

Actor's zest for her craft

The passion that drives Julie Mortensen

Julie Mortensen is laughing with her head of red curls thrown back — as she does often and easily — while remembering a story from her childhood that seemed to foreshadow her career as a Calgary actor.

"I'd be fighting with my parents, and I'd back up to look at myself in the mirror and watch myself as I did it," Mortensen says. "I don't feel like I chose acting. I feel like it chose me. All through elementary, and junior high and high school, it's been just there."

Her life as an actor has been an unpredictable ride. Today, Mortensen has numerous roles in Calgary's theatre community. She worked for The Shakespeare Company, the Calgary International Children's Festival, Sage Theatre and Alberta Theatre Projects, to name a few.

In 2009 she received Theatre Calgary's Stephen Hair Emerging Actor Award. Most recently, Mortensen landed the lead role of Catharine Robb Whyte in New York-based M.Y.R.A. Entertainment's feature film "Drawing Home."

But it hasn't been easy and her current success stems from early work Mortensen pioneered herself.

"I've always loved the work so much, but when I was initially coming out of school I found the world of auditioning very challenging," Mortensen says.

She alleviated this by co-founding the independent Calgary theatre company Downstage with Simon Mallett, after graduating from the University of Calgary Theatre Program in 2005.

Throughout her career, Mortensen credits several teachers who helped guide her. Kate Newby, an actor for 25 years, now artistic director for the Calgary International Children's Festival, was doing her master's degree in directing at the U of C when she cast Mortensen as lead in her thesis project, "The Libertine."

"She played the role of Elizabeth Barry, who was one of the first female actors to step onto the English stage," Newby says. "The role was full of passion and fire and determination, and I found her so pretty that I wanted to really challenge her with a part that had such strength. And she rose to it beautifully."

While preparing for a role, Mortensen says she tries to immerse every part of herself in her character—an artistic process she describes as



Photo courtesy of Daniela Tersigni

Actor Julie Mortensen says she has felt the desire to perform since she was a child.

extremely rewarding.

"The work is so focused in my body — in a physical level, an emotional level, a highly mental level," Mortensen says. "How does this character move? How does this character feel? What is this character thinking? What does this character believe in? When all of those are linked, it's a completely fascinating exploration."

David LeReaney taught Mortensen at U of C and currently works as her dialect coach. He says he remembers Mortensen's dedication. "She's smart," LeReaney says. "Very studious, very receptive, very responsive to everything we threw at her."

Different characters require different methods of exploration for

Mortensen. She explores the histories of those from the past and examines her own life when taking on imagined characters.

"For the part of Catharine in 'Drawing Home,' I was able to read old letters and old diary entries, and I'm so lucky to have that available to me," Mortensen says. "If I'm not playing a historical character, it's about seeking

inspiration from every aspect of my life that somehow resonates with me. It could be songs. It could be movies. It could be different daily practices that I do."

The hit-and-miss nature of her work has led her to embrace a somewhat nomadic lifestyle. Never knowing when she will be in demand or without work is tricky to navigate, she says, but never dull.

"It's a really dynamic life."

—Julie Mortensen, actor

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"It's a really dynamic life," she says. Currently exploring opportunities in Montreal and Toronto, Mortensen says she has learned to trust her instincts and follow what speaks to her.

"The idea of making a six month plan is ludicrous," she says with a laugh. "What it comes back to for me is staying really in tune with what's happening in the moment, and trusting my impulses."

When she isn't acting, Mortensen keeps herself busy with numerous day-jobs and projects. It took Mortensen a long time to make peace with her on-again, off-again schedule; she used to scramble to fill the space between projects. But as her career progresses, she says she has come to relax and appreciate the time off.

"I get really excited about those unscheduled spaces now," Mortensen says.

This attitude is hard-won. It took years of adjustment and some distance from acting for Mortensen to find harmony between her passion and her life; in moments of doubt, she studied and travelled to regain her focus.

"I realize now I was gaining the tools I needed to come back to what is actually the path for me," she says. "I was able to regain a sense of control and power over my own experience."

This isn't to say Mortensen doesn't still struggle. She admits to feeling sorrow for roles lost. But she says she has developed a broad perspective that allows her to see that these would-be setbacks aren't the end of anything; rather, they're often the opposite.

"The great thing about this industry, and how ridiculously dynamic it is, is that there's so much more coming in," Mortensen says. "Sometimes it's heartbreaking, but it can lead to something else that's just glorious."

Newby says, "I find her a really inspiring human being. She's got this wonderful zest for life, an incredibly positive attitude. I admire her."

Through all of her experiences as an actor, the biggest lesson Mortensen seems to have learned is to find happiness through fulfilling herself first.

"This industry is such a rollercoaster; it can be so high, and it can be so low," she says.

"But ultimately you have to find balance within yourself. It has to come from within."