

The  
INTERVIEW

Unapologetically outspoken, actress **Zoe Saldana** lives a simple, honest life in a world that glitters. Balance meets one of Hollywood's most fearless souls...

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# Prepare TO marvel



**W**hen *Guardians of the Galaxy* was so successful, the cast members were in shock,' says Zoe Saldana, of the superhero smash. 'You know when you really want to win the Lotto and you finally do, you go, "I can't believe it"?'

Zoe, 38, knows all about scooping the jackpot. She's now one of the most in-demand actresses in Hollywood, with a bumper schedule ahead of her. Three sequels to *Avatar* (the James Cameron blockbuster which launched her to stardom) are in pre-production, while a fourth *Star Trek* movie is rumoured to be on the cards. Before that, though, this month she'll be reprising her role as the green-skinned Gamora in the eagerly awaited sequel to *Guardians...*, the first instalment of which grossed a staggering £635million globally in 2014.

'The first one was special because it was different, and working with [director] James Gunn was fantastic,' beams Zoe. 'He's such an animated film-maker and an awesome writer and editor.'

'To come back for a sequel and for it to be just as great was fantastic.'

Some A-listers only want to talk about their latest project and, of course, Zoe talks passionately about the Marvel Studios sequel. But free of any Hollywood aloofness, she is refreshingly straight-talking and open, and soon the professional starts to blend freely into the personal. Talk of her propensity for playing otherworldly action heroines, for example, leads us swiftly on to the subject of her formidable Puerto Rican mother, Asalia.

Unable to afford childcare when she was widowed, Asalia relinquished her jobs as a court translator and hotel maid to raise her children, ploughing all her savings into their private school education. 'I work every day because I know my mum wanted to, and she couldn't,' says Zoe. 'If I couldn't afford care, I would be home with my children: because I make the same decisions for them that my mum did for us.'

## WE ARE FAMILY

Her family is clearly important to Zoe. You only have to look at Cinestar Pictures: the YouTube channel she runs with sisters Cisely and Mariel, which launched last January and is aimed at millennial mums. 'We're trying to find healing answers and solutions, and the good thing about social media is no middle entities can get in the way of us connecting directly with our

followers,' she says, noting that the response is 'very unfiltered: It feels like they're sharing a gift with us. It's the gift of sharing themselves honestly.'

Zoe is known for talking passionately about subjects she feels strongly about – sexism, feminism, politics and inequality, to name a few. So has voicing her opinion ever landed her in trouble?

'Of course! I live in the public eye and culturally we're still battling old stigmas: like "women are just supposed to look pretty and say nice things". The moment a woman shows a very personal interest in an issue, she can quickly become "annoying". And I've been considered that not just by men, but also by other women. So many of us feel imprisoned because of it, especially women in the entertainment

industry. You walk a fine line between saying how you truly feel about something, and saying what people are expecting you to say.

You can go from being the sexiest woman to the biggest bitch in the room.'

**IN THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY, WOMEN WALK A FINE LINE BETWEEN SAYING HOW THEY TRULY FEEL AND WHAT THEY'RE EXPECTED TO SAY**

## RELOCATION BLUES

Zoe hasn't always been so outspoken, though. Raised in Queens, New York, her life changed irrevocably at the age of nine when her father, Aridio, was killed in a car crash and her mother relocated the family to her late husband's homeland, the Dominican Republic. It was here where Zoe discovered her passion for dance, enrolling in the ECOS Espacio de Danza Academy where she studied ballet, jazz and modern Latin.

Less positively, though, Zoe and her sisters were targets for bullies who disapproved of their English tongue.

'It was a very traumatising time for me because I didn't know how to stand up for myself,' she recalls. 'I was never equipped, trained or taught to defend myself. My mother never raised me believing that I was different, so the moment me and my sisters started getting attacked, shock was the first reaction.'

'Bullies can reach a depth within you that may cause irreparable damage. There were years that I felt ashamed of myself, thinking: "I should have f\*\*\*ing known better, I should have always stood up for myself".'

Zoe's experience of being singled out made her 'fearless', but it also strengthened a belief instilled

**THE BIG INTERVIEW**

in her by her mother – to live without prejudice. ‘We’re colour blind, we’re gender blind, we’re everything blind and that’s my approach in life,’ says Zoe. ‘It’s very easy now to identify when people have just a hint of ignorance in there. Now I always speak up. I feel like it’s my duty. I have to.’

**THE ITALIAN WAY**

As we chat, it is less than two weeks since Zoe and her Italian football player-turned-artist husband Marco Perego announced the birth of their third son on Instagram. Ask her if there is a secret to juggling a busy professional life with a happy one at home with three-month-old Zen and her twin boys Cy Aridio and Bowie Ezio (now two and a half), and she hauls her 38-year-old beau into the mix.

‘I’m only doing a part of it. My husband and I are 50/50 in what we call the journey of our lives and I wouldn’t be able to do anything if it wasn’t for his help, his advice, his participation and his support.’ Mention the age-old maternal woe of feeling torn between work and motherhood and Zoe wails in agreement.

‘Oh my god, forever torn! The least you can do is enjoy what you have in front of you. When you’re home, be home and when you’re out working, be out working. If you have to work and be away from your kids then work and be happy.’

Zoe and Marco started dating in March 2013, two months after her 14 month romance with actor Bradley Cooper ended. They married a whirlwind three months later while Zoe was in England filming *Guardians of the Galaxy*.

‘We’re not big planners, and all of my family were visiting for a month from the States,’ she says. ‘His family was in Italy, so the trip was going to be very quick. We wanted something small. We got married outside of London, close to Bath. England is so f\*\*\*ing beautiful, we love it.’

In a reversal of tradition, Marco asked to share Zoe’s surname, becoming Marco Perego-Saldana. And there’s no question that the couple’s relationship is a balanced one. ‘He complements my life and I complement his,’ she smiles. ‘I feel so safe now, and that’s something that I didn’t have for a very long time as an adult, and also as a child. Feeling safe in my personal life gives me such freedom

**I BELIEVE THAT WHAT I EAT IS BETTER MEDICINE THAN ANYTHING THAT CAN BE PRESCRIBED. I DON'T DO DIETS, I DO LIFESTYLE**

to just be who I am, and try great things and take amazing risks.’

**MINDFUL OF THE FUTURE**

One of Zoe’s latest endeavours is meditation, which, she jokes, has ‘rubbed off’ from Marco, who has been practising mindfulness for years. ‘It’s not easy for me because I’m easily distracted, and I have so many things on my mind all the time,’ she admits. ‘I’m recognising that the only way to maintain sanity is to try and live a healthy life, and healthy means not just eating

right. It’s also the kind of information you put into your mind, your heart, your spirit.’

In return, Zoe is guiding Marco towards choosing a more nutritious diet. ‘He’s very Italian, so he likes to eat in a very beautiful way. It’s always beautiful and never healthy!’ she laughs. Zoe developed a genetic autoimmune disease called Hashimoto’s thyroiditis when she was little, and so eats no gluten or sugar, which she warns are so ‘harmful’ to her they can cause ‘emotional dysfunction’.

‘Things that have a lot of preservatives and chemicals would make me feel unwell, so I got used to listening to my body a lot. I believe that what I eat is better medicine than anything that can be prescribed. I’m not a cheater. I don’t eat healthy from Monday to Friday then go crazy at the weekend. What good does that do? I don’t do diets,

PHOTOGRAPHY: MICHAEL FRIBERG/CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES AND CHRISTOPHER BEYER/CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES



**BALANCE'S FORMULA FOR SUPERHEROES**



I do lifestyle.’ To encourage her family to follow suit, Zoe has been getting busy with a bread maker, a Christmas present from Marco.

‘I love it,’ she smiles. ‘I want to master making delicious bread that’s gluten free because I’m raising kids and kids need sandwiches, and my husband is Italian and likes to eat pizza. This is my lifestyle, our lifestyle, and I’m going to find ways to make it fun,’ she says.

Her drive is admirable, but Zoe is a typical Gemini: ‘I live my life, I do what I feel like,’ she says, which explains why, unlike so many celebrities, she’s not a slave to the gym. ‘I enjoy staying active but I don’t work out Monday-Friday. It’s important that the body always gets some kind of exercise, but I don’t need to work out to stay sane.’

**TALKING IT OUT**

Given the traumatic nature of Zoe’s childhood – losing her father so tragically; her struggles in school in the Dominican Republic, before returning to New York at 15 – it’s no surprise to hear that Zoe’s had regular therapy over the years.

‘Therapy? F\*\*\*, yes,’ she says. ‘Whenever I’ve found myself in a rut, and tried bouncing ideas off people close to me, and nobody gave me a good reference for what I should be doing, the best thing was to call my therapist. Seeking someone that is a professional is much better than venting with a friend who’s probably going to misguide you, or a mother who’ll always be biased because she loves you. Besides, in life if we’re not growing, we’re dying.’

There is an enviable harmony about Zoe’s approach to life, so was her most recent choice of baby name, Zen, a nod to her calm state of mind?

‘We’re always aiming to live a life in a very zen state,’ she smiles. ‘We chose the name while brushing our teeth. That’s how we choose all our names!’

As for what’s next, film fans will be thrilled to know there’s more to come from Gamora and the gang, with the much-loved Guardians joining forces with other Marvel superheroes for *Avengers: Infinity War*, out in 2018. And Zoe teases: ‘So far, because it’s such a huge cast and the plots are so big and dense, I don’t think that a lot of characters are going to get the opportunity to meet.’

‘I just appreciate the fact that I was working with the Guardians. That’s as much as I can say!’

And what about future movies? Surely that’s easy, especially when there are rumoured plans in motion for a fourth *Star Trek*? ‘Nobody’s called me. I hope they do!’ she hoots, diligently holding any secret plans close to her chest. Where’s that famously outspoken Zoe, when you need her? **B**

*Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* is in cinemas nationwide from 28 April.



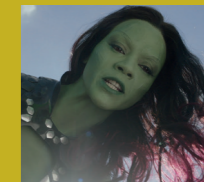
**GODDESS of the big screen**



**AVATAR, 2009**  
The box-office smash that catapulted Zoe to global fame. Her charisma is palpable as fearless warrior Neytiri.



**STAR TREK, 2009**  
Another franchise hit, Zoe has chalked up three appearances (and counting) as whip-smart Uhura. She imbues the role with quiet determination.



**GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY, 2014**  
One of the truly great superhero films, with a sequel on the way, Zoe kicks serious backside (repeatedly) as assassin Gamora.



**NINA, 2016**  
Further proof that Zoe is one of the most versatile actresses working today, she is on sparkling and heartbreaking form as legendary soul singer Nina Simone.