

Milla's crossing



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She achieved fame as a sci-fi alien punk in *The Fifth Element* and is soon to be seen in her newest film, *Ultraviolet*. But the actress and model Milla Jovovich has now launched herself at the fashion world with a typically offbeat label. TIFFANY ROSE reports



Below left: Milla Jovovich and Carmen Hawk
Picture: Amanda Friedman/
Icon International;
Right: Jovovich in *The Fifth Element*; with Daniel Whyte on set of *Ultraviolet*; and fashion by Jovovich

SEWING is hardly a pastime one associates with Milla Jovovich. Sword-wielding, maybe. Perhaps even zombie-slaying. But sewing? Yet that's precisely what she's doing the day we meet at her brownstone home in New York's Greenwich Village. An elegant tangle of gangly limbs, cushion lips and crisp cheekbones, Jovovich is sitting cross-legged on the floor of her reception room, hand-stitching the hem of a silk apron dress.

It's something she's been doing a bit of lately as – together with her design partner and longtime friend the former model Carmen Hawk – she has launched the Jovovich-Hawk fashion label.

Her home doubles as a showroom and is a hive of activity as sewers and pattern cutters dart in and out.

Jovovich, who was born in Ukraine and raised in Los Angeles is a disarming cocktail of Californian kookiness and Soviet seriousness, but the 30-year-old's raspy voice is curiously laced with a world-weariness beyond her years. But then she has crammed a lot into three decades.

She began modelling at the age of nine; retired from the catwalk at 15 to pursue a rock'n'roll career; got hitched in Vegas to her *Dazed and Confused* co-star Shawn Andrews at 16 (the marriage was annulled two months later); signed a multimillion-dollar contract with L'Oreal and tied the knot for the second time to the French director Luc Besson when she was 22 (he was 38; it ended in divorce 18 months later).

She also notched up a credible film career, with movies such as *Chaplin*, Besson's *Joan of Arc* epic and the sci-fi blockbuster, *The Fifth Element*. Now she's turning her hand to fashion design.

"Everything you see here is what we're wearing right now," she says of the 70-piece summer collection that includes Victoriana lace dresses, shrunken hourglass jackets, printed ruffle skirts and 1940s button-through cotton frocks.

By her own admission there's no heavy concept attached to Jovovich-Hawk. Instead their collections are the product of an admiration for each other's style and a love of vintage shopping.

"We believe that this is all very wearable," says 34-year-old Hawk, whose eerie beauty made her a favourite of Alexander McQueen in the late 1990s. "It's what girls want on a lot of different levels; what makes them feel sexy, demure or cute."

What makes the collection unique is that Jovovich-Hawk is not merely a licensing deal using a famous name. It is independently owned and genuinely designed by the names you see on the label.

"If it were just about sending off the drawings and letting someone else make it and just count the money that comes in, fine. But that's not how I've ever worked," Jovovich says. "Even the action movies I've made, there's always been a personal reason why I've made them. *Resident Evil* was my brother's favourite video game."

That adolescent horror splatter-fest made \$100 million at the box office and saw Jovovich's character save the world wearing nothing but a flimsy red dress.

"I would never have said yes to it, but my brother was like 'Milla, it's the coolest thing ever.'"

Cooler certainly than traipsing around the Premiere Vision trade show outside Paris to research fabrics for the collection. But having turned down several films to concentrate on the collection's production, even this Jovovich did with vim, visiting every stall at the fair.

What's more, Jovovich and Hawk personally oversaw the making of samples in the Ukraine.

Although this was the first time Jovovich had visited

her homeland in 25 years, she has since juggled her film commitments to travel back and forth during the manufacturing of the collection because she was the only one who could speak Russian.

Born in Kiev in 1975, then part of the USSR, Jovovich emigrated with her parents (her mother is the former Soviet actress Galina Loginova and her father, a Serbian pediatrician) to California when she was five. Their hopes of a sunny future in palm-fringed LA were soon dashed when her mother could find work only as a cleaner.

Not one to give up, Galina channelled her ambitions through her daughter, who was forced to attend ballet, tap, acting and piano lessons. By the time she was 11, Jovovich had been shot for the cover of *Mademoiselle* and was the youngest model ever to appear on the front of a women's glossy.

"I'm very against underage modelling. I would never allow my kids to do it. But we were immigrants, we had to work and make it work," says Jovovich, who was also, somewhat shockingly, chosen by Richard Avedon for a shoot of Revlon's Most Unforgettable Women when she was just 12.

"You think you're so grown up, so adults take advantage of you. When I was 13, my mum didn't know about certain things that would go on even though she was with me all the time. I'd say I was going off to get a Coke and I'd be making out with some older guy in a corner."

She has since fronted campaigns for Chanel, Versace, Prada and Calvin Klein and these days is contracted to L'Oreal as one of their spokesmodels: (she's the face of its foundation, *Infallible*). It is a lucrative role.

"You know, I don't need to make any more money," she admits. Having appeared on top of *Forbes'* richest supermodel list in 2004, clearly materialism isn't her motivation. "I have the career of a 45-year-old, so I could totally quit tomorrow. But I wouldn't be happy because I know what I love to do – it's what I did as a little kid before I started working, which is sitting all day and drawing," she says.

"Then my acting and modelling interrupted that but I always hoped I would pick it up at some point."

"My mum always told me 'Don't fall into the trap of expecting your prettiness to open doors and carry you because it's going to be gone like that,'" she says, snapping her fingers.

"I really feel this is the time to establish the rest of my life, with a real job that I don't just love but that's also going to put me behind the camera, so I'm not totally dependent on my physicality."

Still, Jovovich isn't about to throw the baby out with the bath water. Given the amount of pages dedicated to "model's own" style in the likes of *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Grazia* and *Heat*, she is only too aware that basing her own mismatched, vintage-inspired collection on her and Carmen's quirky personal style is a canny move.

But there have been times when her off-kilter dress sense was not always quite so appreciated. Like Leeloo, the character she played in *The Fifth Element*, Jovovich was also regarded as something of an alien when she first arrived in the US speaking only Russian.

"My mum would dress me as a freak. I'd be coming to school in Asian trousers with my hair in crazy ponytails," she hoots. "On top of that, my name was Milla Jovovich. American guys wanted to date Jessica and Jennifer. So I spent a lot of time alone."

Ironically, her idiosyncratic style has earned her countless accolades, not to mention the role of unofficial poster girl of Prada. Over the years Miuccia Prada has created one-off outfits for Jovovich to wear to premieres and regularly sends her clothes parcels and front row tickets to her shows. "Miuccia has been a huge support to Jovovich-Hawk. When I told her I wanted to design she was like 'Of course, darling. You are an artist, you must do that,'" says Jovovich.

That Jovovich is a celebrity in her own right is also unlikely to harm the label. Particularly now that she refuses to be shot in anything other than Jovovich-Hawk when doing publicity. According to Hawk, there are other reasons why Jovovich's supermodel experience makes her integral to the design process.

"Someone like me has no problem going to the Salvation Army and wearing the polyester thing with the itchy lining inside. Whereas Milla has so much more experience of the fashion world and wearing designer clothes. You need someone who has worn the best to know," Hawk says.

"You get girls saying, 'I just want to order everything and I don't want any of it to match'. That's their thing, you know," says Hawk, who is puzzled and excited about some of the buyers' responses to their collection. "Do you know what our thing is, Carmen?" Jovovich fires back immediately. "We don't match at all."

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