

# A LEGENDARY SHOOT

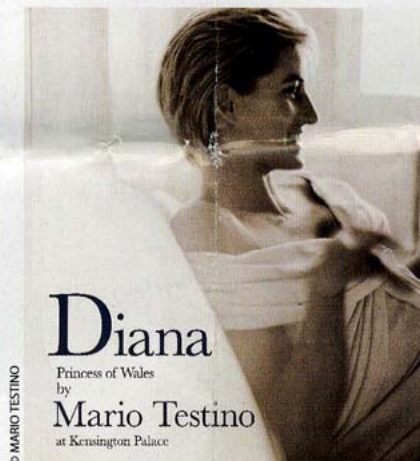
These are the portraits that many remember Princess Diana by, and which helped to launch photographer Mario Testino to superstardom.

Terry Hope gets the story of the day WORDS Terry Hope PICTURES Mario Testino

**K**ENSINGTON PALACE on a dull winter's day, and Mario Testino is walking around his exhibition just hours before its scheduled opening, making final adjustments and casting his mind back to the day, eight years earlier, when he received a commission from Christie's auction house to photograph Princess Diana to promote the New York sale for charity of a selection of her dresses.

Testino had been steadily making a name for himself as a fashion photographer. His big breakthrough had come when he received a call from Madonna asking him to work on a Versace advertising campaign with her. He responded with a spectacular set of pictures, which propelled him into the limelight, and put his name into the frame when the question of who was to photograph Princess Diana came up.

For a photographer still building his reputation, it was a daunting prospect. Princess Diana was one of the hottest names around, a magnet to the press and a person who had her own strong ideas about the image she portrayed and the way she was photographed. Added to this, she was entering a new period in her life, where she was letting go of much of the past, giving away a selection of her favourite dresses to raise money for AIDs and cancer charities and simplifying her title.



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Testino discussed the assignment with the stylist Charlotte Pilcher and decided he would try to photograph Diana in a completely bare, simple way, with no jewellery and her hair and make-up left fresh and natural. It was still down to Diana whether she decided to go with this idea or to demand a more formal approach, but when she arrived she made it clear she respected Testino's team and was happy to go with that they wanted.

The rest is, as they say, history. Her rather formal hairdo was brushed out, her make-up toned down, and Testino set to work to create a relaxed and informal atmosphere. He used a plain white sofa as a prop for some of the pictures, putting white panels behind it and using just the available light that was flooding into the room.

When Diana sat down looking very proper, Testino showed her how he would sit on a sofa, draping himself in a languid style, effectively breaking the ice and making her laugh.

Pausing for a moment, Testino muses on his methods with celebrities. "I use music, and I like to make people laugh, so I make a fool of myself. And I think they realise that I want people to make a fool of themselves with me, but to trust me. They know at the end of the day, whatever picture I get, I will run only the good pictures. But to get good pictures you have to take bad pictures sometimes. It's the trust that people put in you, that is what makes a picture magic. If you don't break the ice then they will be just uptight."

Things got even crazier shortly afterwards, when Testino decided to put on some loud disco music, and proceeded to imitate some of the supermodels of the day as they might sashay down the catwalk. By his own admission, he achieved some pretty good impersonations, and soon afterwards Diana herself was up there with him, laughing and relaxing. It was exactly what Testino had hoped, because he knew how challenging the day could be.

"If you're photographing models you tell them to do that and they do it," he says. "When you're photographing real people it's not that easy. You almost have to perform



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"I CAUGHT HER AT A MOMENT WHEN SHE WAS ELATED, SHE WAS HAPPY"



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for them, and to make them feel they can perform for you."

The pictures astonished people and changed perceptions about Diana and who she really was. Although still a royal, she looked approachable, friendly and happy. Diana herself said her sons told her that they were the most like her they had seen. When the pictures appeared in *Vanity Fair*, the issue became one of the top selling issues in the magazine's history: Testino had been trying for 15 years to get his pictures right and suddenly he found himself known for just one shoot.

I asked him what he felt he had got out of Diana on that day that perhaps some other photographers hadn't. He shook his head and modestly suggested that others besides him had also managed to get something special from Diana, but he did concede that there was a particular spark that had somehow made these pictures stand out.

"I think maybe it was timing. I did these photographs at just the right time. I caught her at a moment when she was elated, when she was happy and it was the beginning of something new. Whatever happened afterwards I don't really know, because I wasn't that intimate with her, but I think I got her. Some people said to me afterwards that I had changed her and I have to say that I had to go back to the paparazzi pictures in the press to see if I had really changed her, because to me I always saw her like that.

"The first time I ever saw her was when she got married. I happened to be sitting on top of a mailbox and photographed the event. In the picture I took of her in her carriage it was uncanny how she looked as though she was looking straight at me.

"That was the first time I saw her, and in my eyes she had always been like that. But then I did look again, and realised that maybe we did do something that was different, but to me that was her. I really don't think I changed anything, I didn't retouch any of her pictures. I just tried to get the right light, the right angle and the right feeling."

The pictures had an extra poignancy, because just two months later Diana was dead, just at the time when she appeared to be on top of the world. It was to make a set of portraits that had already been acclaimed as the best ever taken of one of the most photographed women in the world into something more: a lasting record of a life lived in the spotlight and cut tragically short. ■

*Diana, Princess of Wales by Mario Testino is at the State Apartments at Kensington Palace until spring 2007, and includes photographs and the dresses featured. The accompanying book is published by Taschen at £19.99.*