

# Thrush 'Monsters' role from ground up

BY ERIC VOLMERS, CALGARY HERALD FEBRUARY 6, 2011



Calgary actress Michelle Thrush and Carmen Moore in the new series Blackstone.

**Photograph by:** Dan\_Power, Dan Power

On the day before production was to begin on the TV series Blackstone, Michelle Thrush rejected the clothing that had been selected for her character and set off on a mission to find a more appropriate wardrobe in Edmonton's second-hand stores.

The Calgary actress was not being difficult. But she had a specific image in mind for Gail Stoney, the grieving, alcoholic mother on the dark new TV drama about life on a corrupt and poverty-ridden reserve in Alberta.

The wardrobe department saw jeans and T-shirts for Thrush's role of a newly elected chief's troubled sister. Thrush knew that look wasn't right.

"I said 'No, no, no, you don't get it. This is my aunties and my cousins and people I've known all my life,' " says Thrush. " 'I want the huge sweatpants, I want these big cowboy boots. I want really rough and really hard.' They had all this wardrobe for me picked out and I said 'No, we've got to go to the second-hand stores and find this stuff.' "

When Thrush was approached by Blackstone creator and executive producer Ron E. Scott to play the character, she told him up front that she wanted to "Monster this role."

It was a reference to actress Charlize Theron's startling physical transformation in 2003 for her Oscar-winning role of serial killer Aileen Wuornos in the docudrama *Monster*. Similarly, Thrush wanted to completely disappear into Gail.

She built the character from the "ground up," starting with the boots and the uneasy walk of someone who is perpetually drunk. Along with the frumpy wardrobe, she had makeup fix her up with rotting teeth. She wore a stringy wig.

The transformation was so complete that Thrush says she began descending into the character's darkness even before arriving on the Edmonton-based set every day.

"I've been acting for 25 years and this is the most challenging role I've ever taken on," she says. "I was dreading her. When we would start shooting, before I would get there I would just dread her. She was so dark and so messed up and like so much of my family. I didn't want to go into that shame that she has. I've never been an alcoholic myself, but I've watched it very up close in my life in my personal family. I just was really kicking and screaming to make her into that character."

Thrush admits she was as surprised as anyone that Scott thought of her for the role. She had last worked with the Metis producer on *Mixed Blessing*, a decidedly lighter look at Alberta aboriginals. Thrush again had the "sister" role, but for that series she was ditzy, "fluffy and cute" and dressed in miniskirts and high heels.

"It was a huge honour to have him believe in me enough to know that I could go to the exact opposite of what *Mixed Blessings* was."

Thrush's uncompromising approach to the role fits with the general tone of *Blackstone*, which premiered late last month on APTN (The Aboriginal Peoples Television Network) and Showcase.

The show delves into a litany of horrors that face many aboriginal communities.

The fictional reserve of *Blackstone* is plagued by corruption in the tribal government, poverty, widespread addictions, sexual abuse and teen suicide.

Carmen Moore plays Leona Stoney, an addictions counsellor who returns to the reserve in an attempt to pry power away from a duplicitous chief (played with subtle menace by Eric Schweig) and his corrupt cronies.

She wins the election, but among other pressures she has to deal with her sister Gail, who is lost in a haze of grief and booze after the suicide of her sexually abused teenage daughter. I

t's a dark and harrowing look at life on a reserve, but Thrush makes no apologies.

"Something that I believe wholeheartedly and very passionately about is using the arts as a form of healing," she says. "I've done it for years. I've used theatre and film and writing as a form of healing. I'm a believer that with our people, because we come from an oral tradition and storytelling, the arts has a huge effect. I work with youth all across Canada using theatre to help youth identify things. I

think this is just another medium to allow the audience to see themselves in the character and the story and to ask what they are doing to try to create change."

While Thrush's family were originally from the Nenakeet First Nation in Saskatchewan, she grew up in Calgary. Both her parents were alcoholics and Thrush had trouble fitting in at Bowness High School in the 1980s.

While a school production of *Heaven Can Wait* introduced her to a new world of possibilities in theatre, she felt alienated in a school where there were only two or three native teens.

Bad marks and a "few fist fights" led her to leave Bowness for the now-defunct Plains Indian Cultural Survival School in Calgary, where she further immersed herself in acting.

Still, when she won her first role in the 1984 TV movie *Isaac Littlefeathers*, the then 17-year-old actress told the *Calgary Herald* that she was more interested in social work than acting.

Nevertheless, it sparked a 25-year career that has included roles in numerous TV and film - including a role in the Johnny Depp film *Dead Man* - and numerous one-woman theatrical shows that she toured across the country.

She still travels throughout Canada performing for aboriginal children as Majica, the aboriginal healing clown. Contributing to the community, Thrush says, has become more important than winning juicy roles. Representing her people on screen is "a blessing," she says.

As for Gail, Thrush admits that playing the character was emotionally draining. But she credits some outside sources of power for helping her master the role.

"I'm a firm believer in inviting the grandmothers to guide me," she says. "Gail hits rock bottom, which is in the fourth episode, and ends up in the hospital on kidney dialysis. There's scene where she is walking along a ditch and she is right out of it. I know I wasn't doing it by myself. I could feel there were other powers working with me. And that's something I've felt a lot in my career and I trust that."

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