

Maximum exposure

David LaChapelle's hyper-real and slyly subversive portraits have made him the world's hippest photographer. Now rave reviews for his dance doc *Rize* have made him Hollywood's hottest director. Here, the 'Fellini of Photography' talks to **Alix Sharkey** about prostitution, hanging out with Warhol and being inspired by Pammy. Photographs **David LaChapelle**



★ David LaChapelle will sometimes burst into song, loudly, for no apparent reason. We're standing in his office when he starts belting out Madonna's 'Rain'. I mean belting it out, with hand gestures and vibrato, like he's auditioning for Broadway.

For lack of a response, I tell him it's my favourite Madge video. 'Not mine,' he says, and segues into 'Express Yourself', complete with every crotch-grabbing, butt-shaking move. He doesn't look like a dancer. He's muscular, hairy, 6ft 2in, with tattoos. He's wearing a baggy white T-shirt, shorts, white socks and sheepskin slippers. But somehow, with his cheek sucking and long, slender fingers and nimble disco steps, he personifies a funky dancing girl from the late-Eighties. He performs the entire routine, word perfect, step for step. God knows how many times he's done it in the mirror, but it's second nature.

He sits at the table and squints through his photographer's loop at the contact sheets of the Kanye West portrait he shot two days ago. We're in his Hollywood home – not the New York apartment – with his assistant, Nicholas.



'These are beautiful,' he says, looking up. Suddenly, to the tune of Michael Jackson's 'Bad', his voice rips through the room, 'Because I'm good, so good, I'm so fucking good, you know I'm good... and you fucking know it!'

Be careful, I tell him, or I'll start the piece right there, with LaChapelle singing about how fucking good he is. He mimes wide-eyed horror, before selecting another sheet and peering through the loop again.

'I don't care,' he mutters, head down. 'I won't be careful.'

Won't be careful – or can't be careful? Either way, David LaChapelle doesn't have to be careful. Right now he's the hottest new director in Hollywood and he knows it.

His debut film, the gritty documentary *Rize*, about a group of young black dancers from South Central LA, got a full theatrical release, won rave reviews from just about every major US publication, and is being tipped for a nomination at this year's Oscars. His new book *Artists & Prostitutes*, featuring a selection from two decades of his photography in a 690-page volume, is about to go on sale in a limited edition

of 2,500, signed and numbered, at £1,200 a copy – or a mere £850 pre-ordered.

His production design for Elton John's Las Vegas revue *The Red Piano* – declared '[as] visually stimulating and artistically sound as it is commercial' by *Variety*, and 'Best Show of 2004' by *Las Vegas Review-Journal* – is booked to run for another three years.

Meanwhile, he recently shot the video for Robbie Williams's 'Advertising Space' with a budget of around \$500,000. And that wasn't even big potatoes; his 2004 video for Christina Aguilera's 'Dirrty', nominated for four MTV Video Music Awards, cost twice as much.

Over the past decade, LaChapelle's photographs have set new standards for glamorous, celebrity portraiture. He's done more than 150 covers for *Rolling Stone*, he's under contract with *Vanity Fair*, and has shot Madonna, Elton John, Naomi Campbell, Angelina Jolie, Pamela Anderson, Lil' Kim, Uma Thurman, Elizabeth Taylor, David Beckham, Paris Hilton, Leonardo DiCaprio, Hillary Clinton, Muhammad Ali, Britney Spears and Alicia Keys to name just a few. *American Photo* recently named him among

Putting on the glitz: (clockwise, from left) a well-oiled David Beckham, 2002; Britney Spears, 2000; and photographer LaChapelle, whose colour-drenched portraits take glamour to new levels

its 10 most important people in photography.

His publisher, Benedikt Taschen, believes LaChapelle is the world's most-popular living photographer. 'He has a huge cross-over appeal. Young people, trendies, sophisticated middle-classes, the gay crowd; they all know and like him and his work. No other photographer has ever managed that.'

In a world awash with colour images, LaChapelle's photos still manage to exert a strange, seductive power with their sly humour. His celebrities look wonderful, of course, their skin and eye tones perfect. But his best work challenges or subverts the subject's popular persona, as when he cast thug-rapper Tupac Shakur as a 19th-century slave, dressed in overalls, working on a plantation. Or his picture of Marilyn Manson as a gothic lollipop man, guiding a bunch of black-lipped Goth toddlers on to a big yellow school bus. Or the shot of a naked Eminem ▶

◀ clutching a phallic stick of dynamite with two hands, fuse sparking, and looking like he might just go down on himself.

When he's not singing loudly, David talks a lot. One thing in particular stands out. 'I never wanted to be famous,' he says. 'I always wanted to take famous photographs.'

He's misunderstood, he says. He's always getting letters from drag queens demanding he photograph them. He doesn't photograph drag queens; they must be thinking about his transsexual friend, Amanda Lepore. 'Amanda's a sculptor, and her body is her work. She's self-created, and she totally inspires me. But she is not a man in a dress. She has remade her body with hormones and surgery and created her own face, surgically and cosmetically altered in a way that's never been seen before. And that was one of the reasons I first photographed her, a bizarre kind of interest. But now it's much more. She's a real friend.'

Another friend he photographs repeatedly is Pamela Anderson. When I ask why, meaning why so many photographs, he misunderstands the question and leaps to her defence.

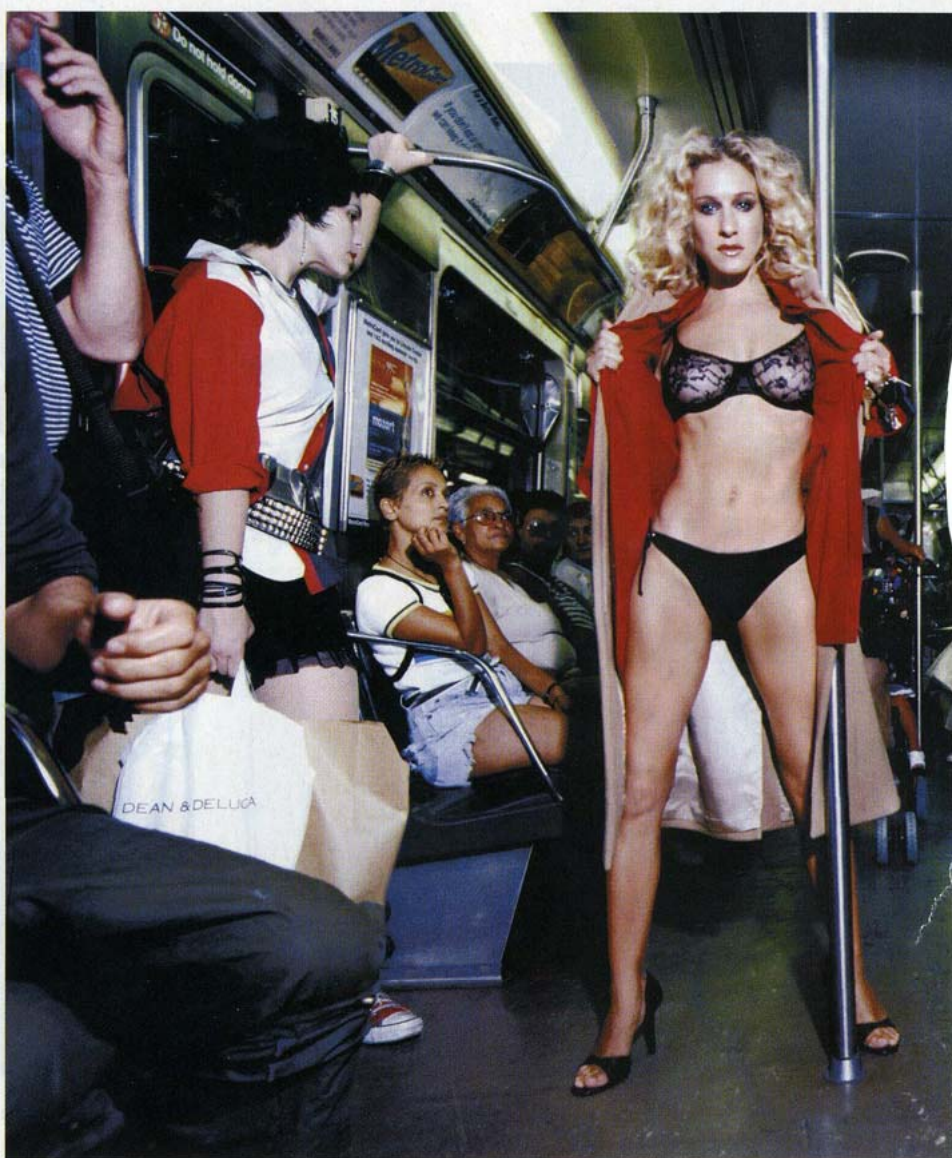
'Why? Because she's one of the most down-to-earth, real people I ever met. Treated me exactly the same when I was nobody, 12, 13 years ago, as she does today. Always the same. Supportive. Funny, sweet, smart. She's an expert on Jung. Does anyone ever mention that? No, she's a bimbo. If she was really a bimbo would she have lasted as long as she has, at the top of the profession?'

Upstairs, he reaches under his bed and pulls out a handful of screenplays. He hands me a letter from one of Hollywood's most powerful agencies: studios, money, production teams, they're all in place and waiting for him to sign up. And his signature would guarantee any number of hip young stars – from music or film or fashion – clambering aboard, because they all want LaChapelle to take their photo, direct their video, shoot their movie, make them look glamorous, risky, sexy, hyper-real, dangerous, seductive, arty, slightly occult, and sophisticated – the way he makes everybody look.

From his bedroom window you can see an amethyst horizon, LA's downtown skyscrapers, the city glittering below, the top of the Chateau Marmont hotel where he once lived, and a giant billboard towering over it all. It's one of those black silhouettes of a dancing girl with a white iPod. The girl is Miss Prissy, the female star of *Rize*.

'See that? When we started shooting *Rize*, I would wonder, will anybody ever see this footage? Is this just gonna end up as a bunch of DV tapes on a shelf somewhere? And there's that little girl from the film, the one who says, "Actually, I'd be scared to go to Hollywood." There she is, on a billboard towering over Sunset Boulevard! Isn't that crazy?'

'It was an ecstasy wedding, I guess. Her mother hated me. She knew straightaway that I was gay'



Crazy? I'm not sure. Hang out with David LaChapelle a little while and you'll see all kinds of crazy. A couple of days earlier we're on a busy corner in downtown LA with rap star Kanye West waving a huge red flag in front of 20 extras

dressed as riot police. A pyrotechnician sets light to a tyre in the foreground and ignites the Molotov cocktail that Kanye brandishes in his other, gloved hand. But suddenly the rapper is shouting and grimacing as his glove catches fire, then flame streaks across the sidewalk toward the extras, and within seconds, an assistant is hopping across the set with his jeans on fire, which Nicholas has to put out with his hand, burning it in the process.

'Can you guys read?' LaChapelle asks his team later, as they sit around laughing about

it. 'You were meant to look in Yellow Pages for a pyrotechnician. You must have booked a pyromaniac.'

A week later I call him; he's working on the new video for Elton John. How's it going? 'Great,' he shouts, over the screech of power tools. 'We've got Amanda strapped into an electric chair with sparks coming out of her pussy.'

The first time we meet is Miami Beach, just before Christmas. He's in town for the launch of *Artists & Prostitutes* with a huge poolside party at the \$1,000-a-night Setai hotel, featuring Amanda sitting naked in a Plexiglas cell floating in the pool, turning the pages of the book. We talk for a couple of hours, and agree to meet later at the party. But so many gatecrashers turn up that dozens of invited guests (like me) can't even get to the door.

Next day, he calls to ask why I didn't show. He's speaking in a hoarse whisper, the wrecked voice of somebody who has spent the night singing very loudly.



'Oh, I feel terrible,' he growls. 'I'm covered in bruises. I was dancing for hours, really going crazy. I drank so much.'

What did you drink?

'Champagne. Vodka. Rum. Tequila. And maybe some other stuff, too. We all went swimming at, like, 6am. It was beautiful, a bunch of us just floating together in the ocean as the sun came up.'

Sounds tickety-boo.

'Yeah, but I got so fucked up at the party, I took off my shirt and jumped in the pool.'

Hey, it's your party, I tell him. And pool-jumping is a time-honoured tradition in Miami Beach. There's a long silence.

'Yeah,' he groans. 'But I had Benedikt's cell phone in my pocket.'

Wait, I say: your publisher is in town for your book launch with no phone numbers and nobody can reach him?

'Yeah, I totally forgot I had it. Oh God, I feel awful.'

Flash photography: Sarah Jessica Parker puts the sex in the city as she reveals all on the New York subway in 1999

David LaChapelle was born in Connecticut on 11 March 1963. He took his first photo at the age of six, on holiday in Puerto Rico. It was a picture of his mother Helga. She set it all up and asked him to press the button while she posed. 'I was her tripod. I was the right height.'

Born in Lithuania, Helga was one of the last immigrants through Ellis Island. She met his father while working at a tobacco factory in Connecticut. A blonde beauty and a keen amateur photographer, she was always looking for a backdrop against which to pose herself, or her kids – Philip, Sonja and David.

'She would just push us in front of stuff that didn't belong to us and take pictures. She would photograph us in houses we didn't live in, in golf clubs we didn't belong to, sitting in cars we didn't own, with dogs that belonged to other peo-

ple. Seriously, she would stop people in the street and ask if she could photograph us with their dogs! And when she got that camera out and told you to pose, you didn't argue.'

School was difficult. The other kids didn't appreciate his 'creative dressing' and called him a faggot. He'd walk into the cafeteria dressed as a Fifties rocker, or as a cowboy with a pink and black shirt and cowboy boots, and milk cartons would fly at him from every direction, hitting him on the head. He got into fights, then started spending all his time in the art rooms, and eventually dropped out.

'My mom, she's from the old country,' he says, 'with the war and all that shit? And she's like, "What's wrong with you, David? Go to school!" She didn't really understand.'

At 15, the family moved to North Carolina and David ran away to New York City, lied about his age and got a job as a busboy at Studio 54, clearing tables for Andy, Liza, Halston, Grace, Jack – all the fabulous people. He was tall, athletic, model-boy handsome, and looked great in tight white shorts. But his father came and got him, drove him back down south and got him enrolled in the North Carolina School of Arts in Winston-Salem, where he studied photography. There were only 30 students on the course, so the teaching standard was exceptional.

'Artists like Laurie Anderson would come down for a week, spend a day with us one-on-one. It's an amazing place, especially for a public-funded school.'

At 18, he was back in New York, an East Village fixture, part of a teeming polysexual subculture throwing up prodigious new art stars such as Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Everybody knew everybody, and every evening you got your little thrift-store look together and went out to dance at Hurrah or Danceteria or Pyramid or Save the Robots. To help save the money for his cameras and equipment, he did a little hustling out of Browns, a gay pick-up bar on 53rd Street, meeting up with nice, older men who would buy him drinks and dinner, then pay to fellate him.

Prostitution?

'I felt like I was doing a service. A lot of them were lonely and had never had boyfriends,' he explains, suppressing a smile.

You're putting me on, I tell him.

'No, it's true,' he says. 'I'm not ashamed of it. I really needed a way to make quick money. I think it's almost a rite of passage for a lot of gay guys. But I don't want kids to read this and think it's cool to do that, just because I did. It was different then.'

He introduced himself to Andy Warhol at a rock concert and landed a job at *Interview* magazine. 'He said, "Oh, you should be a model. But drop by the office, show me your pictures."' LaChapelle and his boyfriend, a beautiful dancer called Louis Albert, were paying rent to a scumlord for a place with no heat or phone. But he was working for *Interview*, setting up shoots, having little one-man shows, it was great! ▶



◀ One day, on a shoot in the Hamptons – ‘with no budget, as usual’ – he saw people collecting money for ‘gay cancer’, this new disease, only 48 confirmed cases at the time, mostly in New York, San Francisco and Miami.

Within two years, Louis died of Aids. Friends started dying, too. Everything changed. Every month you’d see someone else with the lesions, the wasting, you’d smell that burning smell on their skin. The East Village was full of ghosts, ignorance and terror. LaChapelle worked for a while at Act-Up, promoting the new ‘safe sex’ slogan and condom use. But people were terrified that Aids could be contracted by casual contact, or breathing: ‘So I couldn’t tell anybody, there was so much paranoia. Everyone thinks the Eighties were so cool, but there was a big dark cloud hanging over that period. It was really like a war.’ He sighs wearily. ‘Watching your friends die one by one.’

He didn’t get tested until 1992. He admits to being in denial. ‘When Louis died there wasn’t even a test. The fact that I wasn’t positive was a huge shock.’

He’s a little sketchy on the timeframe, but shortly afterwards he joined the Marines, leaving a few months later with his basic training,

a washboard stomach, and a tattoo reading Semper Fidelis on his chest. Then he got married. But... why?

‘All my friends asked me,’ he exclaims, ‘and the answer is, I don’t know! Even today, I have no idea. It was an ecstasy wedding, I guess.’ Next, he was living in London with his new bride’s family. ‘Her mother hated me. She knew straightaway I was gay.’ Maybe she spotted his shaved, dyed hair and make-up, his figure-hugging Bodymap clothes, and his four-day drug benders starting on Thursday nights at Taboo with all his new friends: Leigh Bowery, Boy George, Trojan, Princess Julia, John Maybury and Michael Clark.

‘It started with ecstasy and blow, then it was smoking coke, then smoking heroin, and it got really heavy.’ Somehow, despite the drugs and madness, his portfolio expanded with portraits of the hot London kids for *Interview*, and work for *The Face*. ‘It was like the epicentre of hype, creativity, outrageousness, but it really freaked me out. In the end it was like, I can’t take any more. And

I was from New York, I thought I’d seen it all, but that was a whole other level of artistic wackiness. It was a subculture of insanity.’

Back in New York, he enrolled at Parson’s and hung out occasionally with Warhol. Looking back, he admires the way Warhol made no distinction between high and low culture, before this became the norm – and his curios-

ity, his willingness to collaborate, his continual search for new artists. ‘He was always excited about young people’s work, he wasn’t jealous or bitter. He wanted to be around them, rather than compete with them.’

He also learned about the fickle nature of fame. Warhol, he recalls, was patronised and dismissed towards the end of

his life. He remembers taking Andy to a party downtown and people sneering about how he hadn’t been invited, in earshot of the artist. ‘It was like there was something embarrassing about him or something. And then he died. And for a week, the entire city was in shock. Because he was New York, he was iconic, he was world-

‘London really freaked me out. I was from New York, but that was a whole other level of artistic insanity’



Stepping out: (above) Michael Jackson, 1998; and (left) Pamela Anderson, 2001 – 'Funny, sweet, smart. She's an expert on Jung. Does anyone ever mention that? No, they just say she's a bimbo'

famous, he represented something about the city on such a fundamental level and had done for decades, but by the time of his death he was taken completely for granted. And then the Museum of Modern Art, which had once rejected a picture he'd tried to give them, for the first time ever, devoted their entire museum to one artist. And people were walking around that show shaking their heads, their hands over their mouths, muttering, "Oh my God, we forgot. He was a genius."

Won't be careful, or can't be careful? LaChapelle tries to censor himself, but then fails hopelessly. He calls late one night, says he's really sorry but, uh, that stuff about the prostitution, is it OK if I don't print it? Only he doesn't want kids thinking it's cool, and he's going back to his school in North Carolina to present a screening of *Rize*, so it's kinda... and 10 minutes later, he's telling me all about his time in a mental institution, how his art director Kristin once arrived to find

him standing in their New York hotel lobby, in his bathrobe, singing 'Amazing Grace' to the startled guests. Kristin tried reasoning, but he kept on singing, at the top of his lungs, about how he once was blind, but now could see. To prove it, he led her outside and walked across Houston Street through Friday-night traffic. With his eyes closed.

Which is why he spent four days in the emergency psychiatric ward at St Vincent's, before finally calling his lawyer to get him out so he could shoot the new Mariah Carey video. 'We still think he's acting a little funny,' the doctors told his lawyer. 'You don't understand, that's David,' the lawyer explained. 'He's always acting a little funny.'

He gives me Kristin's phone number, tells me to call and check the story. Can I print it? Sure, he says. What about the prostitution stuff? 'Oh fuck it, who cares. Yeah, you can use it. Only don't make it sound glamorous, because it wasn't.'

We haven't talked about photography yet, I tell him.

'There's nothing to say. Well, maybe a little. But Susan Sontag already said it.'

But the piece is just going to be a catalogue of your outrageous behaviour. And it won't have an

ending. What shall I tell people about you?

'That I'm not cynical,' he says. 'That I like more things than I dislike. And that's healthy, that's the way it should be. People are afraid not to be cynical because otherwise they'd be naive. But you don't have to be an apolitical airhead, you can still have ideas and values without having to judge everybody and everything you come across. But everybody thinks it's so fucking cool to be cynical these days.'

So, I ask, how do you think I should end the piece?

'I don't know,' he says, humming. 'Just make it happy and beautiful. But you could start it with, "David LaChapelle has such a big ego, that he actually thought I would write something nice about him. Ha ha ha!"'

Then LaChapelle bursts into song again, the Bee Gees's 'Emotion'. And he knows all the words to that one, too.★

Artists & Prostitutes 1985-2005 is published by Taschen on 15 April, priced £1,200. It can be pre-ordered at a special price of £850 from www.taschen.com

