



CELEBRITY'S BIG BROTHER

Nobody captures beauty more intimately than Mario Testino – the photographer who turned Diana into a sex symbol. How does he persuade famous faces to drop their guard? Interview by Kathy Brewis. Photographs by Sam Faulkner

H

e photographed Kate Moss on the loo, published the picture – and she thought it was funny. That tells you everything. He persuaded Pete Doherty and Shane MacGowan to pose together, naked. And Princess Diana allowed him to refashion her from teary, betrayed royal to sexy icon. The same people who spend their lives dodging the paparazzi happily throw off their inhibitions for Mario Testino. Why do they trust him?

He has taken off his shoes to recline awkwardly across the train seats because he has pulled a muscle, or it might be sciatica. A friend told him not to use that word, he says, laughing: "Sciatica has to do with ageing." There's something disarming about a man in his socks. But then everything about Mario Testino is disarming, whether by nature or nurture. Probably both. People feel safe around him. In the hissy-kissy worlds of fashion and celebrity he has a genuineness, a generosity. He's 52, tanned but not leathery, with short, greying, tousled hair. He has a longish-term partner, a man, though he won't be labelled gay; he's "always in a relationship" – he needs the stability. He isn't camp. I don't hear him call anybody "darling". He says it takes him five minutes to get ready in the morning – cream on his face if it's peeling, nothing but water to tame his hair. His first appointment in Paris is with a physiotherapist. Every so often he winces and shifts position. We're aboard the Fashion Express, aka the 09.09 Eurostar to Paris. This Monday morning it's overflowing with people who know their Balenciaga from their Bottega Veneta. Oh, look, there's Alexandra Shulman, editor of Vogue, studiously reading the papers, and there's Lucinda Chambers, its fashion editor, looking serious in a beanie hat. And the mother of a model, who tells Mario – they're all on first-name terms, naturally – that her daughter is asking for a second horse. "I've told her it's not just the horse, it's the upkeep!"

They're all off to the couture shows (Dior today, Chanel tomorrow) to see the designers' most fanciful creations. It looks like enormous fun. Mostly, though, it's business. So it's apt that when I first spotted Mario, fashion's favourite photographer, in the business lounge at Waterloo, he was not air-kissing but reading the Financial Times. He is, however, accompanied by a beautiful Peruvian assistant, Peter, who resembles a young Johnny Depp.

Mario is tall (6ft 2 1/2 in, he tells me later, the half seems to matter) with an air of good breeding. He grew up in an upper-middle-class Catholic household in Lima, the second of six children to parents of Italian descent. He went to a good school, spent three months every year at the beach. But he was considered an ugly duckling, and his mother, whom he adores, used to massage his nose to try to make it thinner. "I grew up thinking I was a monster." He has engaging green eyes in a face that's better for a few lines. His clothes are plain, well cut. Three decades after leaving Lima for London, he is a brand in his own right, two magic words that guarantee sales and success. Brand Mario didn't happen by chance. He likes to say he fell into this line of work – he came to the UK in 1976, and enrolled on a

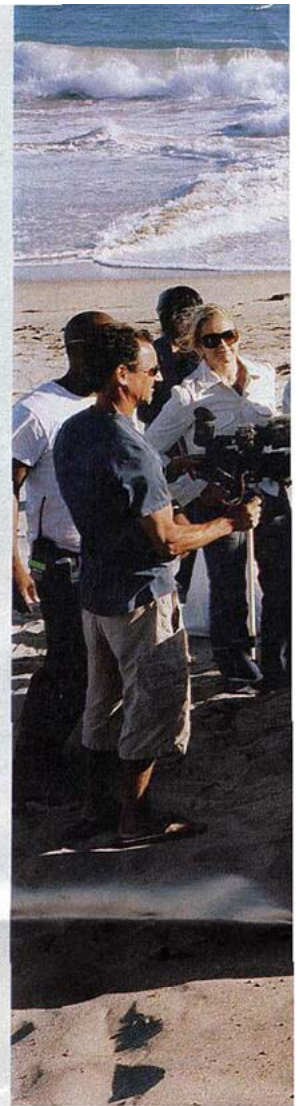
LOS ANGELES, 2005

"This was one of the shoots [of Michelle Pfeiffer, below] where Mario used Polaroids. Like most photographers, he has moved over to digital. When shooting with film, you didn't see exactly what you were getting, so you would shoot with Polaroids first"



CALIFORNIA, 2005

"It doesn't look it, but the beach [right] was actually really cold and windy. Mario still made it look glamorous – he makes everything look wonderful, even when it isn't"



'I like good-looking people around me. The girls react well to them. There is something that comes out, an energy'

NEW YORK, 2001

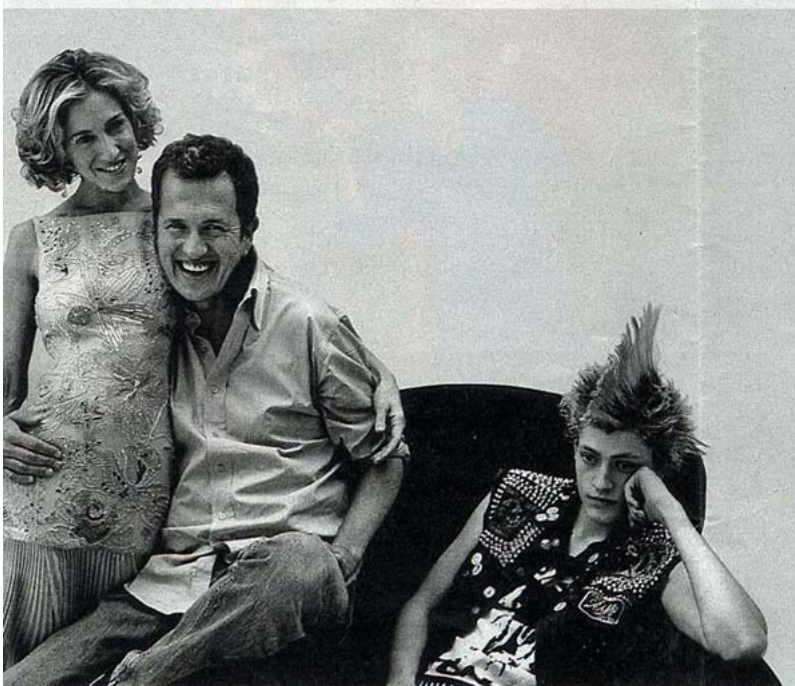
Sarah Jessica Parker with Testino and a model at a Vogue cover shoot (right). "Sarah Jessica and Mario seemed like they had known each other for years. She seemed so comfortable and relaxed. In fact, they had only just met for the first time"

LONDON, 2002

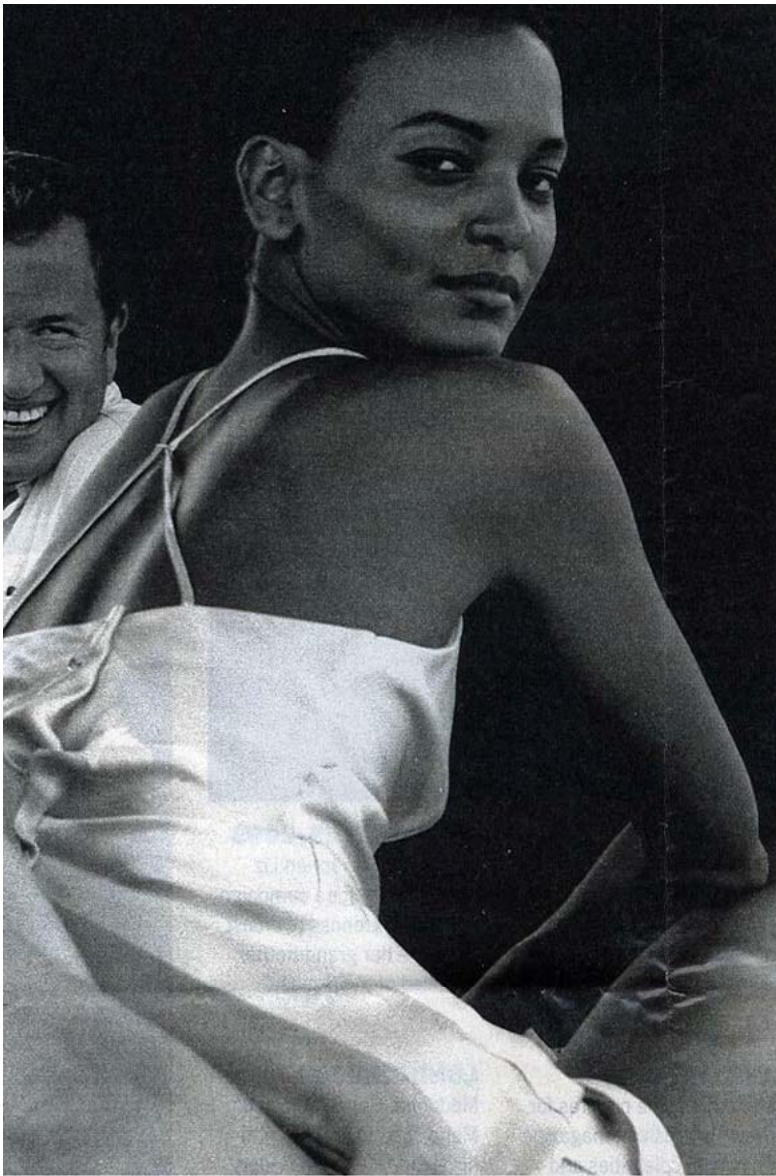
Testino applies the final touches to his exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery (left). "It was a huge success. His photographs of Diana had really propelled him into the public consciousness"



ALL PICTURES: SAM FAULKNER/NB PICTURES



photography course to get his student visa. "I was running towards a certain lifestyle. I was looking for an answer. I felt I was different," he remembers. In London you could dye your hair or listen to the "wrong" music and be accepted. But he had inherited his businessman father's work ethic, and made sure he was not just in the right place at the right time, but with the right people. As a result, he has plenty of names to drop. "I wanted to go to Kate's birthday party but I couldn't..." "I'm helping to launch Indian Vogue, so I might combine that with Elizabeth [Hurley]'s wedding – though I'll go to the English party too, at the house of my friend Molly Dent-Brocklehurst – I'm godfather to her child..." "Then Madonna asked if I would photograph her... Then Princess Diana asked me to do her pictures..." He tells me that his exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in 2002 attracted "a record-breaking 170,000 people", and about discovering the model Jacquetta Wheeler on a street in Knightsbridge. He drops enormous hints about there being "no work" for him in London, beyond Vogue and Burberry. And he laments the fact that he hasn't yet photographed the Queen, no doubt hoping one of her "people" will read this article. "What a card to be given in life! I'm sure it's really tough. I've done the boys, and Charles. They're really the sweetest. And Charles, I think, is just a misunderstood person. He's eccentric, but then who isn't in England? ➤➤➤



CANNES, 2003

Carolyn Murphy, Elizabeth Hurley and Liya Kebede (left) are photographed by Testino. "It was the first time he had shot for Estée Lauder"

LONDON, 2002

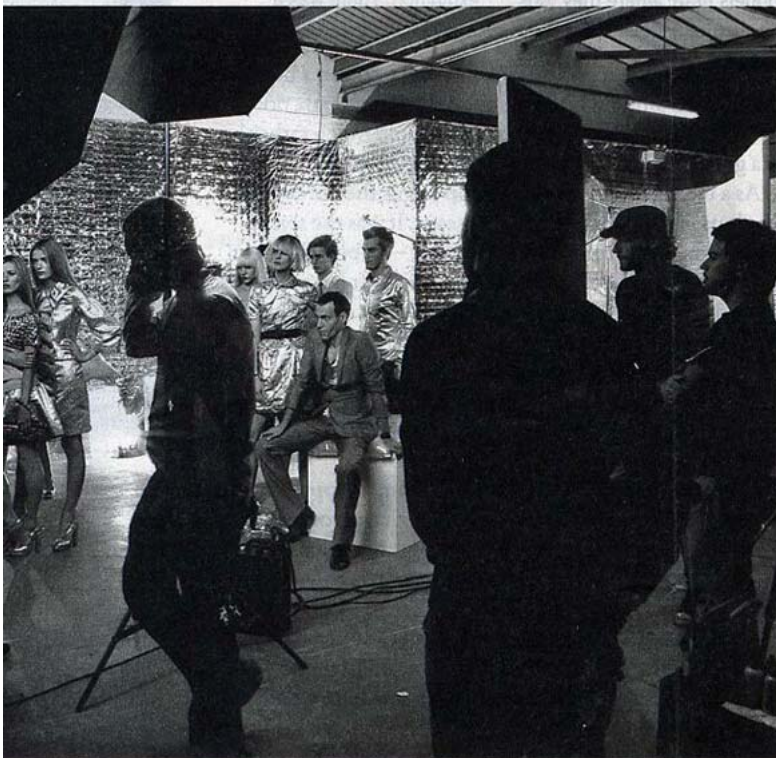
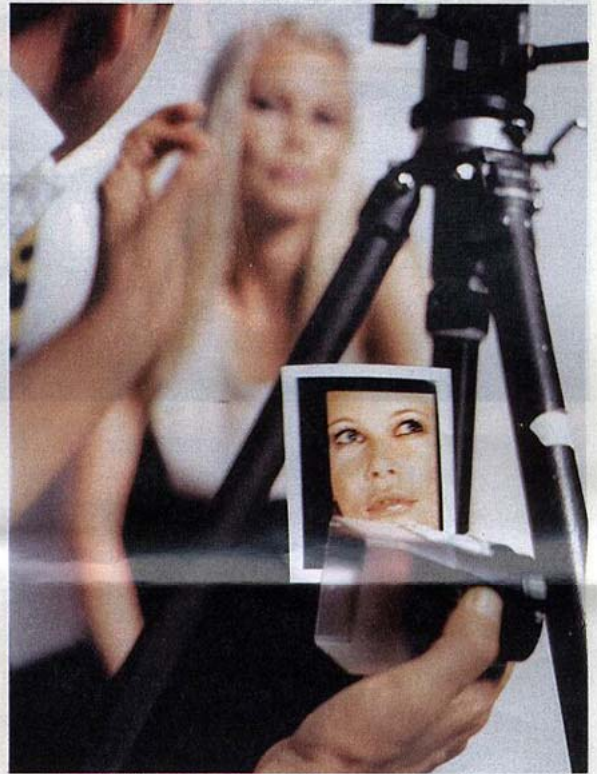
A shoot with Claudia Schiffer (below) for French Vogue. "He took a Polaroid to check the light, and that the model was as gorgeous as possible"

LOS ANGELES, 2004

"When Mario shot Beyoncé Knowles [bottom left] he jumped on stage to dance with her. It's all part of his mood-creating performance"

LONDON, 2006

Shooting a campaign for Burberry (bottom right). "Kate Moss is second from left. Mario's shot for the label for about six years now"



Between the book's party moments, there are shots of Kate Moss with her daughter, and one of Angelina Jolie with her oldest two. He once did a book called Kids, for Sargent Cancer Care, "because I had a brother who died aged 10 of cancer. I've been given a lot, and you have to give it back". He has lost a lot of people he loved, as well. It feels slightly wrong to be talking about this on a train, and he lowers his voice. "It started with my nanny, when I was five. She died in the street, of an asthma attack. It was horrible. It was in the middle of the night, and I remember that for years we wouldn't go down the main staircase of the house because you could see the spot, and we were terrified. Then my brother died aged 10, when I was 17, of liver cancer. He was born with three tumours and they developed..." He looks down. "Then my grandmother. Then I went to study photography in London and my teacher died three months later. I've had three good friends die: one of a car accident, one of Aids, one of heroin. My father died 10 years ago. Thank God it's been easier lately."

Always looking for the silver lining, he adds: "Deaths allow you to change." The book is dedicated to his father. "It must have been hard for him to understand why his eldest son turned out to be so into things that he wasn't into." Mario briefly studied law, economics and international relations before coming to London. He believes in destiny, "But I think you determine which



IBIZA, 2004

"This pool [above] was part of a house that seemed built for cpulent parties. But as soon as the shoot was over, Mario few straight back to London"

LOS ANGELES, 2005

"Mario photographed Liz Hurley [right] for a campaign to raise awareness of breast cancer — her grandmother had died of the disease"

LONDON, 2006

"Mario did some pictures for a New York fashion magazine of him with celebrities and models [left], where they took the picture instead of him"

LONDON, 2002

Madonna, Guy Ritchie and Mario Testino (below right) at his National Portrait Gallery exhibition. There was a whole section on Madonna

'I am no good at holding onto the grey side of life. I always want to hang onto the sun'

road to take. The possibilities are there for you, whether you take them or not. It's a gamble, life, no? People don't see what's in front of them, they miss the signs."

He shows me a long, curved scar on his right elbow — he has had operations for blocked nerves caused by his leaning on his elbows when he works. He was losing feeling in his hands. There's an anxiety below the surface, but he says he's glad he has it, it spurs him on. He admits he's a workaholic. "It's a disease. I believe that if I took six months off, it wouldn't be there when I came back." One critic called his work "the apotheosis of shallowness"; fans call it "luxury realism". "My job is to sell," says Mario. "I sell magazines and clothes, and you sell more if you show the sun and not darkness. I need to lie for my work. But it's also about 'What

do I want my life to be like?' And I want to be on a beach, with a girl riding a white stallion. Real life is tough, no? Every day you get some bad news. I would much rather be in a great world. So I try to make it nicer. For me."

As a teenager, Mario used to hop across the border to fabulous parties. "Brazil was my escape. It was the sexual revolution. That freedom has been lost — nobody has that looseness now, not even the youth. We didn't have diseases. We didn't think about being careful. We just did it." Now his escape is his work. He says he tries to re-create the "magical years" of his youth, but it's more than that: he wants to enhance himself retrospectively. He mixed with the beautiful people, but he never felt beautiful himself. "Now I can be that."

He's not shallow: he just prefers his shiny, happy fantasy to reality. "When my brother died, I tried to go on partying it out. I was 17. I would go wild, to forget. I'm not good at suffering, at holding onto the grey side of life. I always want to hang onto the sun. Of course there are moments when you cannot avoid it, when you just have to suffer, when you think your world will crumble. But I'm okay. I'm still here."

He has no regrets because he has always done what he wants. "My friends who held themselves back are the ones who are bald now." And he has a luxurious, if fragmented,



LONDON, 2002

Fans queue to get their copies of Testino's book signed at the National Portrait Gallery. "People queued for hours. Most photographers are fairly anonymous. Not Mario"



Let Me In! by Mario Testino is published on March 15 by Taschen in a limited edition of 1,000, signed and numbered, price £300. For more information, visit www.taschen.com

life: last year he spent time in London, Paris, LA, New York, Ibiza, South America, Germany, Italy. He takes his Hermès slippers everywhere with him, a gift from his make-up artist, and he's fussy about a particular brand of toothpaste. Lately he's been carrying his own pillow from country to country. But he's homesick. That's why Peter's here: a piece of Peru, a comfort blanket. At the Gare du Nord we're met by another of Mario's model-like assistants, Maximilien, from Berlin, who drives us to Mario's hotel on the Place de la Concorde. Max has the same lanky build and floppy dark hair as Peter. "I like good-looking people around me," says Mario. "The girls react well to them. There's something that comes out, an energy." The world Mario has built around himself is full of gorgeous, newly hatched young things just beginning to discover life. It's Peter's first time in Paris; he gazes out of the car windows in awe. And Mario has to go – off to the physio and then on to the Dior show. This leg problem is irritating him. I tell him everyone loves a man with a limp; he can play the romantic hero. He shudders at the thought: if it's still hurting him later, he will pretend that it isn't. It's the same attitude he brings to his work: if something is less than perfect, he will make it perfect. "I hate looking the victim," he says. "When I get to the shows I will look as if everything is fine." ■