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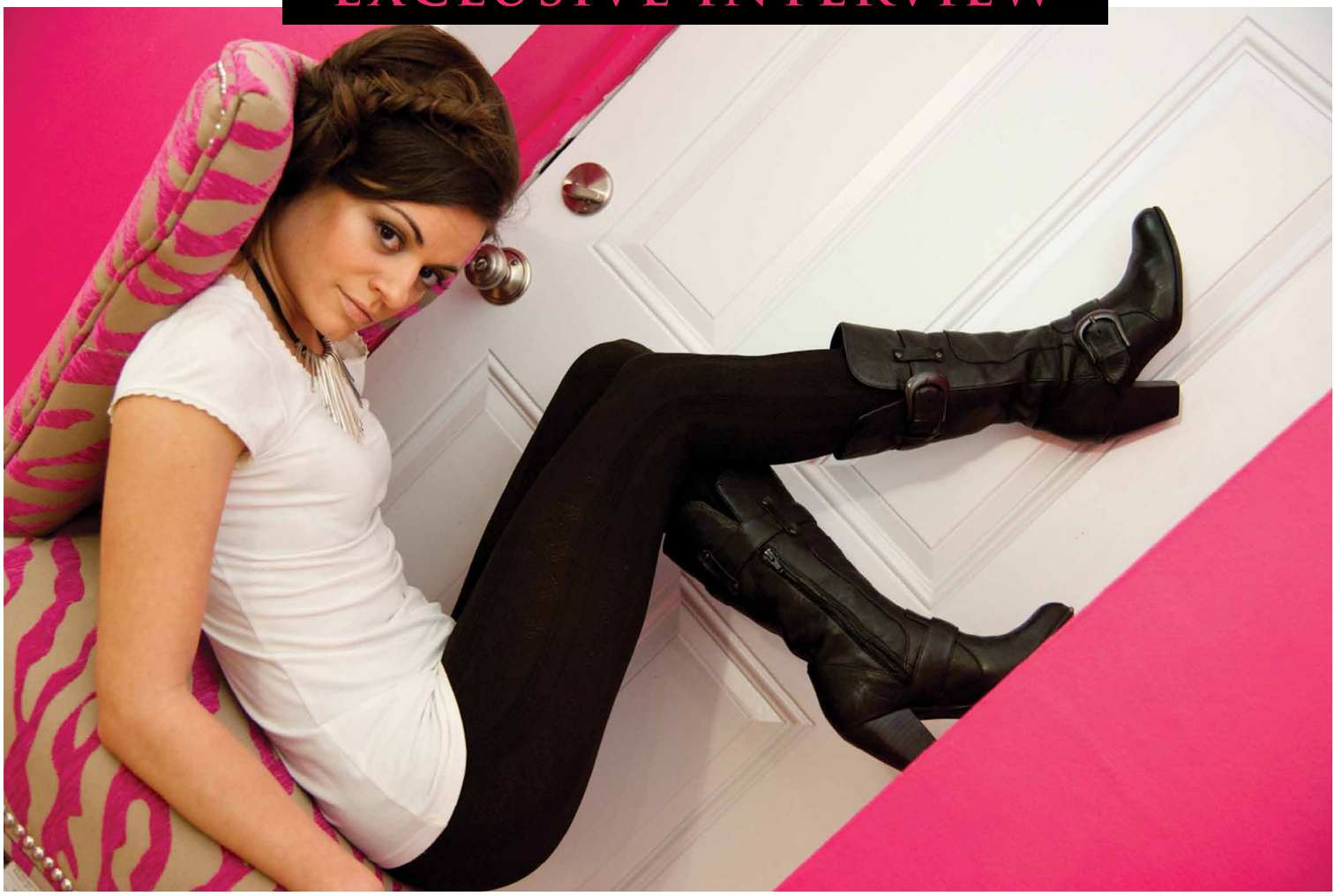
SEPTEMBER 2011

Getting to know

Penelope Lagos

AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW BY DENNIS A. AMITH



Getting to Know Penelope Lagos

Penelope Lagos is known for her role as silent actress Mabel Normand in "Madcap Mabel" and now the actress/model will appear in two upcoming films "Meanwhile" and "Stuck in the Middle". J!-ENT interviews Penelope about being Greek, life, modeling and her acting career.

By Dennis A. Amith

With her beautiful smile that lights up the screen in the short "Madcap Mabel", actress/model Penelope Lagos has won over audiences with her role of real life silent actress and Hollywood's first comedienne, Mabel Normand.

Penelope Lagos is currently promoting her latest feature film "Stuck" which will be screening at the Tribeca Grand Hotel on Sept. 30th and also screening at the Downbeach film Festival on the weekend of Oct. 14th in Atlantic City, NJ.

J!-ENT recently had the opportunity to interview the Penelope about her life, modeling, her passion about acting and the various films that she has appeared in.

Before we get into questions about your career, let's get to know you a bit more. You are of Greek descent, I was wondering if you had an opportunity to ever visit Greece? And did you grow up in a traditional Greek family?

PENELOPE: Unfortunately no. There is going to be a big reunion next summer so I need to just book the ticket and go already. Wish it were a 2 hour instead of 10 hour flight but I'm guessing that is what xanax is for! Yes, I would consider us a traditional Greek family in that we are very involved in the Greek culture and proud of our heritage. I grew up in an extended family with my grandparents helping to raise me

and I wouldn't have traded that for the world. All of my extended family lives in Greece so I'm thinking if everyone were here it would resemble the film "My Big Fat Greek Wedding". I laugh everytime I watch that movie.

I have eaten Greek dishes at restaurants before but not authentic, home-cooked Greek food. What Greek dishes were your favorites growing up?

PENELOPE: Well you'll have to come by when you're in town! I LOVE Greek food but I'm picky when I go out because I'm used to home cooked dishes. Both my parents are amazing cooks but my mom's signature dish is pastichio, which is baked macaroni with beef. My dad's would be any type of lamb dish with orzo. When my grandmother was alive she would make avgolemono soup (egg-lemon) to break the fast of Lent, so that always brings back great memories.

I realize you are a New Jersey native but what about New York do you love the most? And as an actress, have you been tempted to move out to California?

PENELOPE: New York City is one of the greatest cities I've ever been to. My love for the city stems from when I was a child and my parents would bring me to "The Christmas Spectacular" at Radio City during the holidays. It is an eclectic place where there is something for everyone. I'm honestly still in awe of the skyline each and every time I see it, the view just never gets old. As for California, I've only been out there once when I thought about possibly making the move, but realized pretty quickly that NY is home to me. I have many friends out there and would love to work in California if given the opportunity, but I'm a true East Coast girl at the end of the day.

As a model and actress, was there any person that inspired you?

PENELOPE: I have always been a huge fan of Lucille Ball and Julia Roberts. Ball was a great comedic actress, an inspiration that changed the face of television. Roberts, to me, embodies a true Hollywood star. Their careers definitely inspire me to take things to the next level.

What are your favorite movies and television shows at the moment?

PENELOPE: My favorite movie of the year is "The Kings Speech". The acting is extraordinary and the story is beautifully written. Colin Firth's performance is one to be remembered. As for television shows, I'd have to say "Grey's Anatomy". A solid ensemble cast that I enjoy watching every week. Oh, and my guilty pleasure is "The Bachelor". There's something about the fantasy dates and whirlwind romances I can't get enough of. (laughing).

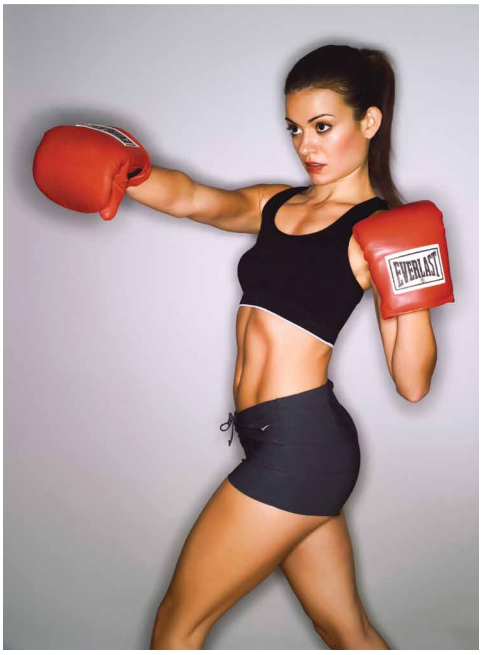
You went to college at Rutgers and graduated with a BA in Theater Arts. At what moment in your life did you know that you wanted to become an actress?

PENELOPE: What's funny is that there wasn't really one particular moment. I'm not one of those actresses who have known since I was 6 years old when I played the good witch in "The Wizard of Oz" school play. I actually wanted to be a meteorologist when I was a child and then thought about broadcasting in high school and college which is why I applied to the Communication/Journalism School at Rutgers. I danced for ten years so being on stage and performing seemed to be a natural fit for me. Acting was and still is the only type of "work" I enjoy doing full time. I always say, if you can take a hobby and make it into a profession, you're on the right track.

I've also seen your modeling work and it's a good balance between fitness, business casual and also sexy layouts. Do you enjoy it?
PENELOPE: I really love it all because modeling is very much like acting and allows me to be a different person in each shot and sometimes wear clothes I wouldn't normally get to wear. What girl doesn't like to play dress up!

How did you get involve with modeling and what kind of modeling work have you done?
PENELOPE: My first real experience with modeling was back when I was 14 years old and my mom encouraged me to enter a local Miss Teen Pageant. I never considered myself a model but thought it would be fun to do the talent competition and be on stage. I ended up winning first runner up and when they called my name I was so shocked I thought they called someone else. I stood there until the girl next to me gave me a nudge. Everyone was laughing and it's all caught on tape in case I want to relive the moment. (laughing)

Many years later, I started thinking about acting so when I submitted to agencies they also wanted to send me out on print work. One of these agencies asked my shoe size and sent me out on a shoe modeling "go see". At the time I knew nothing about parts modeling and here we are 10 years later and I make a good portion of my annual income



with my feet. I work with companies doing shoe fit as well as shoe shows in NY and Vegas. I call them my money makers which is why you won't see me walking the streets of NY in crazy heels.

Are you one of those people that can eat as much as you want and not gain any weight? Or are you the type that works out like crazy to keep fit?
PENELOPE: Funny because I am asked this alot. I have been thin my entire life. When I was younger and my mom would take me to the pediatrician, for my annual check ups he would say I was under weight and ask what my mom was, or in this case, was not feeding me. I always felt bad because my mom made the best lunches for me when I was in school and other kids would try and trade me. I'd eat but didn't gain weight. I never liked fast food and junk food in general because I didn't grow up with that stuff but I've always had a sweet tooth. I love love love, did I say love anything chocolate. I definitely work out and enjoy being active which is why I think I'm alot stronger now than I was before. Like I always say, small but strong. OK, that was corny!

Let's talk about your acting career. You were in a short film back in 2007 called "Hit N' Run" directed by Rob Santana and it was obviously a much more darker film than any previous work that you have done. What was it like working on "Hit N' Run".
PENELOPE: "Hit N' Run" allowed me to explore a range of emotions and was unlike any other film I had previously done. My character "Tracey" was a rape victim but that isn't shown on screen. To play such a character that had gone through what she did was emotionally draining and challenging for me because in the end, I wanted the audience to feel my pain and hopefully I was successful in doing that.

You were in the comedy "Muse", a pilot in which you play the Goddess Thalia. Do you enjoy playing comedy?
PENELOPE: I love it! I am sarcastic by nature and possess what people would describe as a dry sense of humor, so to be able to do comedy is a dream come true. Working on the set of a comedic project is so much fun and the hardest part is not laughing during a take. As the old show business adage says, "Dying is easy, comedy is hard".

So, what was it like playing the character of Goddess Thalia in "Muse", in this case, a muse that is not quite successful with her jokes?
PENELOPE: Being of Greek descent and growing up learning about Greek mythology, the opportunity to play the Muse of Comedy was fantastic. Thalia is quite naïve and child like and her bad jokes are what make her a lovable character. Working on this project, I learned how to do a spit take, pratfall and even get to be unexpectedly pulled into a pool in the middle of October. Maybe I'll take back my earlier answer about moving to California.

In 2008, you were in a short film titled "Mary's Laughter" directed by John Paxton, Jr. What kind of character did you play in the short and what was experience like working on "Mary's Laughter"?
PENELOPE: I played the character of Meredith who is traveling with her on again off again boyfriend and they aren't exactly getting along. There is a lot of tension and the film takes a turn for the worse when they end up lost on a desert-

ed road. The horror genre was one I had tried to avoid because I often thought it looked cheesy when not executed properly, but the SPX makeup crew on "Mary's Laughter" did an awesome job. We did shoot 10-12 hours a day outside on the coldest days in February, so that part of shooting, I think we'd all like to forget.

In 2009, you began working on the webisode "WildFlower" web series and you played the role of Det. Nadia Williams. What was that experience like?

PENELOPE: Playing a detective was a lot of fun because Nadia is such a bad ass and doesn't put up with anyone's nonsense. She is a strong character who is protective of her friends and says it how it is.

In 2010, you appeared on the short film "Madcap Mabel". You played silent film actress Mabel Normand. Were you familiar with the actress before you took on the role?

PENELOPE: No, I actually wasn't. I knew a bit about the era and knew of Charlie Chaplin and Fatty Arbuckle but hadn't heard of Mabel. After a meeting about the film, the minute I got home I started researching who she was. I found out instantly what an impact she had on the industry and was immediately fascinated with her life.

Mabel Normand's nightlife probably can be compared to Lindsay Lohan or Paris Hilton. In the 1920's, she was a very successful woman who was a director, producer and owned her own film studio but outside of work, she partied hard. When playing the character, what did you want to bring out with your portrayal of Mabel?

PENELOPE: I wanted people to see what a strong and successful woman she was. It was important to me that the audience understood what an icon Mabel really was and the hurdles she overcame as a woman during the 20's. To accomplish what she did as a female during that time period, says a lot about who she was as a person and as an actress.

Photo by Joey Quintero (fotoquintero.com)

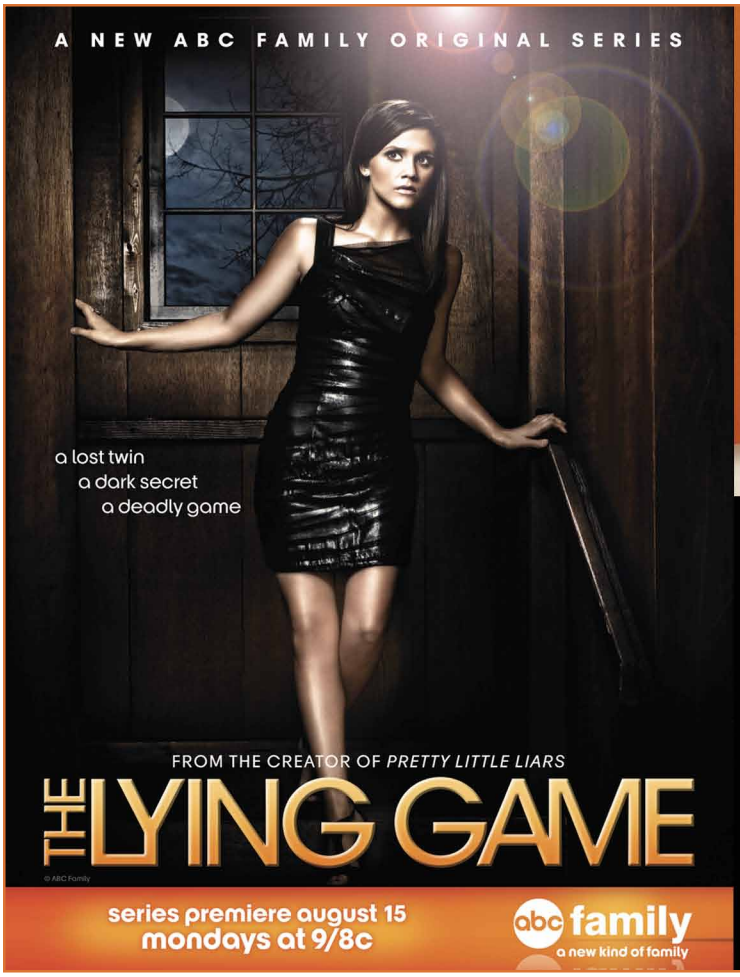
"Madcap Mabel" has received positive reviews from film festival audiences. Why do you think the storyline resonates so well with the audience?

PENELOPE: Two reasons. I think people love period pieces because the sets, costumes and overall theme differ greatly from modern day films. I also believe audiences love stories about real people.

In "Madcap Mabel", there is a very good scene between you and actor Ron Nummi who plays Mack Sennett. What was it like working with Ron?

PENELOPE: Ron is amazing to work with. He is a seasoned actor who really delves into the character he is portraying. I only wish we had more scenes together but since this was a short we couldn't focus entirely on Mack and Mabel's relationship. Those who have seen the film always comment on what a strong performance Ron gave and I couldn't agree more. I hope to have the opportunity to work with him in the future.

Continued on Page 8



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Directing the film was Dena Schumacher. What was it like working with Dena on the film?

PENELOPE: Dena is probably the most focused and professional director I have worked with. She comes prepared and ready to shoot everyday. I particularly remember shooting the office scene with myself and Ron and Dena wanting me to say the last line as I'm exiting rather than to look him in the eyes. I really didn't think the shot would work that way and it wasn't how I had prepared it but followed her direction. Turns out people love this shot and confirms why she is the director and I should stick to acting.

One of the difficulties in doing a period film, especially from the teens and '20s is capturing the look and feel of that era. What was the experience like having to wear the hair, the outfits and trying to capture that feel of that era?

PENELOPE: I absolutely loved wearing the period piece outfits and most of the wigs. I say most because the longer wig was just so much hair and curls, it was hard to maintain. In the last scene, I wear the longer wig before I get hit in the face with a pie, so I was happy to see it covered in pie and in the garbage after that shot. I often say I think I was meant to live during this time. My favorite pair of heels are actually a 1920's inspired design.

Penelope Lagos as Mabel Normand in "Madcap Mabel".

Curious, in the comedy "Muse", you did a little Chaplin and of course in "Madcap Mabel", you play Mabel Normand but have you ever watched a silent film before? Did you watch any to prepare for your role?

PENELOPE: Yes, I was supplied with a myriad of her films and clips of other silent film stars of her time. I rewatched some of the classic films set in the 20's: "Chaplin", "The Cat's Meow", "The Untouchables", "Citizen Kane" and "The Aviator", to name a few. I also read Betty Harper Fussell's book entitled "Mabel" and Mack Sennett's "King of Comedy". Finally, I was fortunate enough to speak with Marilyn Slater, the technical advisor on the film, who gave me great insight into Mabel's life and really gave me the confidence to fill such great shoes.

This year, you appeared in several films. "Meanwhile" and "Stuck In the Middle". Can you tell us more about your two character roles and what the two films are about?

PENELOPE: "Meanwhile" is being pitched as a pilot but many people that saw it during the private screening thought it would make a great film as well. I play the character of Tuesday which is a smaller but vital role. She is an assistant who is dedicated, competent and a little over protective. She moves the story along and if all goes well would be a recurring character. "Meanwhile" takes you through the journey of one man's life where everyone seems to think negatively of him but the reality is he is a struggling artist just down on luck. It was beautifully shot and a project I'm very proud of.

"Stuck in the Middle" is a comedic feature that actually takes place in Purgatory, yes Purgatory. It's about a mail room slacker who ends up killing himself in a bizarre experiment and ironically finds himself sentenced to life in the mail room. He is surrounded by some strong personalities and quickly meets his mail room manager upon arrival. Her name is Brook Lynn Monroe and she is the character I was fortunate enough to play. He falls for her but not in a traditional way and what ensues is hilarious. We were accepted and

Photo by Joey Quintero (fotoquintero.com)

screened at the Hoboken Film Festival in June and the reviews were all positive so I'm looking forward to what's next with Stuck.

In "Meanwhile", the film was written and directed by Hal Hartley. What was it like to work with Hal?
PENELOPE: Hal is a very experienced director and writer. He is the King of independent films and has been recognized internationally for his work. It was an honor to work with him and we got along so well because he is a logical thinker. There was a purpose for all the choices he made and that comes through in the finished product. Hal is not only a writer and a director he is a composer, editor and actor. He really wears multiple hats and does so effortlessly!

I noticed that in "Stuck in the Middle", you worked with two directors – Joseph Pepitone and Carlos Duhaime. What was that like?
PENELOPE: "Joe Pep" as I like to call him is honestly one of the most laid back people I have ever met. There would be chaos happening around him, obstacles to overcome and he handled everything so well. He is the nicest director I have worked with and as a writer is unbelievably talented. To come up with the concept of this film and to execute it in the way he did says alot about his professionalism and creativity. My job would be easy if I could work with people like him all the time!

Carlos is super artistic and not only directed but also edited this entire film. He is a soft spoken guy so there would be times where the actors were laughing so hard or completely improving scenes and Carlos would look at us and say in a soft tone, "Guys back to one please". Most directors would be completely annoyed but he just went with the flow which made for a relaxing environment and an overall great experience. I'm beginning to sound like I love everyone but I've been fortunate to work with some really great people.

Are there any projects that you are currently working on at this moment?
PENELOPE: Well I'm still very involved with the film "Stuck in the Middle" right now. I'm excited to see where this film will end up and hope to work with Joe and the crew on future projects.

You also have done a few viral videos as well, especially a popular video titled "Please Stop Using Social Media, Mom". But curious, are you on Twitter or Facebook?
PENELOPE: I do have a Twitter account at @PenelopeCLagos.

Going forward in your career, what other type of roles are you interested in playing? Is there a certain dream role that you would love to play?

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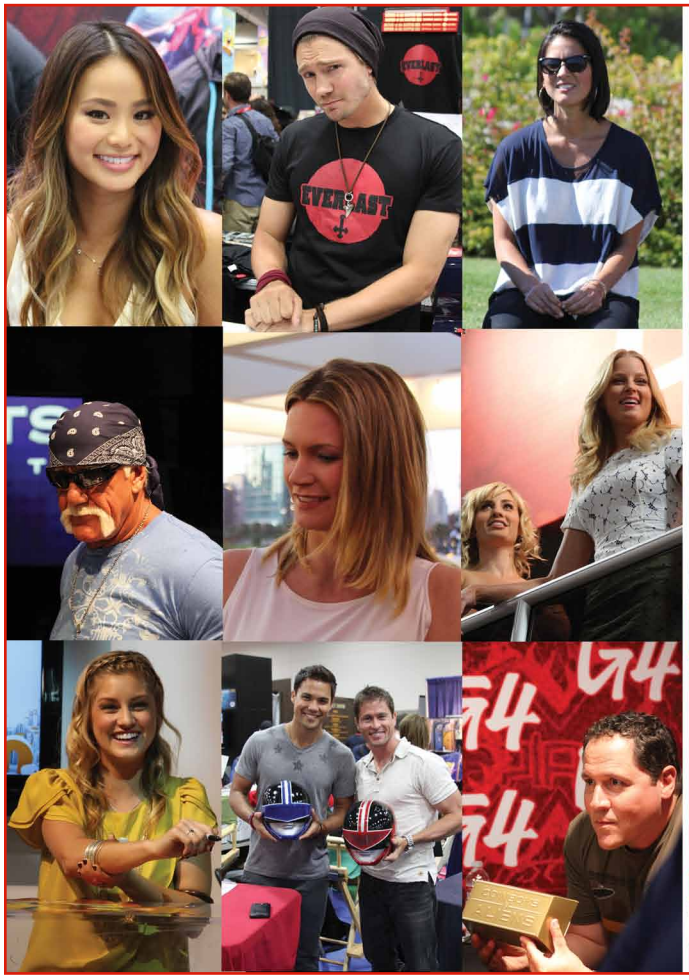

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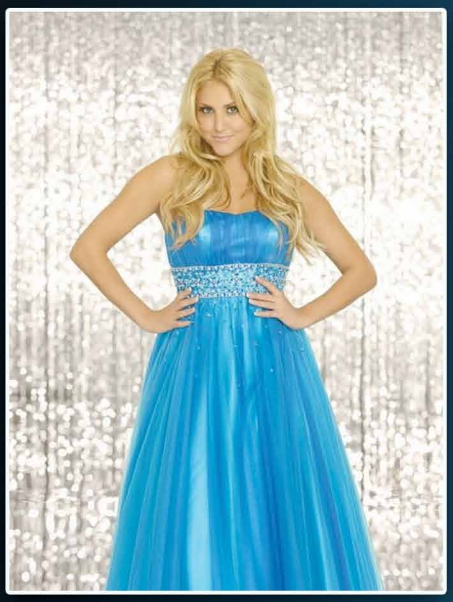

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PENELOPE: I also have always wanted to do an action film. I've been taking kick boxing so I'd like to put my skills to use!

I'm curious, what kind of student were you back in high school? The cheerleader? The artsy type? Athlete? Troublemaker?
PENELOPE: I was a cheerleader who liked to read. I got good grades but always had to work hard to maintain them. My brother, on the other hand, was one of those kids who didn't really have to study but still got a 1310 on his SAT's.

If there were one word to describe you… What word would that be and why?
PENELOPE: Genuine. What you see is what you get with me. I believe honesty is another attribute that falls under the same category and people who have worked with me professionally and know me personally always say this is my greatest quality. My grandmother always told me "what goes around comes around" and these are words I live by.

In many of our interviews, we play a word game in which I give you five words, you give me your definition of those words:

A. LOVE
PENELOPE: Being there for someone through thick and thin.

B. RUTGERS U.
PENELOPE: A well rounded education in studies and life.

C. PAIN
PENELOPE: Experiencing a loss that makes you feel as though your heart is literally breaking in pieces.

D. DIPLES
PENELOPE: My favorite Greek dessert.

E. MABEL NORMAND
PENELOPE: Hollywood star and legend who changed the face of show business for women.

Penelope Lagos as Mabel Normand on the set of "Madcap Mabel".

What final words would you like to leave with your fans and those who are just discovering your work?
PENELOPE: I'd first like to thank everyone who has supported me over the years. This business is a roller coaster so it's nice to have positive people in your corner. My goal in becoming an actress was so that people could watch me in a film or a tv show or even on stage and for those 2 hours would forget their problems and have an escape. The arts have always been there for me and I want to have that same impact on others. My hope is that more people will discover my work and hopefully become a fan!

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DENNIS A. AMITH is the Editor-in-Chief and founder of entertainment and pop culture website J!-ENT. He is also the owner of the multi-disciplinary communications and design business, nt2099 media and entertainment. Graduating from California State University, Fresno with an educational background in mass communications and journalism, Dennis A. Amith has interviewed and featured many talents and industry professionals in the United States, Europe and Asia and is recognized for promoting the entertainment and pop culture of different countries to an International audience. Dennis is currently residing in California.

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