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Interview: The Cellar Door's Michelle Tomlinson

PDF PRINT EMAIL

Written by Theron Neel
Tuesday, 30 October 2007

The Cellar Door is a film that's generating a lot of excitement on the festival circuit. Starring Michelle Tomlinson and James DuMont, it's the story of a woman named Rudy who is kidnapped and locked away in a cage by a psychopath named Herman. As the film plays out, the relationship between the two takes several unusual twists and turns. Although all the actors are great, Tomlinson's strong performance as Rudy is one of the most exciting in recent memory. ScreamTV recently caught up with Michelle to talk about *The Cellar Door*, music as preparation, and how to "save your ass."



Hi, Michelle. I want to thank you for taking time to talk to us here at ScreamTV. Congratulations on the success of *The Cellar Door*. It's really getting a lot of attention. How did you become involved with the project?

First off, this is my pleasure! I've known the writer, Chris Nelson, for a few years. We had actually worked on several projects together. He phoned me one day and told me he had just formed a production company with Hilary Six and Matt Zettell and that he had a script he wrote with me possibly in mind to play the main character [Rudy].

A preliminary table read, a photo shoot to create one sheets [movie posters], an audition involving reading with several

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Christa [Rudy's roommate] candidates, and about a thousand "phone calls I put in to Chris" later—I found out I booked the job. It was one of those projects I just would not let go of and was very persistent in trying to obtain it.

If we can back up for a minute, I'd like to know about your background. When did you get bitten by the acting bug? Have you always been interested in performing?

I have always been interested in performing. I did a few plays as a kid, but when you're raised in a small town in Northern New Mexico, pursuing this craft does seem pretty impossible.

I attended Eastern New Mexico University in Portales, New Mexico. I started out as a mass communications major. I decided to take a beginning acting course as an "easy" elective, and it turned my whole world upside down. Again, to dabble, I took a theatrical make-up course. I was fascinated by the many things we transformed ourselves [into] in that class. That's when the acting bug really bit. How exciting to get to evolve [and] change, and [to] literally transform to envelop a character intrigued me more than anything I had ever encountered!

Wow, you seem to have covered a bit of everything. I believe you did a little work with video production as well, right? I guess that means you've done some directing too and some writing too?

I did do quite a bit of work in video productions. I loved taking a concept from the beginning and seeing it through to the end. It was extremely satisfying! I produced, wrote, directed, and edited some extremely novice (yet fun!) music videos, commercials, and a lot of news pieces for the public access news, high school news, and I submitted several things to News 101 at the CBS station in Albuquerque. My writing partner, Kelby Floyd, and I actually won a News 101 Nambe Award for a piece we worked on. It truly was a great time.

So, it seems you have all the experience you need to completely create your own projects. That's smart. Would that be of interest to you, or do you want to stay focused on one area of your craft?

Oooh, I definitely want to create some of my own projects. Absolutely. That's in my ten-year plan, though. Right now, I am really enjoying the journey of being an actor and where that's starting to take me. Building a career as an actor is a massive undertaking on its own, and I'm extremely focused on that right now. But I already have ideas of what I'd like to name my future production company, what types of films I'd like to make, and with whom I'd like to work.

Speaking of craft, Michelle, you have experience with the Adler Method, don't you? Are you locked into one way of approaching and preparing for a role? Or do you approach each role differently?

I love the Adler Method. I find it yummy and rich with imagination. I love building a character from ground zero, starting with studying the script a zillion times and writing a full autobiography for the character. I love working on the relationships and circumstances of the character and getting into the story of what's going on and how it affects my character. Arthur Mendoza is the master of the Adler Method, and I took class from him for just over two years.

I also dissect the script word for word, sentence by sentence. I utilize Amy Lyndon's Booking Technique for that part. It's a pretty detailed, specific technique that challenges the actor to get under all of their text. It keeps you on track for the beginning, middle, and end of each scene and helps you focus on each emotion your character feels in each scene.

Not to mention on working from the outside in -- I like to take the time to figure out what kind of jewelry, if any, my character would wear. What color of hair [and] length? Walk? All of those things. My job as an actor is to submerge myself as much as possible in every aspect of the character.

Basically, my shooting scripts look like a word bomb exploded on them when I am done working on them!

How did you prepare for the role of Rudy? I mean, how does one prepare for that? I was locked in my grandmother's basement once, but that's as close as I've come to Rudy's ordeal. Did you draw upon any personal experiences for **The Cellar Door**?

I had an incredible time preparing for Rudy. The thing that's wonderful about preparation is all the discoveries you make doing your homework; then you let it go, and you have room to make even more discoveries on set.

In working on Rudy, I approached her very Adler. Rudy is really just an ordinary girl who got stuck in an extraordinary circumstance with a totally "sane" nut job holding her hostage.



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I did the full work of her autobiography and mapped out her childhood and home life. I love doing that part of the work because it's like you can literally implant your character's memories into you. And you create the autobiography from everything that's in the script and you build on it. So, all the tools were there for me to figure out who she was.

I worked a great deal on her relationship with Christa and how important Christa was to her. And I worked even more on her relationship with Herman. It's almost a sick love story, really.

I built my iPod entirely around music Rudy liked. I included music that set the tempo for certain scenes and even music that I felt was from Herman's point of view -- songs that would be running through my mind for reaction to something he'd do or say.

As far as the emotional work -- whew. I had to visit what I call the "ugly scary emotions." Those are the ones we like to have when we are alone -- such as vulnerable, scared, terrified, and feeling belittled or helpless. Matt Zettell was an incredible guide to hit those emotions and stay within the song of the script.

As for personal experiences, I have definitely never been physically locked in anything before. One of the coolest things I discovered for myself when I was working on this was we have all experienced being locked in a box of some sort and often times of our own making. From my own experience, there have been several times in my life I felt trapped, helpless, frustrated, and completely freaked out and didn't know where to turn. And that's what I call a box of our own making. We all settle or get in the trap of thinking there's no way out of a desperate situation, etc. Well, I'm still here, so there must be a way out of even our darkest hours. So, on an emotional level, I tried to locate how I felt and where it hit me during those darker hours of my life and applied them to what Rudy was going through. It was a mixture of imagination, circumstances, and trying to plug my own emotions into her. It was an interesting ride. I discovered I'm still here, so there's always a way out of the "box," and Rudy ended up finding her way out of her box too. It was a good lesson to learn. There's always hope.

Since you've done the work, tell me a little about Rudy and how you two differ. What's Rudy's favorite band? Yours?

I absolutely love The Doors, Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, and others like Waylon Jennings to Crystal Method or Massive Attack. I purposefully didn't give Rudy any of those artists.

But we both love Ani Di Franco. Ani has these lyrics that are more like poetry in motion and are born from an intensely strong female perspective. Clearly, Rudy was a strong female or she would not have lasted long in that cage. So I did have several Ani songs on my trusty iPod.

I wasn't a real big fan of Disturbed's song "Down with the Sickness." But I did choose that for her as part of her rebellious teenage years I worked on with the autobiography. Although for different aspects, I added Ice-T's "Big Gun," Drowning Pool's "Bodies," System of a Down's "Chop Suey," Prodigy's "Firestarter," etc.

Some of the other music we had in common that fed the character and the film were Dwight Yoakam's "Thousand Miles from Nowhere," She Wants Revenge's "Tear You Apart," Coldplay's "Help is Around the Corner" (which was scene-specific when Christa was brought into the picture and I thought she was dead), Tori Amos' "Crucify," U2's "Numb," Rusted Root's "Welcome to Your Party," Sam the Sham's "Little Red Riding Hood," [and] Justin Timberlake's "Sexy Back."

And just for kicks, I also added Alice In Chains' "Man in the Box."

A little "turnabout is fair play," I see. One of things I loved about *The Cellar Door* is the way it allowed the actors a chance to truly act. Between you and James DuMont, it felt almost like a master class. A look or gesture from you was as important, if not moreso, than a soliloquy.

That's actually one of the things James and I both loved the most about working on this film. The writing was incredibly juicy to work on, as were all the more subtle moments. Everything was important in moving the story along. I appreciate you acknowledging that!

I love that Herman's motives and intentions aren't spelled out for the audience. The film demands the audience to pay attention and think, which is so unusual these days for movie, especially a horror flick. It's a very subtle piece of work.

Theron, you just pointed out another aspect of the film we loved. Nothing overt, nothing exploding or going for the "shock effect" in any of the ways most horror films explore. I feel like this film is much more a psychological thriller than a slasher flick. (Although I could still watch "Jason" or "Freddy" films all day long!)



So, Michelle, you're coming off *The Cellar Door*, which you are wonderful in, by the way. This movie is getting a lot of attention. It should open some, ummm, doors for you. What's next? Do you have anything planned?

Thank you, Theron. Love the pun of opening doors! Nice! I would be thrilled if *The Cellar Door* opened doors for more work.

I just got done with about a ten-month self-imposed hiatus, brought about for personal reasons. Now that I've opened myself back up again, I just shot two supporting roles in feature films. As for what's next, or what I have planned, I plan on hunting down as many great roles as possible and keep working. It's about the work first, and it's this work I enjoy more than anything else.



From looking at your resume, I've learned you have some unusual skills. Sure, the usual stuff is there (stage combat, accents, horseback riding), but care to let us know what "Erdega" is and how you speak it?

As for the Erdega, it's a bit weird [to discuss]. I knew this girl in Middle School -- she and her mom created "Erdega." Actually, it's similar to what the girls in Catherine Hardwicke's film *Thirteen* speak. It's almost a code language, not too far from pig latin. In between syllables, you put the word "erdega." Here's "Scream TV" in Erdega: Scredegeam TerdegeVerdege. Yep. My name: Merdegicherdegelle. It's completely silly, but harmless and fun!

"Laughing in the midst of chaos" is also listed as a skill. I guess that often comes in quite handy on a film set.

How funny, I totally forgot I put "laughing in the midst of chaos." Laughing in the midst of chaos will surely save your ass not only on set, but in life. You have to have some sort of sense of humor when things are intense, or you're screwed!

Spoken like a woman who has voluntarily spent time locked in a box...

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