



Prick Up Your Ears

FOR L.A.'S NEW FACE LIFT,
SUSAN CAMPOS ACTS THE HUMAN
PINCUSHION.

In Los Angeles they're referred to as the mannequins — those ageless thespians whose misadventures with Botox have left their faces temporarily stripped of expression. And despite Hollywood's insatiable demand for fresh features and unfurrowed brows, they have triggered a Botox backlash, with a number of directors finally speaking out. "I love Sergio Leone crop shots," declares Allen Hughes, who with his brother, Albert, directed "American Pimp." "But sometimes you can't shoot as close as you want because it starts to look fake."

Wary of the Stepford look, many potential mannequins are sticking with the needles but throwing out the syringe. At the moment, L.A.'s hottest treatment is Dr. Mao's acupuncture face lift.

"If an actress is working on a movie, she might come in every day for a month before shooting," says Dr. Mao — his full name is Dr. Maoshing Ni — the acupuncturist at the Tao of Wellness in Santa Monica. Patients wait as long as six weeks to see Dr. Mao, paying \$110 a session for the privilege.

The doctor — handsome and 39 — doesn't have a wrinkle on his face. His waiting room is filled with people who look young, healthy and relaxed, but not overly relaxed in that airbrushed Hollywood way.

"We can slow down the aging process and in some cases reverse it," Dr. Mao informs me as he turns his well-trained eye in my direction. Carefully examining the deepening road map on my forehead, Dr. Mao seems confident that he can "at least soften some of the lines."

"Let me see your tongue," he says, and then stares at it closely. Diagnosing "a little stress," he inserts a hair-thin needle into my scalp. Slowly, I begin to relax. As he starts on my forehead, he explains: "It tightens the skin, the skin tone and the muscle tone."

In the next five minutes, he painlessly glides 30 needles into my face, so quickly and with such precision that it's like watching a magician.

"Enjoy your rest," Dr. Mao says before leaving the room and turning down the lights.

Forty-five minutes later, he returns to take out the needles. I rush to a nearby mirror to check out the results. Though the changes are not extraordinary, I look a little more relaxed — tighter around my eyes and forehead.

Dr. Mao says it takes about three months of weekly visits to see a drastic difference. "People will start noticing and say: 'Hey, you look great. What's happening?' And yet they can't quite put their finger on what's changed. It's subtle."

In a society where immediate gratification is the norm, a few months of pinpricks may be a hard sell. But Dr. Mao's face lift may just stir a countercultural revolution. ■