on his head (a scenario that Day-Lewis's manager had firmly assured LaChapelle the actor would nix). "We've had people not be crazy about their pictures when they came out," LaChapelle admits, tactfully declining to name names. "But it's not my job to please *them*. I do what I need to do for myself first."

Then, just as the shoot is winding down, the photographer craftily goes in for the kill. "This is not about beefcake or being titillated. But since you lay yourself bare when you act, would you please take off . . . your *shirt*?" Surprisingly, Day-Lewis meekly complies. A smiling stylist rushes to apply clear-colored body paint to the actor's substantial arms, chest, and torso. Wedged inside a Donald Judd-inspired wooden box, Day-Lewis mugs and laughs, but when the pictures stop, so, quite abruptly, does his visit.

"I didn't ask him to take his pants off, which I wanted to," LaChapelle says later, with uncharacteristic modesty. "I just figured, oh, I don't know. He's such a great artist. He's so *nice*. Whatever he wanted, he got." Now that the photographer's receiving the same celebrity he's spent years documenting, has he got a bit more sympathy for his camera-shy clientele? "I have no interest in fame," he says, sounding amazingly like one of his more somber Hollywood subjects. "I just want to take famous pictures."