

Why the Angelina Jolie-Brad Pitt marriage mattered so much in modern Hollywood



Actress, writer, producer and director Angelina Jolie Pitt and her husband, actor Brad Pitt, pose on the red carpet for the opening night premiere of their new film, "By the Sea," at AFI Fest 2015. (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

By **Lorraine Ali**

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In an age where too many celebrities are famous for little more than being famous, [Angelina Jolie](#) and [Brad Pitt](#) occupy a spot in the Hollywood firmament matched only by the stars of yesteryear — Bogart and Bacall, Tracy and Hepburn, even Burton and Taylor. The married couple are equals in the way few movie stars are.

Both Jolie and Pitt are accomplished actors — gilded by Oscar, firmly on the A-list — but both have also transcended their acting. She has segued into directing, him producing, and they've both become champions for social causes at home and abroad. Through a careful management of their image and social media footprint, they conjured the glamour of the movie stars of old.

So when Jolie [filed for divorce](#) from Pitt in a Los Angeles court Tuesday, even those who usually steer clear of such tabloid fodder took notice. Pitt, 52, and Jolie, 41, aren't your average Hollywood celebrity couple falling

out of love.

“They came from an era before celebrities were doing their own social media,” said Vanessa Diaz, a postdoctoral fellow at UCLA and assistant professor at Cal State Fullerton who specializes in pop culture. “What celebrity means, looks like, sounds like, is changing. All of the changes in media, like reality TV, make it so Brangelina is one of the last old Hollywood kind of couples. Two of the biggest movie stars coming together.

“Now, at a time when a lot of the couples are Kardashians, it’s a different era of celebrity,” Diaz continued. “You can turn on any time of day and see what Kanye and Kim are doing. There was a limited window into Brangelina’s life. It had mystery and mystique.”

Film critic and historian Leonard Maltin said that “we don’t know anything about their private lives, really, nor is it any of our business, really. But they’re both successful and attractive people who have been forced to live at least some of their lives in public. So the public feels a certain ownership, whether they’re entitled to or not.”

Yet together they managed to walk a path that was public when it served their purposes — as when Jolie revealed in a 2013 New York Times Op-Ed that she had a double mastectomy to raise [breast cancer](#) awareness — and private when they chose to be. And rather than nurture Instagram followers, they chased their creative passions.

But for all their iconoclastic nature, they met in that most conventional Hollywood way: on a film set. It was 2004, while they were co-starring in “Mr. & Mrs. Smith,” shortly after Jolie ended her marriage to actor Billy Bob Thornton — and Pitt was still married to Jennifer Aniston.

And that’s when the media, which had always had its eye on Pitt and Jolie separately, became obsessed. Brangelina was born.

“Brangelina has a lot of meaning behind it because it’s not just Brad Pitt or Angelina Jolie,” Diaz said. “Brangelina is more than a pronoun. It’s an adjective. People use it to describe things. It means whirlwind romance, extravagance, a particular kind of sexiness, lavishness, glamour, an exotic life they represented.”

The two became Brangelina before they married in 2014, when they were reinterpreting the modern family by having three children out of wedlock, and adopted three more from various countries including Ethiopia and Cambodia.

While doing blockbuster films like “Tomb Raider,” Jolie was also busy raising awareness about the plight of refugees, traveling to Iraq and other war-torn regions, eventually becoming a UN special envoy. Pitt worked to rebuild New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

Jolie perhaps took the biggest leap for a celebrity of her caliber when she revealed her choice to have a

mastectomy. In promoting breast cancer awareness, she explained that her decision was based on her genetic predisposition toward breast cancer. The piece garnered worldwide attention.

Yet the exposure that either of them sought was often on their own terms. Jolie and Pitt remained strategically aloof by carefully cultivating their celebrity image, showing up on red carpets, working the paparazzi and even selling their own authorized photos of their kids to media outlets.

“They have been lead characters in the tabloid soap opera for so long, seldom far from magazine headlines, that this [divorce] is much like a surprise Friday cliffhanger from soap operas of old,” said Dr. Karen Sternheimer, author of “Celebrity Culture and the American Dream: Stardom and Social Mobility.”

The pair separated Sept. 15, according to court documents, a little over two years after they married in August 2014.

In her divorce filing Tuesday, Jolie cited irreconcilable differences, and according to People magazine and TMZ, Jolie has asked for physical custody of all six children.

Jolie’s attorney has said she wouldn’t be commenting on the divorce filing, but Pitt released his own statement to People magazine. “I am very saddened by this, but what matters most now is the well-being of our kids,” he said. “I kindly ask the press to give them the space they deserve during this challenging time.”

But rumors about a troubled relationship dogged them for years.

It was all par for the course for the couple, whose relationship has ended many times over the years in the headlines of gossip publications.

Both actors started out as pretty faces in an industry rife with beauty but soon made names for themselves in breakthrough roles. For Pitt, it was as the lawless love interest in “Thelma and Louise.” For Jolie, it was as the reckless, troubled young woman in “Girl, Interrupted” (she won a supporting actress Oscar for the role).

Before meeting Pitt, Jolie had a reputation as a wild child. She has admitted cutting herself and using drugs including cocaine, LSD, ecstasy and heroin.

“I did the most dangerous and I did the worst and for many reasons I shouldn’t be here,” she told “60 Minutes” in 2011.

In the wake of “Mr. & Mrs. Smith,” Aniston and Pitt separated in January 2005. He and Jolie went public as a couple soon after — famously prompting fans to declare allegiance to “Team Aniston” or “Team Jolie.”

Pitt would later admit to falling in love with Jolie while filming but not to infidelity. In May 2006, Jolie and Pitt welcomed their first biological child, daughter Shiloh.

They reinvented themselves over time as they presented a united front and embodied the image of a socially

conscious, modern family.

In October 2014, she was named an honorary dame and met with [Queen Elizabeth II](#) at Buckingham Palace, and this May it was announced that she'd be a visiting professor at the London School of Economics' Centre for Women, Peace and Security.

Their last film together, 2015's "By the Sea," is now being mined for clues into the couple's now-defunct marriage. Jolie perhaps knew then it would be scrutinized.

"Brad and I have our issues, but if the characters were even remotely close to our problems we couldn't have made the film," she told the Telegraph earlier in 2015. "We have days when we drive each other absolutely mad and want space, but the problems in the movie aren't our specific problems."

Times staff writer Christie D'Zurilla contributed to this report.

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