



Michael

Straight Shooter

Zeppetello

BY JILL JOHNSON — “Excuse the entropy; I’ve been partying for four days,” explained Michael Zeppetello, as he sank into the couch in the Tear Sheet office.

Actually this is probably the best state in which to catch an interviewee. Numb from a string of Christmas cocktail parties and luncheons, Michael was relaxed and ready to provide straight-up answers about his experiences zooming in on the world’s most luscious lingerie models—a job perk which he views rather nonchalantly. He didn’t get into the business to pick up hot models, and the only drooling being done around his photos is that of most male *Maxim* readers.

Actually, Michael claims that his career behind the lens saved him from a sojourn behind bars. I say the guy may claim to be an intoxicated, almost ex-convict, but the reality is that—in addition to being incredibly talented—he is as affable as they come.

JJ: You’re a fellow Upstate New York native, right? I’m from Rochester. You’re from Syracuse?

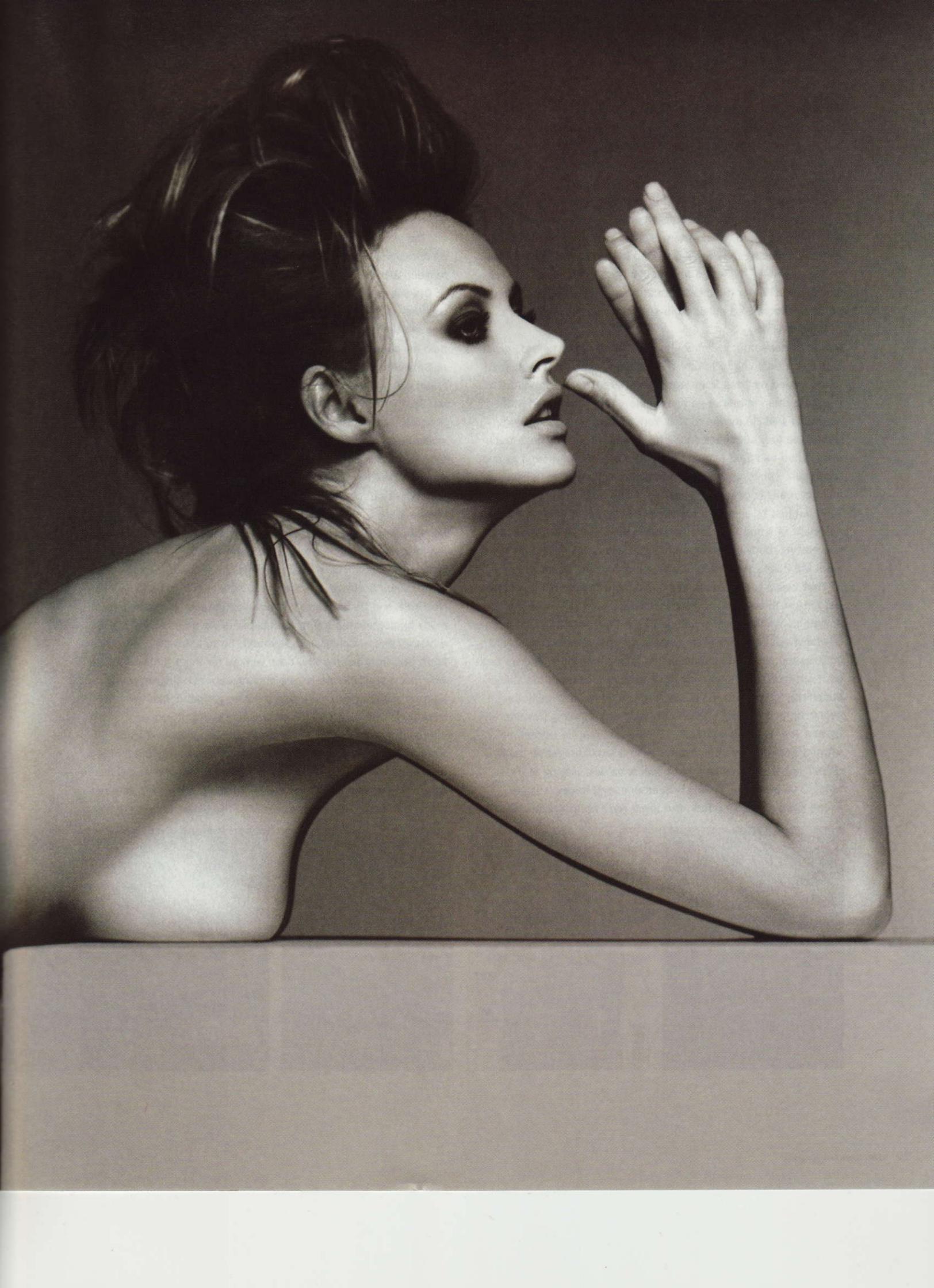
mz: Born and raised until I was 21.

JJ: Was photography your way to escape from frigid Syracuse and come to the Big Apple?

mz: Photography was my way to escape 1 to 15 years in jail.

JJ: Really? (He’s serious, but he told me the story off the record so I can’t reveal the

PHOTOGRAPHER: Michael Zeppetello **HAIR:** Patrick Melville
MAKEUP: Linda Hay for The Agency **MODEL:** Magdalena, Next



details of what might be on his record....)

MZ: ...I got into photography when I was about 12. [Then in high school] my guidance counselor advised that I pursue photography for therapeutic reasons, and I was interested too. I took pictures for the yearbook. Then I wanted to study photography at a school in California—Brooks Institute of Photography—but I kept putting it off. After high school I became a deejay in a discothèque during the heyday of disco. Then, after a couple years of that [and after narrowly escaping the aforementioned jail sentence], my father put on the pressure—either go to school or get a job. I had a choice between Rochester (Rochester Institute of Technology) and Santa Barbara (Brooks), so I chose the sun.

JJ: Wise decision

MZ: So I headed out to school [in 1979] and a year before I graduated I started going to L.A. to test models from Wilhelmina. We'd have xeroxed pictures from *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* and try to duplicate them in a little garage studio. After I graduated [with honors in 1982] I moved to New York to become an assistant. During the first summer I ended up driving a truck—a huge truck which I lied and said I could drive. I drove furniture around to photographers shooting commercials. By November, after freelancing and not really finding what I wanted, I was ready to leave New York, but just by chance I ran into a photographer who was the assistant of Irving Penn. He had been there for seven years and was getting ready to go out on his own. He arranged for me to meet Mr. Penn...[who then] asked me to join the team.

JJ: That was a lucky break. For how long were you his assistant?

MZ: Almost three years. During that time I lived with Avedon's assistant. We took over a loft space, at 109 West 26th actually (a few buildings away from Tear Sheet). We renovated it, cheaply of course, and used it to shoot photos for our portfolios and we rented it out to other photographers. Eventually I became the cheap substitute for clients who couldn't afford Penn. And really the beginning of my being where I am today was meeting [fashion stylist and *Tear Sheet* Photo Editor] Fred Bernstein; he helped me with my book and got me involved with a small magazine called *Island* magazine. This was when Madonna was playing at the Mudd Club and Keith Haring was around, and it was a whole scene going on in New York. But there were no magazines then

except *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue*. *Allure* didn't exist, *Elle* didn't exist, *W* didn't exist. The editorial opportunities were in Europe—Milan specifically and Paris, which was a bit more difficult but not impossible.... So when it was time to go out on my own I went to Milan for a bit and then Paris.

JJ: How long were you in Paris?

MZ: Nine years, most of which I didn't come back here and work at all. The whole center of the fashion business was still there, with predominantly American models, American stylists, American makeup artists.

JJ: Did you pay your dues in Paris?

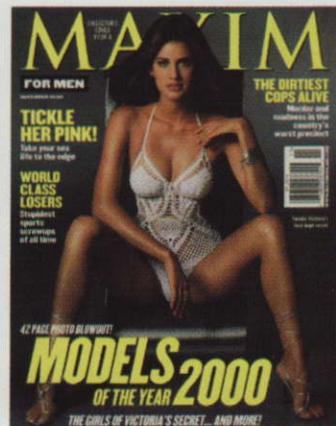
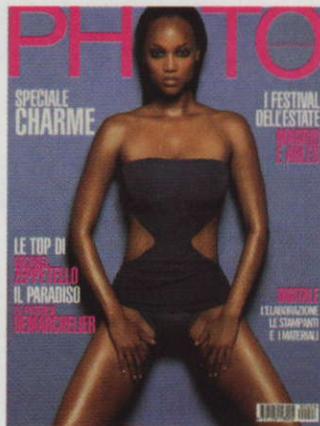
MZ: Well, by the middle of '89 I was down to my last \$50. But I was starting to get some work, and by '90 I was working, slowly. I paid my dues for sure.

JJ: So would you say it takes a decade for a photographer to really get established?

MZ: For me it did. I went to school in '79, assisted from '82 to '85, really started working decently '91, '92. I don't know what would have happened if I had never gone to Paris, because by the time I got back things had already changed and some of the opportunities had been taken up by people who had stayed here. But, I have no regrets. I lived in France, Italy, Australia, and I travelled a lot.

JJ: What would you tell an aspiring photographer now—is schooling important? is going to Europe important?

MZ: Now you're going to hear my cynicism. (Pause...) I think there are no rules anymore. You can go to school and you can come to New York and try to assist a good photographer, but there aren't many photographers left of the caliber of say Penn or Avedon with a history and a technical background. So to learn that, you have to learn that from people who have worked for them. I have a friend who has a portfolio but knows nothing about photography. He knows the right people, he has a model girlfriend, and he's successful. It just depends. It's a transitory world. If you want to be a photographer for a little while, it's probably not that difficult. If you want to be a photographer for your whole life, it wouldn't be a bad idea to go to school and to try and assist somebody. At my level, it's not about whether I have the ability to take the picture—my ability and talent is, I'm sure, equal to the bigger known stars out



there—but, it's about getting the job. It's always been political, even 30 years ago. It's a bitchy business.

JJ: Who are your major clients now?

MZ: This year: Victoria's Secret, Wonderbra, Perrier Jouet champagne, Oil of Olay, Procter and Gamble, L'Oréal, *Maxim* magazine, French *Photo*, a lot of international issues of *GQ*, and a lot of my pictures get sold all over the world because of the supermodel stature of the photography.

JJ: I noticed you don't have tear sheets in your book. Why is that?

MZ: Just as of this year, my agent and I decided we wanted to make a presentation which was more than just a bunch of images of girls in underwear and was more about the photo than just about what's been published. That [the underwear shots] is only something that I've been doing for the last 18 months. I've predominantly been a beauty photographer.

JJ: It's funny to hear you talk about all this work shooting supermodels in lingerie. To most men this would be a dream job, but you sound pretty blasé about it. Is it a dream job?

MZ: It's a great life, photography. I wouldn't want to do anything else.

JJ: And shooting all those models in lingerie...

MZ: Well, people want to hear that it's glamorous and that it's a lot of fun. It is a lot of fun, but it's also hard work that requires a lot of concentration, energy, and thought. People often think that I'm not interested when I'm working, but I'm just very focused.

JJ: So what we see when it's printed is a half-naked gorgeous supermodel, but that's really not what you're seeing when you're shooting.

MZ: Yeah, well, I have fantasies...but they certainly aren't publishable. No, really, they're all nice girls. They all make way too much money. What I really want to emphasize about photography, what's great about it, is I can go from lingerie back to beauty or portraiture. If I decide I want to try landscape photography, I have the skills and contacts, I could do that. And I'll never know it all; every day I learn something new. But everything gets boring if you repeat it too much. I could come back to shooting lingerie in a newer evolution after doing something different for a while, but at the moment it's getting a bit repetitive.

JJ: If you could shoot anybody, who would be your dream subject?

MZ: Probably Claudia Cardinale, or Sophia Loren, or Grace Kelly.

JJ: When we were doing the cover shoot, you made a comment about being "done dating models"; so you've dated some models?

MZ: I dated some models, I guess because they came to me. I never really pursued models. I like models, but at this point, there's too much of an age difference.

JJ: Boy is that refreshing to hear!

MZ: Time is precious, you know.

JJ: Are you in a relationship?

MZ: No.

JJ: Are you looking for someone? Do you want to have a family?

MZ: I would like to, but I don't want to go out with models, and I don't really want to go out with anyone else in the business—makeup artists or hairdressers or stylists—and the women I meet who aren't in the business have a really hard time dealing with what I do. It will have to take a woman who is pretty damn confident in her own thing to let me do what I do. And the field is limited. I'm in love with all my friends' girlfriends and wives—the lucky ones that found the good ones.... I love women.

JJ: Well, dating aside, do you have a favorite stylist?

MZ: Lysa Cooper is great and Eric Orlando.

JJ: What's more important: hair or makeup?

MZ: Hair, because there are few good hairdressers. Makeup is more about painting; it stays. Hair is like sculpting. Hair lives in a way; it moves throughout the shoot. The best picture occurs in an evolution of the hair, and with a great hairdresser, like Patrick Melville or John Sahag, the photographer doesn't need to communicate what he wants—just a hand gesture and the hairdresser knows.

JJ: What was the best piece of advice you were given regarding photography?

MZ: I learned the most from a painter who said, "It's all about the control of the details in the shadows." It's all about light to me. My background—technical aspects—became very important to me.

JJ: What type of camera do you use?

MZ: Hasselblad.

JJ: Film?

MZ: Ektachrome

JJ: What is your favorite photo?

MZ: Oh, I don't know.... The best pictures sort of happen by accident, like the picture of Magdalena (see p. 19). It was the end of the shoot, she was tired, and that's when I got that shot.

JJ: So many photographers are doing books. Will you do one?

MZ: Maybe when I have a couple dozen photos I'm proud of.

JJ: You're book has a few dozen photos you should be proud of. You're too humble! Any final advice for photographers/aspiring photographers?

MZ: Established photographers need to take more chances and not be so safe. For aspiring photographers: If you have passion, do it.

