



Avatar star  
**Zoe Saldana** may  
look dainty, but she's tough  
as nails — and now has her own  
action figure to prove it.  
BY SONA CHARAIPOTRA

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downlow

# Beauty and Brawn

Growing up, Zoe Saldana had one dream in mind. "I always wanted to be a ballerina," says the classically trained dancer. "But it just wasn't meant to be. I simply didn't have the feet for it. And with my attitude and ambition, I'm just not cut out to be in the background."



Zoe Saldana in: 1. *Avatar*, 2. *Center Stage*, 3. *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*, 4. *Star Trek*



Ironically, it was those ill-fitting feet that launched Saldana, now 31, onto a path that has put her front and center in the testosterone-laden world of action heroes. Since stealing scenes as a sassy, chain-smoking dance-school dropout in the 2000 teen hit *Center Stage*, Saldana has found her niche as a lady among men in flicks like *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*, last summer's *Star Trek* reboot, and this month's feverishly anticipated *Avatar*, James Cameron's first film since 1997's *Titanic*.

But while she might look fragile, Saldana swears she can hold her own. "I grew up in a house full of girls," says Saldana, who was raised, along with her two sisters, by a working mother first in Queens, New York, and later in the Dominican Republic. "But I am so not the girly girl. I can totally hang with the boys. I look pretty delicate, but I feel very strong. And once I open my mouth, that delicate thing flies right out the window. I'm kind of tomboyish."

In fact, she says she's surprised many of her male

directors, who have included Steven Spielberg, J.J. Abrams, and Cameron. A sci-fi and action fan, Saldana grew up idolizing trailblazers like Sigourney Weaver (who also stars in *Avatar*) and Linda Hamilton.

"Women are so sexy when they're being physically powerful," Saldana says. "I'd love to be the type who can be that strong icon, like Sigourney or Linda or even Angelina [Jolie], who were sort of like the pioneers for my generation. These are women who seriously showed themselves as a match for any man."

With her own *Avatar* action figure now available at a toy store near you, Saldana is proud to join their ranks. "You know you've made it when you have your own action figure," says Saldana, laughing about the mini version of her character, Neytiri, the eerily beautiful alien whose face has been plastered on billboards across the nation since summer. "It's really surreal," she continues. "I've been shooting *Avatar* for more than four years, so it's amazing to see it finally come to fruition."

Saldana admits that she's always been a perfectionist but that working with the notoriously demanding Cameron pushed her to work even harder. By the end of filming, she says, she'd become addicted to the rush that comes with achieving a perfect take. Luckily, Saldana's close-knit family is able to keep the adrenaline junkie down-to-earth on her days off.

"Downtime, to me, is all about my family, friends, and wine," says Saldana, who hangs with her mom and sisters whenever she can. "That's what I do. My sisters and I are kind of one. We're not even like three different entities, we're so close. It's like we compose one body together. They're really the ones I turn to when I need to get away from everything. They're teaching me to relax more."

And for the Los Angeles-based actress, relaxing means occasionally hitting the theater to check out a movie — or three. "I just love being swept away into another world," she says. "It's why I do this in the first place."