

GIVING WOMEN WHAT THEY WANT: BEAUTY AND THE SILBERSTEINS

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ABOUT IT

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Photograph by Jodi Cobb

The Brothers from Another Planet

Dominique and his *frère* Jacques want to become major New York beauty photographers. They may do it, as long as they've got the force.



By Anne M. Russell

On the top step of a ladder a dark, muscular figure crouches over a Nikon F2. The camera is focused on a recumbent model, who in turn seems mesmerized by the powerful voice reverberating overhead. "Feel the wind," he says. "Oh, yes. I love it. You feel good. Very good. Give me your lips, your eyes. Good. Good. Beautiful. Play with the camera. You love it." The photographer begins dancing to Diana Ross's "Eaten Alive," swaying on the ladder and hooting like James Brown.

A second, smaller figure leaps out of the darkness onto the edge of the imaginary beach scene and massages the girl's arms, rearranges her gossamer cover-up, and neatens her hair. The motor drive begins again, and the model twists her body toward the camera. "Now, sideways. That's it. I'm capturing

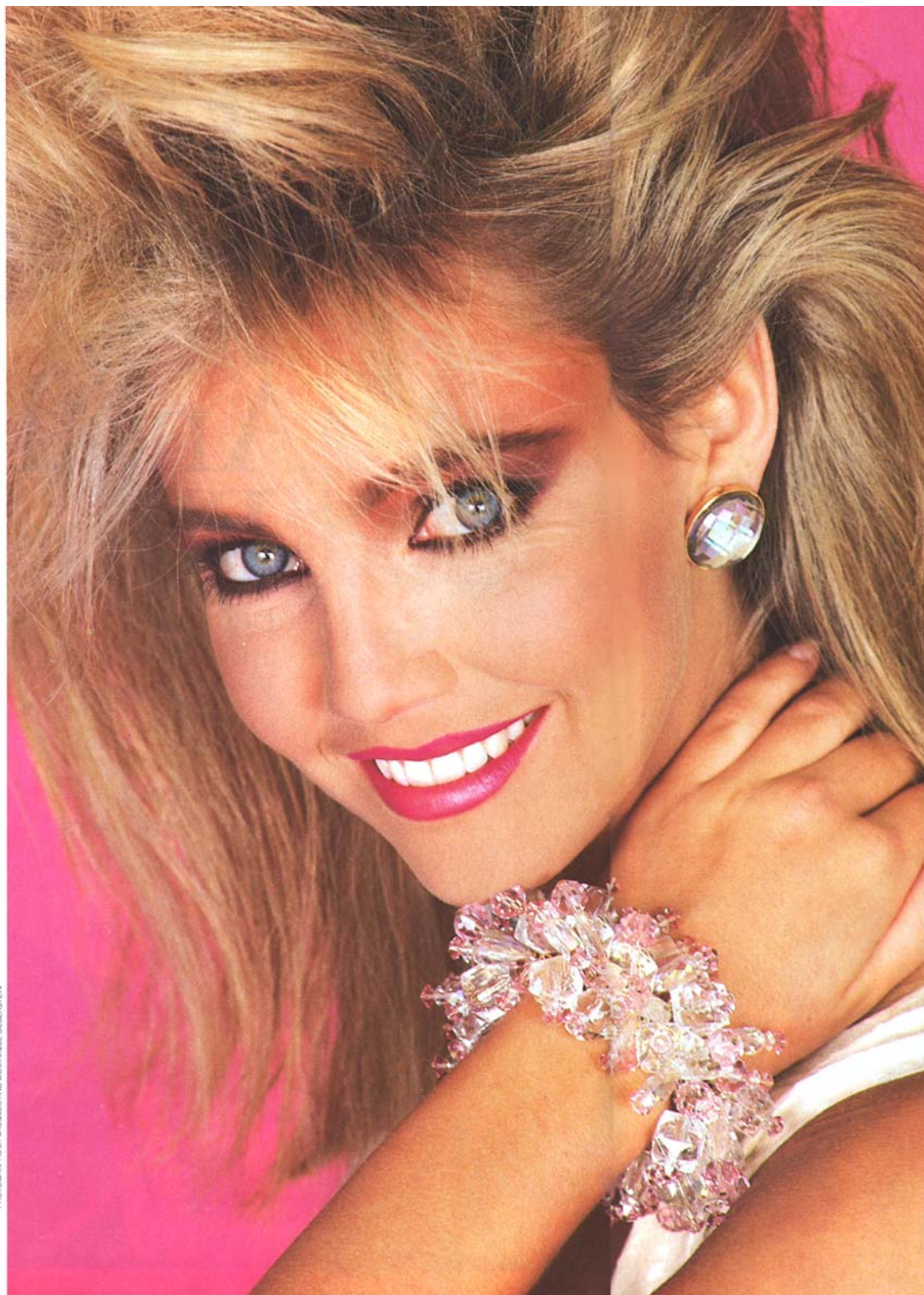
Dominique (left) and Jacques pause to pose in the midst of a shoot.



your beautiful eyes. That's it. Come closer. You're free. Come on. I'm coming to you. Beautiful."

Where are these guys from—another planet? The world hasn't heard such photo babble since the last showing of *Blow-Up*. But Jacques and Dominique Silberstein really do talk that way, and with remarkable result. The two brothers, who moved to New York from France in 1978, have made themselves specialists at photographing model tests. Though their names are not widely known, they have hustled this particular business to an unheard-of level. Their stunningly clean, subtly sexy fashion and beauty photographs have brought them more work from modeling agencies than they can handle. By their estimate they have photos in more than 1,000 models' portfolios, all taken over the last six years. The brothers have also caught the attention of several women's magazines, such as *Woman's Day*, *McCall's*, and *Good Housekeeping*, for which they now work regularly.

Their success can be attributed to any number of factors. Perhaps, after all, it's the constant patter with which they woo their model-subjects into alluring poses, or the syrupy *argot d'amour* that colors their accent. Whatever, the brothers seem to have a remarkable affinity with women, an affinity they employ unselfconsciously, even at the risk of becoming self-parodies of Gallic slickness. Certainly Jacques, 39, and Dominique, 34, have demonstrated a growing mastery of beauty photography. They taught themselves how to use strobes, lights, and cameras by practicing beauty lighting on each other and eventually shooting test photos for aspiring models for only the cost of expenses. But it took more than that to make them a legend among models: It



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JACQUES AND DOMINIQUE SILBERSTEIN

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was their almost supernatural ability to make girls (and women) reinvent themselves for the camera. As Jacques says, “We have the force. Our special way of treating women empowers them.”

What exactly *is* “the force”? In essence it is that old Norman Vincent Peale standby: the power of positive thinking. In the many hours the Silbersteins take to bring out the best in a young woman, they rarely make a negative comment. While most photographers’ instructions to models are spiked with *don’ts*, the Silbersteins offer firm but friendly reinforcement; like behaviorists, they praise a model’s good conduct and attributes and ignore the bad. They make their subjects feel desirable through flattery and attention. Because they work with a sense of playfulness (“Never take yourself seriously” is Jacques’s motto), any sexual undertones the brothers’ lingo or posturing might suggest seem unthreatening.

Linda Cox, art director of *Cosmopolitan*, has worked with the Silbersteins on more than 70 assignments for the magazine. “We’ve sent them all kinds of women over the years,” she recalls, “and they do something incredible for each one. There’s an amazing joy that surrounds the shoots. You might think it’s fake, but in all the time I’ve known them, I’ve never seen them be any way but excited about their work. They make everyone feel very special.”

Ellen Levine, editor of *Woman’s Day*, recently chose the Silbersteins to do her personal portrait. “I wanted to go to someone who would make me feel comfortable,” she explains. “Jacques and Dominique have a very high energy level. A lot of fashion and beauty photographers are very cool, as though they’ve shot one too many beautiful women. But Jacques and Dominique



never seem bored. They make you feel good about yourself.”

The brothers are aware of their Continental allure and strive to cultivate it. “I don’t want to lose my accent,” says Jacques (since he sounds like Billy Crystal imitating Fernando Lamas, that isn’t likely to happen). But mixed in with the sophistication is an unexpected sense of innocence—wonder at their own good luck. Both Jacques and Dominique are obsessed with self-documentation, filling dozens of green-and-white speckled composition books with Polaroid pictures of themselves in such exotic locations as Hawaii, Haiti, and Death Valley. Each photo, featuring one brother and taken by the other, is neatly trimmed and glued into place, with the date and names of their glamorous companions noted in ornate script.

Among the Silberstein memorabilia are also thousands of slides showing them with their subjects, including top models such as Paulina Porizkova and Renee Simonsen, in the studio. More recently, the brothers have begun videotaping their shoots with a small Canon VHS camera. Jacques often answers

Dominique (top left), from the Silbersteins' personal album. TV starlet Heather Locklear (left) got the glamour treatment, while model Linda Evangelist (above right) faced up to the desert sun.



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questions or illustrates points by popping a videotape into the deck.

Though they have hundreds of hours’ worth of tapes, the Silbersteins find them endlessly fascinating. It’s more than vanity on their part. Instead, like athletes watching the tape of yesterday’s game, they study themselves, learning the moves that work. Consider, for instance, the constant patter they use to control their subjects: It is neither accidental nor totally spontaneous, but a carefully practiced component of the Silberstein image. “At first,” says Jacques, “I didn’t want to say certain things. But then I tried it, and it worked.”

The Silbersteins are self-made men in the most literal sense. “Here in the United States,” says Jacques, “you are what you’ve created. It’s a great satisfaction. You can make your own image. And we have.” As two of the four sons of a Russian-born Jewish father and a French Catholic mother, the brothers encountered a certain amount of prejudice in France. “There people would say to us, ‘Your name doesn’t sound French.’ Here, our name is a symbol of equality,” Jacques explains.

When they first arrived in New York, the Silbersteins rented a tiny studio on Tenth Street. Today they have a spa-

acious, sunny, white studio near Gramercy Park, which they’ve named J.D. D’Argentpierre Studios. (*D’Argentpierre*, or “silver stone,” is a literal French translation of their German surname.) The studio has windows on three sides, and the brothers keep it immaculate. “They’re an example to us all,” says Linda Cox ruefully.

At least one of the brothers can be found working there every day, sometimes for their usual commercial day rate of \$2,000, sometimes for an editorial rate of between \$250 and \$500 a page. In addition to the women’s magazines, they occasionally shoot for Hawaiian Tropic suntan products, Christian Dior, and Clairol. They also do videotape casting for French clients reluctant to cross the Atlantic to screen hordes of models personally. “We’re not doing so bad for guys at the beginning of their careers,” observes Dominique.

Jacques, who is taller and dark-eyed, is more extroverted and assertive. He usually wears a white designer T-shirt, crisply pleated chinos, white socks, and elegant black loafers. Blue-eyed Dominique is quieter and, according to Jacques, “moodier.” His clothing combinations reflect a more experimental bent: black ankle boots, plaid pants, and a lavender surfer’s shirt, for example.

Knowing the Slavo-Gallic mix of their blood might make it easy to imagine that Dominique has inherited the Russian reserve, while Jacques got the French *joie de vivre*. But people are rarely explainable in such simple terms, as Jacques inadvertently revealed when Dominique went to Paris to make a promotional videotape for a French cosmetics company, leaving Jacques by himself to teach a one-hour seminar to young models.

The audience at the International Model and Talent Competition in Miami Beach was comprised of model-school students, ages 14 through 22, from all over the South. Although the 200 aspiring models would likely be swept away by the photographer’s good looks and French accent, Jacques fret-



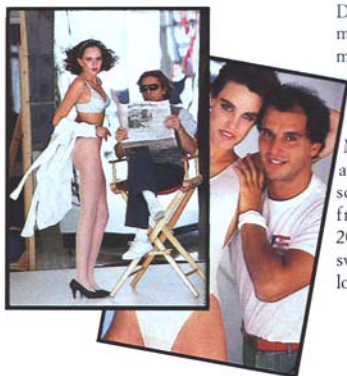
ted constantly about Dominique’s absence, reminding himself that for the last seven years Dominique had shared the stage at IMTC with him. Jacques typed a speech, something he says he’d never done before, and practiced in front of a mirror all morning.

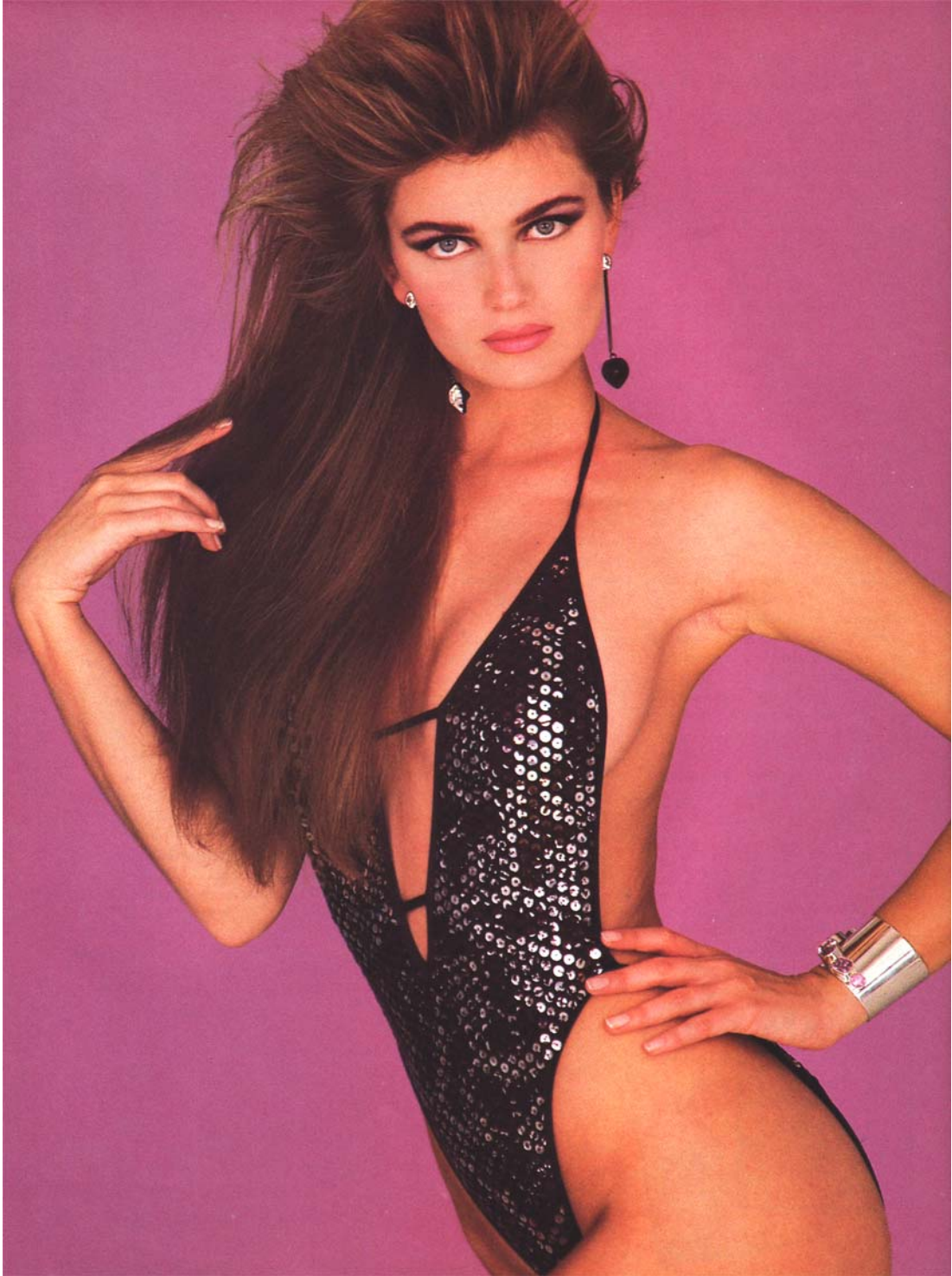
Of course, the model-school conventioners adored him, surging up to the stage as though they’d just spotted Menudo. The girls waved their hands and displayed their badges, hoping Jacques would call them up for his simulated fashion shoot.

Preparing the audience for his demonstration, Jacques explained how he tries to build a “bridge of magic” with his subject. The explanation makes some sense of the antics he and his brother go through in making pictures. “To get this bridge,” he told his rapt audience, “I will have to make you feel comfortable and happy. Of course, the lighting is important, but so is the makeup artist and hair stylist. The magic will come from the chemistry among all these people. You are very important in achieving this result. Capturing beauty is my motivation. I am a very lucky man,” he concluded to appreciative giggles.

But *how* lucky? Being surrounded by a surfeit of beautiful young women 40 or 50 hours a week may be some men’s idea of bliss, but it could be a recipe for disaster for those who lack sufficient

Left: Supermodel Renee Simonsen’s first American test shoot was done by the Silbersteins. Above right: Model Dianne de Witt shares the frame with a fan. Below: More Silberstein album snaps.





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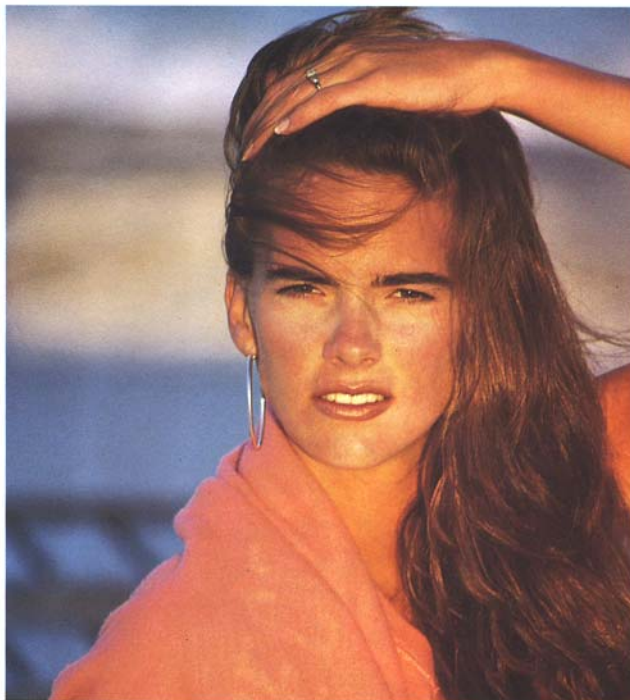
self-discipline. Given the level of flirtation the Silberstein brothers keep up on a professional basis, can they possibly maintain relationships with steady girlfriends? “Dominique and I are really well balanced,” Jacques says. “We never take ourselves seriously to the point that we use what we’re doing as a point of attraction. It’s too easy to exploit the stereotype of the glamour business.” He thinks a few seconds, laughs, and adds, “We don’t need to, anyway.”

Jacques does indeed have a steady girlfriend, Sarah Webb, a dark-eyed Ford model with the Brooke Shields look. She views her boyfriend’s antics with good humor. Watching Jacques enthusiastically kiss and hug the IMTC modeling competition winners as he presented the trophies, she smiled and acknowledged his all-in-good-fun wink.

Dominique also has a relationship with an American model, who is now working in France. Fortunately, he gets enough assignments in Paris to sustain the romance.

The Silbersteins do seem more balanced than their milieu might imply—and more patient. They say they aren’t unhappy about having failed to crack the Condé Nast fortress, publisher of fashion bibles *Vogue*, *Glamour*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Self*. “We haven’t yet connected with some of the major magazines because it’s such a small club,” Jacques acknowledges with a Gallic shrug. “The time is coming for us.”

“It’s coming,” concurs Dominique.



Far left: Paulina Porizkova strikes a pose in the studio for Cosmo’s Super Beauty & Fitness guide. Above: Jacques caught Sarah Webb in Miami’s golden evening light. Below left: The brothers kid around on set.

“There’s no rush. We are hot in one area. Now we have to promote ourselves more.” Because they haven’t done much self-promotion, the Silbersteins remain a mystery in the fashion and beauty business. Some New York photographers recognize the Silberstein credit only from seeing it on models’ composites. The brothers do no advertising, nor do they have a rep to take the portfolio around. Contrasted with the relentless self-promotion of many photographers, the Silbersteins’ methods seem almost cavalier.

Jacques best describes their approach with a fable, a story by La Fontaine. It seems there were two brothers, and their father left them a good bit of land, telling them a treasure lay in the

fields. The one brother wanted his share immediately and began to dig madly. The other brother tended the fields and became rich. Only then did they realize the truth: The treasure *was* the fields.

Whether the Silbersteins ever attain the celebrity so coveted by their peers in photography, they seem more than content, at least for now, to cultivate their own self-made garden. ■

For more on the Silbersteins’ beauty lighting, see page 64.