

Interview with Catherine Simmonds - Actress and Director

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Actress and Director for Community Development, Melbourne, Australia

“What can you do?”

Dzamling Gar, February, 2018

Catherine Simmonds

The Mirror: We know you have an interesting beginning that helped for where you are today, so can you tell us a little about your early life?

Catherine Simmonds: I was born like everyone, and then put into a babies' home for adoption, I was adopted at six weeks old by two people who then became my mother and father. We lived in the country a few hours from Melbourne/Australia. My parents divorced when I was five years old and my adoptive father got custody however I still saw my adoptive mother. I remember thinking as a child “something must be nothing and nothing must be something’ was it an inkling that led me to the teachings?

My father remarried another woman with two children and they became my sisters, so I grew up with them—through my teenage years. My father was a writer, played the guitar and also a taekwondo instructor, so the whole family did taekwondo, my mother, sisters and I all became black belts, and once I was even the runner up Australian champion. My other passion was ice skating and I eventually became a professional ice skater

M: Were you interested in acting or theatre at that time?

CS: I'd always been interested in the arts, writing stories, drama, painting, and illustrating, and I thought I wanted to write and illustrate children's books, so I studied graphic design. I remember at the time a friend's mother saying to me, "Being a visual artist is quiet solitary I think perhaps you're too social for that" and her words remained with me.

-I continued with my studies and the place where I ice skated was approached by the Miss Victoria Quest to raise funds for the disabled in Victoria and they asked me to represent them in the Quest (of course at 18 my ego was flattered.) To my surprise I actually won Miss Victoria which attracted some media attention, front page of newspapers etc. A few months later, my father and I received a letter from the Catholic Family Bureau (adoptive agency) saying that my biological mother was looking for me. Generally speaking, I try to hide the fact that I was once Miss Victoria, but I mention it as it relates to what happens next. My biological mother was trying to find me and the adoptive agency had been looking for almost a year for a Catherine Simmonds but to no avail, and then they saw the name on the front of the newspapers and the age corresponded, they thought perhaps this is the girl, and it was, it was me. The agency asked if I wanted to meet my biological mother and my adoptive parents were supportive so I said ok. I met my mother, who actually married my biological father five years after giving me up for adoption, and they went onto to have six other kids. So suddenly I had acquired a full biological family which meant that accumulatively across my families I had three mothers, two fathers and nine brothers and sisters. Like water flowing, life circumstances were changing course

After this period my interest started to shift towards acting and I left the graphic design course. I auditioned for the National Institute of Dramatic Art where they accept only 20 people across the nation for their acting degree and I was second on the waiting list to get in. I'd had no formal acting training yet almost got the lead in a TV mini-series, so I felt very encouraged by these experiences. I auditioned for the Victorian College of the Arts, where I was accepted and studied acting for three years. Studying acting required you to investigate yourself, a journey of sorts into the inner world, exploring your motivations, impulses, desires, imagination and senses. It's about developing a capacity to observe, interpret and communicate human behavior. The investigation starts with oneself as in some ways acting school strips your ego, challenging you to confront uncomfortable aspects and to open a range of human emotions, it's a kind of journey toward self-understanding.

Body work was core to the acting training and I became interested in yoga, I started Oki Do Yoga classes and the teacher invited me to come and listen to a Tibetan teacher. Rinpoche was giving a

lecture at Melbourne University, I went but did not have the experience nor the language to really comprehend, I didn't really know what was going on. I left and didn't think much about it, but I did pick up a little brochure that said there would be a retreat. Every so often I would glance at this brochure, attracted by the words, "primordial state" wondering "what does that really mean?"

I ended up going to the retreat in the Blue Mountains near Sydney. When I arrived, I thought, "Oh my god what have I done?", there was a woman with bright blonde hair, a leopard skin leotard and bright red lipstick doing these hand gestures outside the tent (now I know they are mudras) I went into the tent and many people were sitting on cushions with straight spines, some had malas in their hands and I sat feeling like the bad girl at the back of the bus. For three days, I listened but didn't really have a clue, I was struggling between wanting to know and wanting to run away, then someone suggested I go to speak with Rinpoche. I saw everyone lining up and I thought okay I'll give it a go and went up to him. As I got closer to him and it was my turn I burst into tears and he kind of laughed and looked away and I felt a little angry on the inside and then he looked back to me and said, "If you relax, the first thing is to relax, it's like going fishing, if you relax you might catch one." And I instantly thought "Oh yeah, you're right, that's simple and true, so then I kind of relaxed after that point"

As the days went on I started to participate, trying to learn the different practices, purification of the elements was a good place to start. Towards the end of the retreat, we came to this thing called a Ganapuja, it was raining outside, I'd relaxed a bit and even though I didn't know all the words, energetically, with the soft rain outside, I felt like gold inside. In my heart, something had happened, there was a deep feeling of peace and of home. I remember one moment when Rinpoche walked past me and spontaneously said "What can you do?" It felt so random at the time as I didn't know to what he was referring but somehow those words have stuck in my head, yes what can I do? At the time the question felt like it came from nowhere but today I've interpreted it to mean you have to be active in life, not passive, what can you do?

When I graduated from acting school I saw a small notice about scholarships being offered to work with international companies. On the same board, there was another notice about workshops with an Italian theatre director, Renato Cuocolo. I'd seen a theatre piece of his, the year before I started acting school and was inspired by the dream like poetry of the work. It appeared coincidental and I thought wow perhaps I could apply to work with his company. I met him and he was making a base for the company in Melbourne, I participated in his workshops and he immediately invited me to join the company. He explained how the training would require total dedication, meaning I probably wouldn't have time to pursue other acting work, I accepted. We trained intensively, every day, engaging in strong physical experiences, such as running toward walls and opening the body just before contact, we'd sometimes explore one gesture for hours, we'd meditate and improvise sometimes for 24 hours non-stop. The purpose of the training was to reveal an authentic expression of freedom through discipline, to develop the presence and energy of the actor by stripping away the masks and exploring movement beyond the normal rhythms of everyday life. Movement was viewed from an anthropological point E.G the root of all cultural dance and movement understood

as coming from a knowledge of the “hara”. This work helped to develop my concentration and a deepen my expression of body and voice, it helped me to build confidence in myself as an artist. I acted with the company for twelve years, displacement, identity and cultural minorities were central performance themes and we performed as part of some really important national and international festivals.



It was around 1990 and Rinpoche was coming to Australia again, the retreat was in Kyenton and without any doubt I knew I must go. After this retreat I became more connected and active in the community. We organised a teaching tour for Fabio Andrico and I had the privilege to travel around and learn more through Fabio and his teaching, in particular I became very interested in Yantra Yoga. As passionate as I was about my work as an actor I knew the pathway was limited in terms of making money so I was aware I may need to develop something else. Not long after Fabio left I was in my home town waiting at the bus stop and incidentally there was a local paper I turned the pages and there was this advertisement, Community Artist Wanted to work with migrant women working in factories.

My art form was theatre and although I'd never really directed before I thought why not formulate an idea and go for the position and I got the job! I went to neighborhood houses, health centers, shops, English as a second language classes and factories to meet and talk with migrant women about their experiences. The local council invited women to join the project and I ended up in a

room with a diverse group of women and said ok, let's start let's play! Slowly, slowly I built their trust and confidence through theatre games and methods, encouraging them to connect with each other through movement, voice and their stories. Working in factories the conditions were often harsh, loud machine noise, physical repetition, the pressure to produce, the fear of losing one's job, daylight hours spent away from the sun, limited English, etc, all these factors contributed to a kind of numbing of the senses, whereas as the creative work was about reconnecting to the senses. After many months of creative consultation with the women, I scripted and directed a performance, each woman became the protagonist of their own story. The performance was called "She of The Workplace" and it wove women's stories of exploitation within factories, racism and tales of migration. Audiences were a mix of people who'd never seen theatre (friends and family of the women) as well theatre goers and my artistic peers. The response was overwhelmingly positive and people urged the performance work to grow. Through this I founded the Brunswick Women's Theatre, with the core mission to engage, empower and express migrant/refugee women and their stories.



Participation was not premised on the notion of talent as the only requirement was the willingness to participate and respect toward others. This project also founded my future as an artistic director

of community cultural development.

Coming back to the main point here, the teachings and Rinpoche's influence upon me and my work. The following statements "collaboration" "work with the circumstances" and "relax" have resonated at all levels of my work.

As I was working with people of different cultures it was important to foster a space of collaboration, where respect for difference was practiced. It was not however about sanitizing difference and

making everyone the same but rather connecting through stories and common human emotions and then using the power of theatre to communicate and create empathy. Mid-career I was a recipient of a two-year fellowship from the Australia council for the arts and I lived in Brazil following the work of the late and legendary leader of community cultural development “Augusto Boal” who founded the Theatre of the Oppressed. I also received an Asialink scholarship and worked in the villages of East Timor with elders and youth exploring cultural knowledge and creativity as a tool to peace building and a means to explore community issues such as education, domestic violence and child labor.

It's now 25 years on and my work has helped to powerfully engage diverse communities in addressing some of the most pressing issues of our time, including; intercultural relationships, changing values across the generations, public and private violence, trafficked women, changing futures for indigenous people, mental health, addiction, the asylum seeker story and the potential of an intercultural world. One of my performances ‘Journey of Asylum – Waiting’ was published in an anthology of plays about asylum seekers.

Navigating issues with people who come from very different countries, together in the one space can be tricky at times due to contentious histories, perhaps it's like working for the UN. I learnt to keep politics out of the creative work, and to focus only through the personal narrative. I never tell people what to say, I ask lots of questions, the main one being if you thought someone would listen, really listen what do you want to say? I consider each person to be the expert of their own experience and facilitate people's confidence to tell their story. When directing a story, I look for the humor, tragedy, love, anger, desire, contradiction in fact all the emotions. The process of scripting means I listen to everyone, and script accordingly and then through ongoing improvisation and rehearsals I throw out ideas and rescript again, sometimes the idea I want to reject is the key to the creativity and things keep cycling this way until the performance is ready

My work provides marginalized people with a creative space in which to ‘discover the need to speak and to speak the unspoken’. It is about helping people to share their experiences, which are then liberated through the act of theatre. I am not confusing the theatre with the teachings as it's an art form, but there is something special that can happen in the ritual of theatre. There is the heartbeat of the audience and the heartbeat of the performers in one space called the theatre and in this exchange, there is an opportunity to create empathy and understanding. Creating dynamic authentic theatre with the community about their stories has the capacity touch hearts, to challenge stereotypes and to reduce stigma and ignorance around many relevant social issues, perhaps I could call it documentary theatre!

M: Do you think the teachings help you to develop your capacity to handle such challenging emotions?

CS: Rinpoche is my teacher, my hero and I know the teachings have encouraged my capacity to not to be afraid of anything, to let all manifest. Self-liberation, not denying experiences, allowing

stories and feelings to manifest without judgement all the while cultivating an intention to benefit others is the aim of my creative work. The teachings are my reference and frame-work, they support me to be present to others. Simply said, I do my best to craft with what I have.

I am the facilitator and the art of the theatre is the vehicle, but the content is the people. The methods are there for the people not the inverse. I am not the content and I have to work with where people are at, because of course as you can understand, I am frequently working with very vulnerable, challenging issues, so people have to be ready, I have to respect their limit and shift their limit. When constructing drama, the aim is to express pathos but to find a point of liberation and transformation. Many participants have experienced trauma and when rendering their stories, they can touch moments of pain but equally it is about celebrating and motivating their resilience. In the end the theatre work is about giving respect and dignity to people and it is very transformative, especially when an audience truly applauds, and they are acknowledged.

People learn to work with their body, voice and mind, and when I say mind I don't mean the nature of mind, but their story telling mind. The space of creativity is a visible and invisible space, as I don't know what will happen, I don't have a formula, each time when I start I think I don't know and that is creativity, because if I know then it becomes a formula and I am not discovering something. To link it back to the teachings I could say that creativity is another way of saying "work with the circumstances" For example, I am working with the community, they are not paid to turn up, maybe somebody doesn't turn up, what do you do then? They come in different mental emotional and physical states and it is about keeping the work buoyant, in every moment, you have to work with the circumstances because nothing is particularly stable. Everything has to be flexible, it is not only about the performance itself it is about the process, what ends up on the stage is the result of a whole process, a process that has responded to every element of circumstances. That is why there isn't a formula.

M: How do you see going forward now?

CS: It has been over twenty-five years I have been doing this work. The arts are always in vulnerable position in our society but I recognize that I'm now in a relatively good position because as an artist I am making a living and helping the voice of people to be heard and have influence in the education, health and government sectors. I love what I do as I learn about the world through the people.

M: So, the question Rinpoche posed to you all those years ago, what can you do? Look what you've done! You certainly have achieved a lot.

CS: I never talk about the teachings directly in my work and I never use any terms, but for example when I do an exercise to connect and build people's confidence, I sometimes use an exercise called the mirror. You face a partner and you mirror each other, you act the other person, you follow their actions, if you really do it well then you need to be aware of many things, the feelings,

the rhythm of the breath and not just mimic external actions, and to do this you have to be very present and in the moment. I often ask people when they are doing it, "When you're in the mirror, who's judging, does the mirror judge you?" and they inevitably say "We judge ourselves" and I say "Yes it's not the mirror that judges, the mirror does not judge anything, the mirror is just the mirror, it reflects, it sees everything, so let's try to enter the mirror"