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The Power of One

Justine Clarke joins
the A-League



the Power of

One

JUSTINE CLARKE FIRST CAME TO PROMINENCE AS A TEENAGE SOAP STAR IN THE 1980S. TODAY SHE IS A CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED STAGE AND SCREEN ACTRESS WORKING WITH SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST RESPECTED ARTISTS. LIBBI GORR DISCOVERS HOW SHE MANAGED TO JOIN THE 'A-LEAGUE'.

Words **Libbi Gorr** Photography **Steve Baccon**





“Acting became an extra special joy because with children you have such a limited time to yourself; you have to distil it into perfect moments and satisfying moments for yourself. That really helped. It made me enjoy it more. I feel like my emotional plumbing is working better. I’m more connected to my own feelings than I’ve ever been.”

Justine Clark has a quiet power. Strength of character that belies her almost lilting tones. I can’t imagine her being loud, or running amuck. But I can imagine her being there in the moment – a calming presence with both weight and softness, silk and steel.

She’s been playing pretty frock dress-ups for our photo shoot, but is now comfy in jeans, a burgundy turtleneck and boots she bought in Cooma, while making a film with Jane Campion.

“Pretty good”, she agrees affably, “Just drop another name!” as we order focaccias at the pub down the road, and stray into a conversation as to whether gravely red or sparkling champagne makes her feel more ‘arty’.

“Gravely red”, she considers, “It’s that weighted feeling isn’t it? Acting is an earthy thing. Bubbles are by their nature frothy. Love ‘em, tho”.

But it’s the middle of the day – a work day – so we settle for milky coffees and pick our way around side salads whose dressings, tho seductive, could make talking and eating at the same time a tad unattractive.

This pragmatism, this earthiness, is the pin fastening the third major stage of Justine Clarke’s career. The stage that had her starring in last year’s breakthrough innovative Australian film, *Look Both Ways*. The stage whose foundations were dug with the previous year’s sweet genre movie, *Danny Deckchair*. The stage that has had her treading the boards with Cate Blanchett and Hugo Weaving in *Hedda Gabler* in Sydney and New York. The stage that must seem a lifetime away from stage one as a child actor romping through TV commercials and stealing the screen as a feral in George Miller’s *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* in 1984. And the stage which must be a relief away from her second major breakthrough beginnings in 1988 as the scheming Roo on Channel Seven’s *Home and Away*. Not that Justine seeks to distance herself. “Roo was in my mind, a complex character,” she reminisces, as we sink into battered red leather lounge

chairs. “And I loved the idea of playing the bitchiest character on the show. I loved Pat the Rat (in the 80s Aussie soap, *Sons and Daughters*) and I thought – ‘wow!’ I had no idea it was going to be such a huge success.”

Justine Clark was then 16 years old. Born in 1972, she had been performing professionally since she was seven, encouraged by a mother passionate about the arts. A dancer and choreographer herself, Justine’s mother’s best praise for her children was reserved for their more extroverted extra curricular activities. “There was a lot of missed school. Even though our school work was important, if we were dancing well, acrobating well – getting good marks in gymnastics, we were praised a lot more than for our academic achievements”, Clarke laughs fondly. *Home and Away* was the ultimate education – “a massive wake-up as to what celebrity life is like.” And the fame, for which Justine had been bred, just didn’t cut it for her.

“Yeah, we think of that as success”, she ruminates; “at least that’s what I thought. And when I did *Home and Away* I was being recognised for what I thought was not much. I hadn’t really achieved anything. But it was a really great way of guiding me towards what I really wanted to achieve”. And what was that? Well, she doesn’t say the word, but I know it lives deep inside her heart. What she wanted, as an artist, was respect – from herself and others. Her name was on everyone’s lips. But not in a way that made her comfortable.

“When I finished *Home and Away*, I knew that if I wanted to explore film roles, I had to remove myself from television.”

Like so many people who have followed their dreams welded to their psyche in childhood by loving parents, Clarke questioned her very being.

“I’d never really made a decision about acting as a job, and I didn’t feel completely committed to it; I never knew whether it was what I wanted to do.” And life, as is its wont, took her to the crossroads, and made her consult her internal street directory. She’d just married fellow actor Jack Finsterer, her first child was born, she turned 28 and thought, “What else am I going to do?” And from the haze, there seemed only one answer. Make conscious career decisions – what she would and wouldn’t do.

“Which sounds ridiculous because there is so little work,” she laughs self consciously, “but I needed to feel confident enough in my own craft. It had always been instinct, and I really wanted to make a choice to work as an actor, to turn up for rehearsals at ten o’clock, and act for the day, and then switch it off so I didn’t have to do it.”

So how did Justine Clarke do it? How did she take

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her career from 'teen queen of soap' to the envied and admired echelons of Australia's creative elite?

Well, there is no creative caste system when it comes to determination. Justine retraced her steps to the theatre.

"At the same time, I became a *Playschool* presenter and that has been a really helpful acting tool. You have to be honest, you have to be relaxed, and you have to play. These things are all acting 101."

She only took on work she "believed in, 100%", as she feels that "if you don't it can be debilitating and confusing."

To supplement the tougher times, Clarke sang in clubs and released a children's album.

"To be financially dependant on it just adds another element of stress into the mix of getting a job. It's hard not to be but I think it's important

chamber of the heart you did not know existed?

"Yeah..." she giggles. And then, embarrassed, "It's a difficult thing to admit that you may not have experienced joy until you are 30".

She dissolves into peals of laughter. "Last night I just watched my daughter playing – just for thirty seconds or so. And that was it. That was my day – that was the most satisfying moment. You get topped up to a new level of joy. It's fantastic."

This from a woman who, fresh from a triumphant season of *Hedda Gabler* with the STC in New York, hooked up with an international agent, and has stepped straight into a great role in the ABC's new drama, *Bastard Boys*.

What attracts her to a script is a character's flaws. "I like peoples' faults. I enjoy them. I feel comfortable about peoples' faults – I like knowing others have them", she confides mischievously.

"I'm not academic at all and I'm not a terribly deep actor but I'll feel it, feel it from reading it", she tries to explain, before dissolving into self deprecating laughter. "You know Virginia Trioli on ABC 702 was talking about Tom Petty's last interview with *Rolling Stone*, where he said at some point in an interview you hate yourself. That's how I feel now. That was my moment." But no need for that, Justine. Not when you are on SUCH a roll.

"It's the biggest run I've had in my whole career in terms of constant work", she agrees in her endearingly surprised way. Next stop is back at the Sydney Theatre Company, being directed in a play by her *Hedda Gabler* cast-mate, Cate Blanchett. "Come on!", I wheedle, "Tell me about Cate."

"Oh, well, I just think she is absolutely brilliant; technically and personally, she's a great person, she's a great human being."

"But if we are talking about flaws," I cajole, "she must have one?"

And there Justine is again, that cheeky girl in her Jane Campion boots.

"Oh, well – she loves products..." Justine teases, "... loves a moisturiser. But then, we all do."

And then she leans forward, and distils our conversation into the perfect moment, as artists do – because there is so little time and we all want to know how she did it – how to work the work we want to work, how to transcend a former incarnation, how to be who we want to be... to coin a phrase. "There needs to be something in it for yourself otherwise it can be soul destroying", she reflects. "That is what makes you feel like you are in control of it all. And you are. You are in control of your career by making choices about what you will and won't do."

"It's really the only power you have." ■

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not to be financially dependent on it", she reflects. By the time the script for *Danny Deckchair* arrived for Justine to read, she was ready to exercise her newfound skills in every way.

"Taking that role, it was actually a decision. You're kind of on your own a lot more in film, in terms of crafting a role and making choices, because everyone else has so many other things to think about. When that script came along, I really liked it. And I felt I had done the ground work." *Danny Deckchair* didn't set the world alight at the box office, but it did draw attention to Justine's newfound confidence and re-energised approach.

"Just after filming *Danny Deckchair* I got pregnant again and I was chained to the house with the kids. Acting became an extra special joy because with children you have such a limited time to yourself; you have to distil it into perfect moments and satisfying moments for yourself. That really helped. It made me enjoy it more. I feel like my emotional plumbing is working better. I'm more connected to my own feelings than I've ever been."

A little bit of maternal draino, perhaps, to unblock a

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