Michelle Forbes Delves Into The Darkness Of Durham County
Posted by: Diane in Durham County

Michelle ForbesBy Diane Kristine Wild of TV, eh?

A new neighbour is coming to Durham County with some dark new secrets. The second season of the acclaimed television drama, set to air on Canada's The Movie Network and Movie Central next year, is adding cast member Michelle Forbes (In Treatment, Battlestar Galactica) as the latest foil for Hugh Dillon's Mike Sweeney.

The atmospheric series returns in the aftermath of the Sweeney family's encounter with serial killer Ray Prager. Forbes plays Dr. Penelope Verity, a forensic psychiatrist who quickly develops a bond with the detective.

"Penelope is quite troubled, to say the least, because of what's happening and because of some trauma that had not been dealt with or transformed when she was younger," Forbes revealed in a recent interview, though she was careful not to provide details that would give away the intricate plotting of the six-part series. "All of this comes bubbling to the surface. There's a certain fracturing of her soul and her mind, and she's desperately trying to grab onto Mike Sweeney."

"It's been wonderfully challenging to play and it's a very emotional story. That's just what's going on with my character. Everyone has about 15 things going on, so it's a very complex, very wonderfully interwoven story. Each character is beautifully and gracefully fleshed out."

The actress doesn't see her character as the same sort of nemesis as the first season's Prager. "I know where her distortions are coming from and I have an enormous amount of empathy for that," she explained. "I think there's an enormous amount of love and hurt at the core of Penelope's distortions, whereas I think – and this is the difference between men and women – I think that at the core of Ray Prager's distortions, it was about ego and bravado. And of course hurt and what he went through as a child, but certainly what it turned into as a man was the need to conquer and be powerful. That is not the engine for Penelope."

Forbes found herself "riveted" by the first season of the series. "I was really seduced by the darkness of it, by the truth of it. Laurie Finstad (Knizhnik), our writer, has this extraordinary ability to hold up this frail, human dark side of ourselves and confront it. That was what was so compelling to me and made me jump at the chance to be a part of it."

With women executive producing the series, including Knizhnik, who recently won a Gemini for writing on the show, and director Adrienne Mitchell, Durham County now turns its attention to the darkness of a female antagonist.

“I think that it’s still not allowed for women to have as much rage or darkness as men. It’s not socially acceptable, it’s not ladylike, it’s not expected, it’s not allowed,” Forbes said. She tried to read up on violence and women before shooting began, but found much of the literature shied away from that topic. “That’s what I love so much about Laurie as a writer. She’s not afraid. She has an enormous amount of courage and boldness to walk into this world both guns a-blaring.”

“She’s created such a complex character – fingers crossed I can live up to it – but it does confront the darkness and the rage and the confusion, that idea of not being seen for being fully who you are, with your frailties, with your weakness, with your possible failures in motherhood. All those things are really not allowed, and she’s shone this big interrogation light on it. I feel honoured to be a part of that.”

Hugh Dillon, Michelle ForbesDurham County admirably avoids the good guy versus bad guy dichotomy, opting for a more complex portrayal of the darkness within all its characters, and, sometimes, the glimmers of light. In season one, Mike Sweeney was that most disquieting of protagonists, a man whose flaws pale only in comparison to the serial killer next door – low standards indeed.

Sweeney’s likability is also enhanced by the enormous charisma of Hugh Dillon, and Forbes was full of praise for the man behind the character. “I think he’s my new favourite person in the whole world. He’s one of the funniest people I’ve ever met in my life,” she raved. “How a company is formed is really from the leader, and he’s such a wonderful leader. He’s warm and funny and generous and committed and earnest. Everyone – the crew, the cast – we’re all just totally devoted to him. We adore him.”

“I’ve really been lucky to have him to stand opposite for what is really a challenging role,” she continued. “He’s the real deal. He’s just the coolest guy in the world. There’s no nonsense with him and you can’t ask for anything better than that.”

Both actors tend to bring an onscreen intensity to their roles. Though she bristles at the suggestion, Forbes is most widely known for her roles in a couple of iconic science fiction series, playing Ensign Ro Laren in Star Trek: The Next Generation and Admiral Helena Cain in Battlestar Galactica. “It just cracks me up. I did about nine hours of Star Trek and five hours of Battlestar. That means I’ve done 14 hours of science fiction in 20 years. And then you do these wonderful shows like Homicide, these beautifully dramatic shows, and everyone’s like, ‘I don’t really remember that.’”

It seems an uncomfortable fit, then, that those roles have cemented her place in the science fiction fandom when she isn’t a fan of the genre herself. “I didn’t have anything against it, but in fact I didn’t even get science fiction until I did Battlestar. Science fiction was just of no interest to me whatsoever until then, when I finally got it, the idea of looking forward to understand who we are today. It lets us ask these questions now before it’s too late, to use it as a metaphysical and political mirror to what’s happening to us now. That is the beauty of that show for me, that and the absolute glory of Ron Moore’s writing, which still throws me for a loop.”

Though she's spent a lot of time working on American series in Canada, including Battlestar Galactica, Durham County marks her first Canadian production. Currently shooting in Montreal, Forbes has fallen in love with the city – even with the recent snow - and relishes the opportunity to work outside the Hollywood system. "I love working for the BBC, and I've had just a fantastic experience here. All of that Hollywood nonsense just disappears. It's really just about getting down to work, getting your hands dirty, and having a laugh. Which is exactly what we've done here. I've had a brilliant time here."

Michelle Forbes in In TreatmentShe doesn't see her career full of strong characters as outside the norm, and she sees the idea of strength as something of a trap in any case. "I'm always hoping to bring humanity and vulnerability to the cliché of the strong woman. I've always sort of hated that term 'strong woman' because it implies that most women aren't. Nobody ever really uses that when talking about a man."

"I've been incredibly lucky to find these writers like Ron Moore, Rodrigo Garcia, Alan Ball, Laurie Finstad, where it's not even an issue who's stronger and weaker – they just write. I don't know how I got to be so lucky to work with these writers."

Though she's a fan of 30 Rock, she finds the broadcast networks are more limited in fleshing out the kind of roles that attract her. "I don't mean to sound like a snob against the majors, but when I'm reading scripts I can barely get through one of those. We've seen it all before and it's not terribly interesting. Cable is the place to be. Or you have to leave the country and work for the BBC, as I tend to do, or now, come to Canada and work for these gals."

"Penelope's really quite different from anyone I've played. There's a strain of that rage and frustration I've felt in other characters but in a totally different way. There have been moments of me just grabbing on to Laurie or grabbing on to Hugh and saying 'oh my God.' It's been a right challenge for me and that's really good. She's really quite unlike anyone I've played before."

Forbes is juggling three series at the moment – she's back to shooting In Treatment and True Blood after finishing Durham County in a few weeks – and values the opportunity to do such diverse work.

"I'm always looking for the best writing, maybe great actors to work opposite, something that intrigues me as far as exploring something new in a character. I sort of got stuck playing the same character for a wee while, but that's
really changed. I'm doing three stories right now and they're all incredibly different."

"You asked me if I had any plans for my career: that's all I've ever wanted, is variety and the chance to explore different parts of the human condition and our psyches."

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