

## TIFF's Rising Star brings some 'balls' to her roles



**By Brock Weir**

As an actress, Cara Gee often dreamt of walking the red carpet on the way into a premiere.

In her starring turn in 'Empire of Dirt', she had the chance to do just that, as it bowed at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) where Ms. Gee was also named one of four 'Rising Stars'.

TIFF's Rising Star program selects just a few applicants each year for a professional 'boot camp' meeting with producers, casting directors, and making connections early on their road to stardom.

'The program is exceptional and the opportunity of a lifetime,' says Ms. Gee. 'We had meetings all day long with different producers, directors, writers, and casting directors' and it would take you potentially years to meet all these people out working. It was a real inside scoop and to have real conversations with these incredible people in the industry was just amazing.'

In Empire of Dirt, Ms. Gee plays Lena, a single mom, who had her baby as a teen and runs away from her community to Toronto. She's had a 'pretty tough go at it', says Ms. Gee, of the Aboriginal character who, at 16 years old, was living on the streets of Toronto, baby on her hip, but no resources.

'The film takes off when they hit rock bottom,' she says. 'Now she has a teenage daughter and they have nowhere to go but the home she ran away from. I'm now introducing my mother to my daughter for the first time and it is a real family drama. How do you figure out how to be a family?'

Ms. Gee shares little else with Lena but Aboriginal heritage; nevertheless, she says one can't help draw upon personal experiences to bring stories like Lena's to life. One key point of contrast: Ms. Gee describes her mother as her 'very best friend in the whole world.' Therefore lacking on personal experience dealing with a cold and distant figure like Lena's mother, she imagined what her world would be like if her own mother wasn't part of her life.

'I can't imagine not having that relationship,' she says. 'To go into a world of these characters where they have been so badly damaged, how do you learn to be a good mom? Where do you learn that from if you haven't had a good mom? In that way, I was very much drawing on my own experiences having the best mom ever, and I am very lucky for that.'

Ms. Gee now lives in Toronto, but when Empire of Dirt's producers took their production on the road, she returned to her parents' Aurora home and made it her base as they filmed in Keswick, Innisfil and Sunderland.

Gee was first bitten with the acting bug as a student at Newmarket's Huron Heights Secondary School where, rather than experiencing a drama class full of mundane activities, she was inspired by drama teacher Michael Halfin's passion for the craft. It was university level work, she says, and the serious dedication to the craft was something she never previously considered. It is now, however, second nature.

"What I love about it is you can draw on every single aspect of your life," she says. "Every single aspect of your life is valuable. I am very social by nature and I think people are fascinating. The world would be a better place if we had more empathy and care for one another."

"I think my way of contributing is to hopefully tell stories and tell them well so people can get to know a little bit more of what it is like to be somebody else."

As one of TIFF's Rising Star, hundreds of people from around the world had a chance to see her interpretations first hand. Finally having her chance to walk the red carpet, she said her visions of the red carpet as a glamorous way to enter the theatre were slightly dashed when she realised it was a little bit of a "setup", but no less special.

"It was very wild and like a blur in a lot of ways," she says of her TIFF experience, which soon helped her reap some immediate rewards. "We were programmed from very early morning and then we had screenings and a million parties afterwards. It was a phenomenal experience. It is one thing to see your agenda on paper and another to actually live it. I was told it was a whirlwind, so it is one thing to hear it but another to experience it."

"It is a complete and total launch pad. I found out halfway through TIFF that I was offered a role on the Republic of Doyle so I actually flew out on the last day of TIFF to Newfoundland. That was some next level career stuff going on there! What an honour."

The role on Republic of Doyle was originally written for a man, but casting directors clearly decided to take things in another direction. With that episode in the can, she is now working on a couple of short films with director Norman Young. The one underway right now is called "Anne Darling", in which she plays a role also originally written for a man. An addition, her dream role is to play Iago, the villain in Othello.

"These roles are neat spaces to inhabit " and bring some balls into it!"