



Presenting Paula

Colombian star has her Hollywood coming-out party

By CELIA SAN MIGUEL

THIRTY-YEAR-OLD Colombian-American actress Paula Garces, star of the upcoming flick "Spin," has such a care-free, confident attitude that she's earned comparisons to the perennially bubbly Cameron Diaz.

It's an ironic parallel given the differences in their lifestyles — while giggle-prone Cameron was canoodling with the likes of Justin Timberlake, Paula was in Queens, caring for her daughter Skye, 12.

And while Ms. Diaz struggles to dodge paparazzi, Paula can pitch in at From Earth To You, the Chelsea-based café she co-owns with her husband, Antonio Hernandez,

without celebrity gawkers running amok.

Not that this juggling act is new to the Spanish Harlem-raised beauty and star of this year's critically acclaimed pot-head parody "Harold and Kumar Go To White Castle." A single mom at eighteen, Paula strove to kick-start her acting career and still maintain a loving home for her child.

"I had a lot of help," she says humbly. "Whenever I got a job, my mom would travel with me [and bring Skye along]."

In 1995, she took her first family trip to Hollywood after being cast as an underprivileged student in "Dangerous Minds."

Since then, she has completed a two-year stint on "Guiding Light," scored roles in films like "Clockstoppers" and "Marci X" and enrolled Skye in dance classes.

And "Sopranos" fans probably remember her as Felicia Galán, the sultry Puerto Rican secretary who caught the eye of Finn, Meadow's boyfriend, at the construction site where he worked.

This month, she will star opposite Stanley Tucci and Rubén Blades in the coming-of-age drama "Spin." As Francesca, a girl from a physically abusive family, Paula exhibits a darker and more vulnerable side.

"There are actors that can fake really well — they'll be laughing and two seconds later, they're bawling," she says. But I really have to feel that [pain], so I had to think of the saddest things that have happened to me [in order to] reach that place."

Having experienced a fair dosage of trauma for the role, she's now ready for some lighter fare. This spring, she'll star as a South Beach sorority girl opposite Paris Hilton in the comedy "Pledge This!"

So what was it like working with the notorious heiress?

"She was really friendly," she says. "I expected something totally different, and it taught me that I shouldn't make up my mind about people before meeting them."

"Spin" opens October 15th.



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