

Agent Provocateur

He used to campaign on behalf of the Yanomami Indians, until he found he could make more money looking after Caprice, Stacey and Gabrielle.

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At 4pm on a Wednesday in a modern office in Wandsworth, south London, there is nothing left to do but call Caprice, the blonde model. 'Hi it's me!' says her PR manager Ghislain Pascal. 'How are you? You sound out of breath. Um, a couple of things... You know the phone thing I was talking about? There's a meeting next week with the company. They've been looking at pictures of you - the famous Maxim cover, obviously, with the tape across the boobs, and the other one that's at the top of my stairs, the one used in the Ilford calendar...' (Caprice is about to have her breasts featured on the fascia of a cellphone.)

'And FHM is out - it looks amazing, some of your best pictures. Not the cover so much, but the inside pictures are nice. The cover's not as nice - they've put in a fake background, put in a fake beach and all that kind of stuff. The inside pictures are full length, head to knee, a blue-and-white bikini with your hair hanging over your boobs. It looks great, but they've put in a fake beach!' (The top-selling men's 'style' magazine FHM has Caprice and five of her friends on the front of its November issue, accompanied by the cover-line: 'Six ladies, one island, and five square inches of cloth'. Except there was no island.)

'And I spoke to Maxim today, so we're just sorting out what's happening for the January 2002 cover - they're going to come back to me. And that's about the size of it. No, I'm chasing the show, but nothing's happened. There are only so many phone calls I'm going to make. There's no point flying around the world at great expense.' (Caprice has been lined up to present a TV show about celebrity sex symbols.)

Ghislain Pascal talks to Caprice twice a day when she's in LA, and more when she's in London. He also spends many hours each day talking to, or on behalf of, his other clients: Tamara Beckwith (LA party correspondent of OK! magazine); Stacey Young (model, sometime television presenter, married to pop singer Paul); Amanda Stretton (car and bike fan, television presenter, 'the new Murray Walker'); Jacqueline Gold (pouting head of the Ann Summers sex shop and Knickerbox chains); Shebah Ronay (broadcaster, film critic for the News of the World, granddaughter of Egon); and some bloke called Ed Sanders. 'I look after the beautiful people,' he told me on the way back from a film set where Caprice had been advertising pizza. 'I increase their profile, I help them earn money, and that's how I make my money.'

Pascal is 29 and he takes 20 per cent. He says he would like to take 50 per cent. In return for his cut he provides a uniquely modern service - career guidance, public relations, brand development, product placement - operating a tiny but effective management and publicity company called Panic that exists to put his clients into magazines and catalogues and cable shows, and make them feel like permanent fixtures in a shifting world. He used to work in the charity sector, but now that he works in the amiable fluffhead sector he likes it much more.

Refreshingly for a man who works in an industry infested with charlatans and sleazeballs, Pascal is a thoroughly likeable individual, and as soon as you learn to pronounce his first name - Gee-La is his preference - this slight figure will guide you through his unnatural but alluring world with generosity and skill. He may go further: in his everyday combination of combat trousers, Duffer T-shirt and pierced eyebrow, he may make you believe that the creation and maintenance of celebrity is an easy thing to do.

His most recent charge is a 26-year-old from Kent called Gabrielle Richens. Barely known in this country before last summer, she is now a favourite with the popular newspapers and a big-selling clothes chain. 'She's six weeks old,' Pascal told me when first describing her, 'and already she's well on her way.' This translates as: 'She's been with Panic for six weeks, and men's magazines are calling up asking her to take her clothes off.'

This sort of career opportunity doesn't just come about by chance. It began last year when Pascal rang up for tickets to the premiere of Mel Smith's film *High Heels and Low Lives*, which was no problem once he'd said that he was 'bringing a new girl along'. The film turned out to be poor, but none of Pascal's people go to a premiere to see the movie.

'We had tickets to drive into Leicester Square,' Pascal explains, 'which is great because you don't just get dropped off at the corner and have to walk in with all the people. We got the chauffeured car, the Mercedes with blacked-out windows, so the photographers can't see who you are until you get out of the car. I'd spoken to the *Daily Star* and a few of the freelance photographers in advance - the Dave Bennetts, the Richard Youngs - and I'd told them I was bringing Gabrielle Richens. So when we stepped out the car it was all, 'Gaby, Gaby!' this way and that way. She poses, does both sides, and then walks in. It was just her and me, and when we get there I stand back so that I'm not in the shots.'

The result was a little disappointing - just a small picture in *Hello!* - but there were reasons for this. 'It's all about the dress. It wasn't 100 per cent - it wasn't a showstopper. Also, she was incredibly nervous, as she'd never really done the premiere thing before.'

But she would soon get used to them. 'I took her to The Parole Officer. We'd gone out on the day to look for a dress, and we got the dress that was going to do it. It's obvious that a dress can launch a career - before Liz Hurley wore that Versace

dress she was just Hugh Grant's girlfriend. And that Versace dress that Caprice wore to the National Television Awards went down in history.'

For Gabrielle's second appearance in Leicester Square, Pascal took her to the designer Jenny Packham's studio. 'It was something that showed her off nicely,' he says. 'It wasn't OTT and it wasn't under TT.' Richens felt so exposed in it that she changed back into her own clothes in the car on the way to the party. But by then the job was already done: the next day she was on the front page of *The Star*.

Gabrielle Richens did in fact have a bit of history. A model with the Elite agency since her mid-teens, she scored regular catalogue assignments before departing for television work in Australia. There, she became involved with New Zealand-born rugby star Solomon Haumono, who helped raise her profile further by interrupting his rugby season to be with her. She returned to England when the relationship ended, and not long afterwards Ghislain Pascal got a call from his friend Bob Carlos Clarke, a man famous for his Levi's and Smirnoff advertising campaigns and erotic photography.

'Bob was forever ringing me up and saying, "You've got to see this gorgeous girl!"' he remembers. 'And I'm like, "Bob, I'm not a model agent, I'm a management company. They've got to have more skill than just being a pretty girl.'"

But he eventually agreed to meet her for lunch near his office when they chatted about her ambition to become a television star. 'The reason I took her on is, one, because she's incredibly beautiful - unusually beautiful because she's got her father's Cape South African looks, that dark skin, a bit of Chinese, and very voluptuous big lips. She looks like a young Raquel Welch. Most beautiful women in England are not like that. And, second, because I looked at her show reel and it was very good. Believe me, I've seen some duds in my time.' It also helped that she was already in a Channel 5 programme called *Desert Forges*, a show she presented with Richard Fairbrass from *Right Said Fred*. Pascal describes this as 'the sister show of *Fort Boyard* with Melinda Messenger, but it's set in the Jordanian desert. It's about teams of people competing under extreme conditions.'

After their lunch, Pascal got postcards made up with Richens's picture on them and sent them to 2,000 of his closest media contacts (his database contains 3,500). As a result, he got three phone calls from people saying they'd like to have a closer look at her. He also got a thumbs-up from the editor of *Maxim*, an old friend of his, for a photo shoot, and a man from *The Daily Star* wanted to know whether any more pictures were available.

The third premiere he took her to was *A Knight's Tale* - a very deliberate choice. 'You have to pick the premieres very carefully. I didn't take her to *Planet of the Apes* because there you'd be up against Winona Ryder and Helena Bonham Carter, and with *Moulin Rouge* she would have been up against Nicole Kidman and Ewan McGregor, so you may as well stay at home.'

Basically, the rule is to pick films that are crap. For *A Knight's Tale*, Richens put on a red dress loaned from designer Maria Grachvogel. She didn't really want to wear it, preferring something of her own. But her manager said, 'Trust me.'

I once asked Caprice what Pascal was really like. 'Like me,' she replied. 'Ambitious and aggressive.'

'He's very hungry still,' Tamara Beckwith says. 'Not a lot of fat on him. He's not into long waffly lunches like a lot of people. He can be incredibly blunt and he can lack charm. But he's a real softy underneath, though he likes to portray himself as quite hard.'

'He's very straight,' Bob Carlos Clarke said. 'Any boy or girl who's good-looking in this town is like a carcass to predators. There are a lot of people who will just pick your bones and use you up, but Ghislain will always see your career as long-term. With Gaby he's done exactly what I thought he would do - focus her.'

Pascal grew up in Tooting, south London. His parents divorced when he was two, his French father working as a fashion photographer in the United States until he died in a car crash four years ago. Pascal went to public school and the London School of Economics, after which his long-term interest in green issues led to a job for a year with Survival International. Then, he decided his future lay elsewhere - 'Basically I wanted to make some proper money.' He got a job as a junior account executive at Freud Communications, where his clients included Planet Hollywood, but left after three weeks because he didn't like being told what to do. Luckily for him it was *It Girl* season; Tamara Beckwith's life was chaotic, and she needed someone to massage and protect her profile. Pascal founded Panic in 1996.

He works from his own house in Wandsworth, his office on the ground floor, sandwiched between the bedrooms below and the lounge above. His mother visits once a week to do his books. Each weekday he is joined by his assistant Jack Kennedy, who joined Panic last August fresh from university. 'Jack is my shadow,' Pascal says. 'I chose him from 500 replies to an advert in *The Guardian*. I didn't want anyone with experience - I wanted to mould him.' Pascal's last employee, Jez Felwick, left after four years to set up business on his own, taking one of Panic's clients, Rachel Brady, with him.

Recently, Pascal has made an addition to his roster of beautiful people by forming a second company called Pitch, which looks after five members of England's rugby team, boxing champion Stephen Smith and yachtswoman Tracy Edwards. He runs this, also from his home, with Henry Chappell - another ex-Freud man - and their assistant Victoria Fuller. It's a modern set-up: a celebrity PR company that looks after all matters concerning its sports clients, except sport itself.

As with his more glamorous clients, Pascal is discovering that what the outside world really wants of his new sports clients is to see them naked. He is mostly

happy to oblige. One of the first opportunities for nudity occurred last autumn when three of his international rugby players - Phil Greening, Paul Sampson and Joe Worsley - turned up at a studio near Old Street, in east London, to pose for the magazine Attitude.

Pascal recalls, 'I read Attitude all the time, and I knew their naked issue was coming up, so I called them and said, "Do you want three naked English rugby players?" They said yes right away and I explained it was in the players' contracts that they won't show their genitals.'

The three players arrived in high spirits, discussing how a rugby ball would cover their groins, and they stripped down to towels.

Then the players' sponsorship manager, a man called Dipo Alli, came out of their dressing room with a bemused frown. 'They say they had no idea that Attitude was a gay magazine,' he told Pascal.

'Rubbish,' Pascal said.

'I told them it wasn't a gay magazine,' Alli continued, 'just a style magazine with a lot of gay readers.'

'I've got a copy here,' Pascal said as he pulled the latest edition from his bag. 'Just don't let them see the adverts in the back.'

Then the players emerged from the dressing room and were swiftly alive to the photographer's pleas: 'Just twist your arm that way, turn your shoulder in, back to me. Phil, you've gone too tall again. Perfect, excellent.'

Then Pascal's boxer, Stephen Smith, turned up for the same treatment - again totally nude apart from his genitals, which are covered by his gloves.

'It's just a big game, isn't it?,' Pascal says, as we sit down at a local gastro-pub. He's driven me there in the vintage silver Porsche he bought for £15,000. 'I'm not sure anyone understands that. The concept that most things you read about in a newspaper or a magazine have been placed there by a PR is just incomprehensible to people. But 75 per cent of a tabloid newspaper is like that. Perhaps more - perhaps 90 per cent.'

I say I'm not sure that this is quite true.

'You see!' he says. 'Proves my point. And half of those placed stories are made up by people desperate for PR.' Pascal, by contrast, is very keen to stress that he himself has never made up a story in his life, partly because he fears the consequences of being found out and partly because the world in which he first began operating five years ago ensured that this was no longer necessary. 'In the past, all the outlets were negative and usually when a celebrity appeared in the press it was to do with a scandal. But since I've been around, the way celebrities

have been able to present themselves has totally changed. With Hello! and OK! they do great photo shoots, pay you and never write anything nasty. And then there are all the men's mags that have emerged - such as FHM and Maxim. They changed the whole climate and made it much easier for me because they constantly want new faces.'

Pascal says there are two particular skills to his job. The first is to raise his clients' media profile to the point where they get approached for big money endorsements. The second is 'to make sure people don't get bored with the girls' - that fine line between under- and over-exposure. He says he's always having arguments with Caprice about that.

I ask him whether he doesn't feel that his life is a little empty. 'Well, I certainly haven't achieved anything,' he says. 'But I really like the people I work with, I've found a niche and I enjoy it. The one thing that I lack in my job is that I don't use my brain. It's not exactly an intellectual job - I don't debate anything.'

Back at Pascal's office, things are slowly picking up again after the terrorist attacks on America. The first two weeks were very slow and all the Fashion Week parties were cancelled. 'The first thing to go in times of recession and crisis is always the PR budget,' Pascal says, 'although in times of war the tabloids need celebrities more than ever.'

There are calls and emails to return. He phones Gabrielle Richens. 'A few people have called about you seeing Eric Cantona? Something about beach soccer? Rubbish? He's married, as you say.'

He turns to me: 'It's rubbish.'

Random House calls, asking how many invites to print for the launch of the Ann Summers Little Book of Sex at a shop in Oxford Street. The answer is 300. Pascal tells Random House that Jacqueline Gold is no longer required to plug the book on the Lorraine Kelly show, as they're doing a breast cancer awareness special instead.

Tracy Edwards calls up to chase some money and discuss her next round-the-world attempt. Someone else rings about the health of Joe Worsley, the star No 8 rugby player who had his scrotum ripped off in a ruck during a game against Harlequins.

Then photographer Bob Carlos Clarke phones. 'Hi, Bob!' Pascal says. 'Simon Garfield from The Observer is here and he's thinking of calling you seedy... You're happy with that? I was trying to persuade him against it.'

Bob Carlos Clarke is holding forth in a bar-restaurant called The White House in Clapham Park Road. Gabrielle Richens is with him, in leopard-skin underwear, on a large brown couch. He is saying, 'Good, good, good Gaby, lovely, a little

more, give me the look, that's it. OK, let's break for lunch.'

'What the magazines require these days is not art,' he says over sweet-and-sour chicken. 'It's just some sexy pictures of a sultry girl, a formula from which they rarely digress. If you're a guy at Kwik-Fit who does exhaust pipes, there's no point getting clever and imaginative with exhausts, because they won't work. It's the same with what I do - there's no point doing strange lighting or funny props, because they won't run it.'

The client today is Front magazine, a sort of FHM for Kleenex-carrying mid-teens. 'Ideally, for the best pictures, I'd need to live with Gaby for three years,' Carlos Clarke says. 'Or maybe three months would be enough, and really get inside her - both literally and metaphorically. That's the way to take great erotic photographs. It's a great shame to my mind that Naomi Campbell has never lived with a photographer - that's why Naomi's photos are all surface and no depth.'

Carlos Clarke has been taking photographs of Richens since she was 15. 'I thought she was amazingly attractive, a combination of all the things I like best - Sophia Loren, Brigitte Bardot, Claudia Cardinale and a barmaid all rolled into one. She was also fantastically lazy, like a big chinchilla. But great to be with - I'm bored with models who won't eat because they're going to get fat or won't laugh because they're going to get wrinkled. I've seen a lot of miserable, scared girls. But Gaby can eat like a horse sometimes - just enjoying herself.'

I ask Richens what she thinks about when posing for Bob in loaned underwear. 'Sometimes I'm just falling asleep,' she says. 'But basically it's all about just keeping your profile up so that it leads to other jobs, ideally in television. Hopefully to jobs where they pay me to keep my clothes on. Normally, I insist on other items of clothing as well as underwear, but Ghislain said that this whole thing was going to be underwear and I said, "OK, I'm happy with my body."'

As she's talking, Pascal mentions that he's got Richens some modelling work for George at Asda the following week - not bad money and a step in the right direction. Then he discusses the next shoot with Carlos Clarke and Lee Mannion, Front's picture editor. It might be something with a red background, or against smoked glass; the most important thing is to make it tantalising enough for the cover. Richens disappears with a stylist to find something even smaller to wear and reappears in a thong. A make-up artist starts applying cream to her bottom. 'It's like painting the Forth Bridge!' he shrieks.

'It could be a cover,' Lee Mannion says, perusing the scene with interest. 'But it depends what else comes along. If we get Britney Spears wearing the same sort of outfits then we'll probably go with Britney.'

When the magazine came out a few weeks later, neither Spears nor Richens was on the cover. Instead, it was two page-three Einsteins called Jakki and Jo, wearing not much. But Richens was pleased with her images inside and, after six

months with Ghislain Pascal, happy with the progress her career was making in his hands.

In fact, at the beginning of 2002, things were looking good all round. Pascal had just signed a new client called Jeffro, whom he had spotted on the TV show Shipwrecked. Jeffro was eloquent and striking, and Pascal thought he might be able to get him some digital satellite presenter action. Another of his clients, Ed Sanders, quiet for a while, had recently landed a big role in a new Sky One drama about holiday reps in Spain.

And what else? His yachtswoman was happily sailing in dangerous waters; Stephen Smith had lined up another big fight; Joe Worsley's scrotum had healed up; Tamara Beckwith had signed up to write a column for The Sunday Express . And Caprice had just agreed to appear in the international hit play The Vagina Monologues at the Arts Theatre in London. 'It's her West End debut,' Pascal said, like a man who couldn't believe what he was saying. 'She's very excited.'