

SWIMSUIT: EMPORIO ARMANI
RING ON RIGHT HAND: BVLGARI

THE NEXT BIG THING

Not familiar with MALIN ÅKERMAN? You soon will be. JOE ROGERST meets the Swedish-Canadian actress who has paid her dues in Hollywood and now stands on the verge of superstardom

EXCLUSIVE PHOTOGRAPHY / BLEACHER + EVERARD FOR UNALI ARTISTS

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HE WANTS TO MEET at the Chateau Marmont, that mock-Gothic refuge of celebrity on Sunset Boulevard. No paparazzi, no adoring fans; everybody in the lounge is *somebody* in Hollywood, even if you don't immediately recognise the name or face. And such is the case with Malin Åkerman. After 10 years in the entertainment industry, she's still far from being a household name. And despite her supermodel looks – tall, blonde and blue-eyed – you won't find her gracing many magazine covers.

But all of that should change in short order. Åkerman has just landed the biggest role of her life: Linda Lovelace in a soon-be-be-filmed biopic called *Inferno*. Not the story of how Lovelace came to be the globe's biggest porn star, but rather her long and torturous journey from abused wife to anti-porn advocate. People are already talking big-time award nominations – if Åkerman can pull it off. And if her career to date is any indication, she'll slam-dunk the part. Shortly after our palaver, she landed another starring role, this time opposite Tom Cruise, Alec Baldwin and Russell Brand in next year's *Rock of Ages*, a film version of the hit Broadway musical. (It's a plum part for which big names Amy Adams and Anne Hathaway had been considered.) All told, Åkerman has six feature films rolling out over the next 12 months.

Åkerman was born in Sweden, but at the age of two her parents pulled up stakes and moved to Canada. She grew up in a small Ontario town called Niagara-on-the-Lake, downstream from the celebrated falls and just across the river from upstate New York. She modelled off and on as a child, but ultimately decided the runway wasn't for her, opting instead to pursue a psychology degree at university. While at school she was offered a small role (as a robot, no less) in the hit Canadian television series *Earth: Final Conflict*. That sparked her interest in acting and a 2001 move to Los Angeles to pursue her dream.

It was a long, slow road to success. Although Åkerman found steady work, she didn't turn many heads until 2007, when she starred opposite Ben Stiller in the remake of *The Heartbreak Kid*. That may not have boosted her into the showbiz stratosphere, but it did bring a string of higher-profile comedy parts as a female sidekick to more established players – Katherine Heigl in *27 Dresses*, Sandra Bullock in *The Proposal* and Kristin Davis in *Couples Retreat*. She also snagged a leading role on *Childrens Hospital*, an irreverent television and web series that lampoons serious medical shows.

Not wanting to get typecast as a ditzy blonde, Åkerman peppered those comedic roles with a wide variety of other parts in mainstream and indie films. She got buff and brunette as comic book superhero Laurie Jupiter (aka Silk Spectre II) in *Watchmen*, shaved her eyebrows and part of her head to play a woman stricken with alopecia in *happythankyoumoreplease*, and then sank into the world of South African apartheid in the highly acclaimed *The Bang Bang Club*. Along the way she met and married Italian alt-rock drummer Roberto Zincone, with whom she shares homes in Italy and southern California.

You've played an incredible variety of movie roles. Is that accidental or planned? Yes, that's my plan, definitely. It's been a very calculated decision. When I started, all I was doing was comedy, which I love and always want to continue to do. But at a certain point I just thought I was being pigeonholed into the comedy genre and I didn't want that. It's so much fun to try new things. That's sort of what this business is all about – to challenge yourself, pushing yourself to your limits. I kind of got an itch to get out and try roles that were a little more grounded, like *The Bang Bang Club*. The independent-film route has been a really great area where I get to test out these new characters and see if I actually *can* do it. That's a big question for me too: if it's something I'm able to succeed at. But I got to the point that I was worried that I would just be the comedy girl. In many people's eyes, I still am for a lot of the studios – until all these indies are coming out.



SWIMSUIT: DOLCE & GABBANA
BRACELET: TIFFANY & CO.
SHOES: JIMMY CHOO

Do you ever feel like a new role is too challenging? That maybe you're out of your league?

Yep, *all* the time [laughs]. In all seriousness, every job that I embarked on – like my first job with Ben Stiller – I felt completely out of my league. I called my husband every night. We went to San Francisco for the first week of shooting and I called him every night and said, “Babe, I don’t know why they hired me. I don’t know what I am doing. I’m standing in front of Ben Stiller and I feel like a fool and I don’t know if I’m doing this right.” So it’s just nerve racking. You question yourself every step along the way but I think that’s what is exciting and exhilarating.

I watched an interview with Michael Caine a few years back. He had been in the business

for 50 years at this point, and he said, “I can finally say I am proud of this movie that I just did. Up until then I didn’t know what the hell I was doing. I think I am starting to figure it out.” That was after 50 *years*. I think that is so true about this business, that there is never really a moment where you go, “I got it!” I think you always feel like you can do better. Out there in the comedy world, I do feel like I have a little bit more of a grip on it compared to the stuff that I’m doing now, where everything is new. But the challenge is always there in all the roles I’ve done so far. That’s what is really interesting and exciting about acting – you don’t know where it comes from, you don’t know if you’re going to be able to do it. But sometimes you do. You totally do.

Have you ever turned down a part because you thought you couldn’t pull it off?

No, I can’t say I have. Actually, to the contrary, I think I’ve taken on roles that I feel are way beyond my capability and then figured it out. I do a lot of preparation and work hard at figuring it out. But the magic happens when you’re on set and you hope it’s going to happen. Cate Blanchett says that if you feel like you’ve already done a role or you feel like you can do it, don’t do it. Take on something

SWIMSUIT, SHOES, BAG AND SUNGLASSES: GUCCI
EARRINGS: BVLGARI
BRACELETS: TIFFANY & CO.

“[CHILDRENS HOSPITAL] IS THE LOVE OF MY LIFE, WHERE I GET MY COMEDY KICKS...PURE EXPERIMENTAL TELEVISION”

that challenges you every time. And I really feel that’s why she’s so brilliant as an actress. She’s such a chameleon. That’s what I love about her.

What are you working on now?

I’m in the middle of shooting something called *Medallion* with Nicolas Cage in New Orleans. It’s a heist film, which I’ve never done before either. I’m going to New York to do press work for *Bang Bang Club* on Wednesday. Then I go back and finish shooting *Medallion*.

Tell me about Medallion.

It’s a movie about four friends who rob banks: me, Nicolas Cage, Josh Lucas and MC Gainey. It goes wrong and Nic gets caught and goes to jail. He’s the one who had the money when we all kind of scattered. Cut to eight years later, he gets out of jail. He goes to see his daughter, who is now 14 years old. She has a little bit of an issue with him, obviously. He comes to see me and gets a phone call and his daughter has been kidnapped by one of our former partners. The guy’s gone crazy and wants the \$10 million that was stolen from the bank and Nic really doesn’t have it. Or so he says.

And then comes Inferno.

I’m really excited about that one...and I’m really scared and nervous. *Inferno* really is taking it to another level. The script is wonderful and it’s very much focused on the relationship of Linda Lovelace and her husband. It’s not about the porn industry; it’s about a battered woman and her journey. There’s always that thing where people ask me why don’t women leave when they’re battered, and it’s just not that easy. There’s this whole psychology behind it that I find fascinating; which is what we’re exploring in this script. And we’re also telling a little piece of her life from the moment she met her husband Chuck Traynor until the time she became an anti-porn advocate.

How do you get your mind around playing someone like Linda Lovelace?

I don’t know. It’s going to be a journey. I’ve had conversations with my husband that, “I might just check out for a month...or maybe I won’t, but I’ll need you more than ever.” I feel it’s going to take me to some dark places and I really don’t want to bring that energy home. A lot if it is just being well prepared. A lot of preparation. I have a wonderful [acting] coach who I love to work with on anything that’s very intense like this, who I’m very excited to just sit down with and go through the whole script – and be extremely prepared when I walk onto that set so that I’m ready for the challenges.

You’ll also have to go through a physical transformation.

There’s not that much. Obviously hair. We’re either going to dye it or we’re going to do wigs. She goes through different [physical] transformations, so I think we are going to have to wig it. It’s hard because we go through five years of her life. There’s a moment when she was bigger, and then she was really thin when she did *Deep Throat*, because her husband made her lose the weight. He told her she was fat. We’ll just have to figure it out with costumes and hair and make-up. But I think with anything like that, capturing the essence of the character is what’s important. And, of course, as much of the transformation that you can possibly do.

I look forward to seeing the result.

Me too. Me too. It’s going to be *very* fascinating. The reason I really like this role is because it’s not a story about a victim. Nobody wants to watch that. It’s about that amazing sort of question of how much is she really involved and how much is she a victim and how much does she really enjoy and what is it she enjoys. When she became an anti-porn advocate, there were a lot of journalists who offered doubts about how much of a victim she really was. This story explores that big question mark that everyone had about Linda Lovelace.

You have an awful lot of movies coming out over the next year. What will the public see next?

The Bang Bang Club is the next one. We shot that in South Africa and it’s based on a true story about war photographers during the end of apartheid. Then we have *Wanderlust* coming out the end of summer, beginning of fall. That’s a big blockbuster with Jen Aniston and Paul Rudd. I’m super excited for that one actually. I really think it’s going to be a good movie. It’s a big ensemble cast. Jen Aniston is the star but you have these amazing actors like Joe Lo Truglio, Kerri Kenney and Ken Marino. We’re all just these quirky, crazy characters. I won’t give away too much, but my character really is full of surprises – some of the things she says and comes up with. There’s never going to be a dull moment. It’s quirky and out there and pushing the limit.

Speaking of comedy, you’ve also got an ongoing TV gig – Childrens Hospital – one of the funniest shows ever.

That’s the love of my life, where I get my comedy kicks. A white canvas on which we can do whatever we want. We have so much freedom. Pure experimental television. So phenomenal and so much fun. When you give these guys – real comedic writers and stand-up comedians – the freedom to do whatever they want, you get the worst stuff and you get the best stuff. But who wants to see something that’s somewhere in between? Let’s go for it. Let’s mess it up or go for something really great. Why not give it a shot? Rob Corddry and David Wain and all the creators, they know comedy really well. So there’s a rhyme and reason inside the debauchery on the set. It’s like kids in a playground and we get to go to Disneyland every day and be silly.

Switching topics completely, let’s talk about your ethnic background. I read

SWIMSUIT: DOLCE & GABBANA
BRACELETS: TIFFANY
RING: ANITA KO

“IT’S AMAZING – ESPECIALLY GOING ON THIS JOURNEY AS LINDA LOVELACE. IT’S VERY THERAPEUTIC, VERY CATHARTIC”

somewhere that when you’re in Sweden you feel more Canadian, and when you’re in Canada you feel more Swedish.

Yes, pretty much. It’s like I really don’t belong anywhere. It’s fascinating because I go to Sweden and I realise I’m not really like the Swedes. I didn’t grow up there I don’t have the exact same mentality. And then in Canada, it was definitely a Swedish culture I grew up with at home. But at school I was with all the Canadians and I always felt like, “Oh, you don’t do that at home?” There was always something that was amiss. I was never on the same boat as everyone else. I was always sort of swimming behind, treading water and trying to figure out when everyone else got into that boat.

So which part of you is Swedish and which part is Canadian?

A really good question. I don’t know if it’s my mom, but I think my outlook on life is just very much Swedish rather than any other culture. Swedes are very open and very liberal. I just feel they’re not very prudish. They’re open-minded and worldly. Sweden allows for that because it’s such a small country. You realise at a young age that you’re so tiny compared to the rest of the world that you need to learn about the world and you need to learn English and you need to learn different languages in order to survive in the world.

When they finish high school, pretty much 90 percent [of Swedish kids] will go on and do a year of travelling through Europe and just exploring. That was very different from all the other kids I grew up with [in Canada]. I felt like with a lot of kids, their parents were pushing them to go straight into university. But in Sweden they have more of a philosophy that the world is your university. I think it’s important to go out and see the world and see what’s out there before you spend all that money and four years and you don’t even know if that is what you want to do.

Another Swedish part is that we are very open with sexuality. The attitude about our bodies and everything is very natural. It’s not weird if you show boobs on television in Sweden. You see it. You never black it out. It’s natural rather than sexual. A lot of questions have come my way, “Isn’t that weird for you?”

You mean taking your clothes off in front of a camera?

Yes. And I say no, it’s not [weird]. It depends on the context, if it serves a purpose. Of course,

I’m not going to get naked just to get naked, but [I will] if it makes sense in the script. It’s going to be more awkward if you’re in a bed with your husband of 10 years and you’re post-coital and you have your bra on. It’s like, “Come on, guys! How often does that happen?” But I get it if you’ve grown up in a world where [nudity] doesn’t happen, whereas in Sweden it does. It’s just more natural, that’s all. So little nuances like that have come into my life and I realise, “Oh, I’m not exactly like my friends.” There are certain things [over which] we really differ.

And what’s Canadian about you?

I think the Canadian part is...Canadians are very, I want to say goofy. But I want to say it in the best way possible. And that’s what I love about Canadians. They can make fun of themselves, take the shit out of themselves and have fun. And it’s very laid back. If you look at the Brits, they have a very dry sense of humour and it can be condescending. But Canadians are more goofy, so that makes them more warm and personable and approachable. And I feel that the Swedes are a little bit more conservative in that sense and a little bit more like the Brits in their humour as well.

Is there such a thing as Swedish humour?

[Laughs] Yes, there is – if you hang out with the right people. You know, I feel like if I hadn’t grown up in Canada, I probably wouldn’t have gone into comedy. I was allowed to be myself and be goofy and clumsy and not very articulate at times. But that’s the other thing that has been very difficult for me. I grew up going to French immersion school, speaking Swedish at home and English with my friends. So my vocabulary isn’t...I’ve been working on it lately. But I have an Italian husband now, so it becomes English and Italian at home.

Do you ever ponder what your life would have been like if your family had stayed in Sweden?

Yes. I probably wouldn’t have been an actress. I didn’t grow up thinking, “Oh my God, I want to be an actress.” I have many different incarnations of who I wanted to be. I was a figure skater for 10 years, competing nationally. Then I wanted to be an astronaut; I wanted to go to the moon. And then I wanted to become a psychologist. A child psychologist. And that’s still one of my greatest passions, but that is later in life. The acting and modelling were always a good source of money along the way. TV commercials and catalogues put me through school. But it was never something I thought I was going to focus on until it came knocking on my door and I started getting guest-star roles.

So acting kept on coming back to you, even when you tried other things?

Yeah. It came to me in the form of really bad roles in not the greatest Canadian productions. But it still was coming. So it was sort of like a sign, maybe the universe was pushing me in that direction. And I thought, maybe I’ll give this a shot for a while. I can always go back to school. And so I did. And I was glad I did. Because it is a sort of more selfish version of psychology.

What exactly do you mean by that?

It’s amazing – especially going on this journey as Linda Lovelace. It’s very therapeutic, very cathartic. You go through many levels within yourself. You peel the layers of the onion that you don’t really look at. You know we have this personality, all of us as human beings, that we put forth on a daily basis and that becomes us. There are so many emotions and moments in our lives that we’ve gone through that we don’t deal with. And I think that’s really interesting when you get to do these really dark roles, you get to dig deep inside yourself and you have to hit something that’s for yourself or else you’re not going to give a good performance. ■

SWIMSUIT: MISSONI
SHOES: JIMMY CHOO
BRACELETS: TIFFANY & CO.
RING ON RIGHT HAND: CHOPARD