

Cover story

The busy world of Danielle

Actress Danielle Cormack has never been one to shy from multiple projects. We're about to see a lot more of her soon in the film *Separation City* and in TV's much-buzzed about *The Cult*, writes Sarah Lang.

DANIELLE CORMACK is going mental. At least that's what she says on the phone when she calls to again postpone our interview — not that you can hold it against her.

On the day we finally meet, the award-winning TV/film/theatre actor is dashing between three jobs — as wardrobe mistress for short film *Redemption*, and filming two TV shows: new local, *Lost*-esque drama *The Cult* (onscreen in September) and Walt Disney fantasy series *Legend of the Seeker*.

She's also just seen off 13-year-old son Ethan on his first day back at school, but is somehow squeezing in a soda and a chat in the lead-up to the release of homegrown 'dramedy' *Separation City* on August 6.

After a stint crisscrossing the Tasman for theatre gigs, Cormack was ready to sink her teeth into the relatively rare meat of a New Zealand feature film (penned by cartoonist Tom Scott). In her signature naturalistic style, she plays uber-organised, overtired, libido-less mum-of-two Pam, whose relationship with husband Simon — played by on-the-up Aussie actor Joel Edgerton — has become about as familiar and exciting as an old sock. This has left him with a wandering eye that settles on mutual friend Kati, played by heavyweight English actress Rhona Mitra (*Boston Legal*, *Underworld: Rise Of The Lycans*). Cormack, who admits everyone knows everyone in the New Zealand acting fishpond, relished the injection of internationals into a film that "didn't necessarily feel completely Kiwi".

Because she's flying from Auckland to the Wellington premiere on Wednesday, Cormack hasn't watched the film (on DVD) until just before we met. "I thought I better take a look at it before I start talking about it." She agrees it's a little depressing about the prognosis for long-term relationships. "But I don't necessarily aspire to that conventional relationship anyway — the ones I've had haven't particularly conformed." She can relate only vicariously, not personally, she says, to the film's "successful, white, middle-class family with two kids" and their smug-married friends.

Cormack hopes the film will inspire debate about the nature of romantic relationships. "Are we supposed to be monogamous for the rest of our lives? How do you keep that element of surprise going in your relationship because, you know, the biology of humans is such that we don't have chemistry pumping through our veins for our entire relationship with someone."

The 38-year-old is notoriously private about her private life. Partly because other people's feelings are involved; partly because her work is the *raison d'être* of the interview; and partly because she just doesn't think it's that interesting. "I wish I could say I'm dating Judy Bailey right now," she jokes, "but I don't know what Judy would think of that!"

"But hold on, let me think about this because maybe I don't feel so guarded about it now — it's a cliché isn't it, the actor or the person in the spotlight wanting to keep their personal life



WEDDED BLISS?: With co-star Joel Edgerton in *Separation City*.

personal. I'm a walking cliché!" She ponders but decides it's still not for public consumption. "Maybe I never kiss and tell. If I do, I'll give you a call."

Cormack, who pulls off a funky rock-chick outfit, could certainly pull a newsreader. We first glimpsed her lean limbs and well-documented curls on shoulder-padded late-80s soap *Gloss*. Fast forward 20 years and Cormack doesn't look much older, but her CV has certainly plumped up. As well as a dozen feature films (including *The Price of Milk*, *Topless Women Talk About Their Lives*, *Channelling Baby*, *Via Satellite*, *A Song of Good*) and several short films, she's also notched up 20 plays here, across the Tasman, and occasionally further afield.

But it's the small screen where much of the work is. TV credits include *Maddigan's Quest*, *Rude Awakenings*, *The Strip*, *Marlin Bay*, *City Homicide*, and *Shortland Street*. Just don't go summing her up as "ex-*Shortland Street*er Danielle Cormack", a description she read recently, despite the fact that her core-cast-member role as nurse Alison Raynor was back in 1992-93 — and it's not as though she has been a one-trick pony since. "Acting kept on finding me."

Playing everything from a headstrong hippie to a poncy Ponsonby professional, Cormack has avoided being typecast by mixing it up workwise. Sometimes saying yes comes down to needing the money ("I just bought a \$500 car off the side of the road"), but usually it's because there's something about a project, perhaps the role, theme, director or cast, that really attracts her.

The Vagina Monologues, *Spare Prick*, *A Streetcar*



JANNA DIXON

Named Desire, *Topless Women* and now *Separation City* — you'll notice Cormack's never been shy of projects where sex, whether explicit or implicit, is central. Pointing out sex was often the selling-point but not the essence of these projects, Cormack says getting intimate can be awkward, but necessary to the story. "I've never really had that much of a problem with it [sex scenes], which might be quite telling actually. If there's no nudity in this project, I don't want to take part!" she laughs.

So as a late-30s, as opposed to a 20-something actress, is it ever a feast-or-famine situation? Whether her youthful looks have anything to do with it, and while she doesn't want to jinx it, the simple answer is "no". The offers keep coming.

While she gets enough work from her base out "Westside" in Henderson suburbia, yes, she's had the urge to do the whole uproot-to-Hollywood thing "in fits and starts. But I'm a realist." Getting snapped up at your first LA audition can happen, she says, but many wannabe starlets have laboured under an illusion of easy success. Still, she reckons it's easier to get US work nowadays in the age of strong agent contacts.

That's how she picked up work in US company Pacific Renaissance Pictures' fantasy shows including *Hercules*, *Cleopatra*, *Amazon High* and *Xena*, the latter of which earned her a flurry of fan letters, a spot on the convention circuit and a 2003 berth aboard a cruise-ship of groupies. Fantasy shows are "an opportunity to really dress



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THE CULT: As mad scientist sidekick Cynthia.

up and have a bit of fun, running around with imaginary friends and oversized weapons," she says with a laugh, plus it's nice to do something a little lighter occasionally, and something her son wants to watch.

Since her pregnancy was incorporated into the plotline of 1997's *Topless Women*, juggling motherhood with multiple projects (in various stages from conception to completion) has required a take-it-day-by-day approach. "Actually, second by second." But it beats working 9 to 5. "I don't know what would happen to me if I had a 9-to-5 job. I don't know what would happen to that job!"

The flexibility of the acting industry — where just about everyone (apart from *Shortland Street*ers perhaps) are perennial freelancers — frees up time for other pursuits. TV-host work includes presenting Alt TV music show *Fire It Up!* and fronting an *Intrepid Journeys* trip to Syria (where she was propositioned by a sheik in return for camels). Radio, in which she's dabbled as a BFM and Kiwi FM DJ, is her back-up career — she also wouldn't mind being an architect, a designer or working in fashion — but for now she's meshing her love of music and writing as one half of band Bob Geldof with Jonny Brugh whose experimental music is set to her "tongue-in-cheek poetry and stories". She's also dabbling in play and short-story writing, collaborating with writer Karyn Hay on a poetry book and fitting in the occasional gig as MC, event presenter and speaker. But acting is still her bread-and-butter.

Although she enjoys the fast-turnaround challenge of TV, and seeing the "magic" end-result of a film, her favourite medium is theatre because of its immediacy, character breadth, flexibility and "forgiveness. I can play a 90-year-old woman. I can play a 13-year-old boy."

Critically-acclaimed 2007 solo show *The Case of Katherine Mansfield*, for which she adopted a severe bob, has been her most challenging role to date, partly because Mansfield's verbatim quotes didn't translate easily to the stage.

One of Mansfield's quotes was: "Risk, risk everything. Care not for what people say, for fear breeds failure". And that's how Cormack does things.

"I don't think you can find out things about the world or about yourself if you don't take a step with a certain amount of risk... You never know what's around the corner."

Separation City is out in cinemas August 6. *The Cult* debuts on TV2 in September.



On TV

Fly me to the moon

The historic 1969 lunar landing is dramatised in tonight's Prime TV drama *Moonshot*. Cliff Taylor chats to star Andrew Lincoln about his role.

THE WORD "hero" may have been devalued in recent times by association with lucky survivors and overpaid sportsmen, but for some historical figures it's a title easily worn.

Like the astronauts of the Apollo 11 mission in 1969 who flew to the moon, landed and flew back again — three pioneers who risked their lives in every moment of what was truly a journey into the unknown.

"They were some of the last heroes," says British actor Andrew Lincoln, who plays astronaut Michael Collins in tonight's Prime television docu-drama *Moonshot: The Flight of Apollo 11*. "They went up strapped to a rocket they used to launch nuclear warheads on. They sat on that and went to the moon. They are heroes those guys, they're unreal."

The youthful looking 36-year-old Lincoln, best known for his role as Egg in the 1990s hit BBC series *This Life*, and for his appearance in the hit film *Love Actually*, spent six weeks filming *Moonshot* on location in Lithuania.

The feature-length drama was made to mark the 40th anniversary of the moon landing on July 20, 1969. Collins was one of the three men on that mission, although his fate was to stay in the command module alone in space while Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin descended to the lunar surface to make the first life-changing moon walk.

Lincoln (whose real name is Clutterbuck) says he and fellow actors Australian Daniel Lapaine and American James Marsters (best known to New Zealand audiences as Spike in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), were acutely aware of the responsibility of playing historical figures who carried out possibly the most famous act of all time.

The first week of shooting included extensive lectures in physics so the actors would understand the complex tasks they were required to portray.

"This moment was like the Kennedy assassination," says Lincoln of the moon landing. "It had a profound effect on the whole world. A lot of people are very, very well informed about it. It's difficult dramatising something the whole world knows about. That's why when you do something like this you want it to be absolutely authentic. There was no point in doing it half-heartedly. It's an extraordinary story on every level."

However, one thing that was not authentic was the location. The producers decided to shoot in Lithuania because, in Lincoln's words, it was "cheap as chips". Lincoln says it did get surreal at times. "I couldn't believe the locations. We used Gorbachev's old home to fill in for the Space Centre and we had people like the Cadillac club of Lithuania turning up with all these rockabilly guys. I thought 'what on earth are we doing here?' The producers made \$2 million look like \$7 million."

The production, by Dangerous Films, the company behind *9/11: The Twin Towers* and

Human Body: Pushing the Limits, employs a mixture of conventional drama, CGI effects and archive footage to perfectly recreate the era of the space race and demonstrate how the push for the moon was accomplished over many years.

It still seems scarcely believable that they could have succeeded with such comparatively crude equipment and untested technology. Lincoln is in awe of the men who accomplished their extraordinary mission four decades ago. "Their computer had the processing power of a digital watch. Collins had to press 93 buttons to programme the setting for the computer in the command module. These guys were f***ing machines. They were the top guns."

The film reveals that President Nixon had two speeches written — one to mark the success of the mission and another to mourn the three astronauts if they had perished.

At one point the lunar module broke down as Armstrong and Aldrin prepared to leave the moon. The entire fate of the mission rested on one of the astronauts being able to jam the nib of a pen into a circuit breaker switch to get the vehicle started.

"These guys were f*ing machines. They were the top guns."**

ANDREW LINCOLN

But, while *Moonshot* vividly portrays the technological challenges and sense of history, the heart of the drama lies in the complex, even competitive, relationship between the three astronauts who Collins later described as "amiable strangers".

Lincoln says Collins and Armstrong have always been "notoriously shy" since the mission, but Aldrin had some contact with the crew during the making of *Moonshot*. Lincoln says the clash of egos could not be ignored in the telling of the wider story.

"It was a very important part of that mission. These were the most famous people on the planet."

It is partly as a result of the almost mythical nature of the moon landing that an industry of conspiracy theories has dogged the event since the 1960s, with some maintaining that the "landing" was filmed in a secret studio as a Cold War propaganda tool.

Lincoln has no time for doubters. "If it was a conspiracy theory why would they continue to send people to the moon? It's bizarre. The more I read, the more I think there can be no doubt. We would have heard. We live in such a cynical age. I think it's deeply insulting to the bravery and extraordinary efforts of those men."

Moonshot plays on Prime tonight at 8.30pm.