

Hairdresser from heaven

Kate Constable has her hair done by the man Madonna calls an angel – Orlando Pita

I have this image in my mind. Madonna is walking around her New York apartment, humming quietly to herself... "The moment I wake up... Before I put on my make-up... I say a little prayer for you..." And the person she's singing about? It's not Sean, it's not the father of her child, Carlos Leon, and it's definitely not Warren. No, in this scenario she's singing about someone far more important in a girl's life. She's singing about Orlando Pita, the gifted, gracious hairdresser from heaven who takes mortals' hair and fashions it into creations fit for angels. Orlando is one of the most sought-after names on the fashion circuit, a hair stylist constantly in demand by people like Jean Paul Gaultier, Richard Avedon and Herb Ritts. Think of any of the defining looks in fashion over the past 10 years and the chances are that Orlando Pita was behind it. He's one of the inner circle – that group of men and women who are responsible for some of our most memorable fashion images. These are the people who create each season's key looks on the catwalks then refine them and serve them up to us on the pages of magazines, on pop videos and in the big advertising campaigns. Smart, then, of John Frieda to sign him up to be his international artistic director as a way of bringing some of that creative energy straight into the salon. And today Orlando Pita is going to cut my hair.

Born in Cuba, brought up in New York, he has been cutting hair since he was 14. "I had a friend who



Right, the tools of the trade. Left, Pita at work on the author's hair. Below left, Pita with Naomi Campbell backstage at the autumn/winter 1996 Rifat Ozbek show

worked in a salon shampooing hair on a Saturday," he says in his quiet, long-vowelled drawl. "I used to hang out with him and I thought, 'Hey, I could do that.'" So it became a bobby until his brother, working for a fashion photographer, got his baby brother taken on as the session stylist when the original choice of hairdresser cancelled. He's worked as a session stylist ever since. So maybe because

he's never had to work in a salon, pleasing a cranky band of clients with definite ideas about what suits them and what doesn't, his eye has remained fresh. There's no "can't do" with Pita, instead a brand of ingenuity that means he will happily construct elaborate confections of false plaits, ringlets and hairpieces, or painstakingly weave strips of patent leather into Madonna's hair for a bit of whiplash glamour if that's what's needed. And it makes getting hold of him extremely difficult. The last time we were due to meet, he had to cancel at the eleventh hour when Tina Turner's need was greater than mine. So I know how Madonna felt. She too found it hard to secure the services of Pita until she got

wise and booked him months in advance.

"I'm going to give you a style that will look good while it's growing out," Pita says to me confidentially. His hands, adorned with

a huge gold band on one and square diamonds on the other, proceed by stealth, so that I hardly realise what is happening. First it's scissors, then it's thinning shears, and finally a razor. My

hair appears to be the same length as when he started. Not until he's finished blow-drying it do I realise that what he's been doing is creating heavy "slices" of hair with just enough of the "done with a knife and fork" look about them to turn my mousy bob into something cute and modern. And can he blow-dry. He reaches into his suitcase for one of his many brushes. (Pita travels with a large suitcase full of brushes, lotions, sprays, scissors and curlers, all carefully packed in separate pouches and compartments. There's even a packet of sea salt in there for rinsing models' hair to give them that charming salt-caked, beachy look.) "What's that?" I ask nervously, pointing at what look like jump leads. "Oh, they're for holding a wig on to the false head when I'm working on it," he says without missing a beat. Of course. >

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