

SPARTACIUS

THE BRINGER OF RAIN

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INTERVIEW WITH JESSICA GRACE SMITH

MARCH 2011

THE BRINGER OF RAIN.NET: *I want to thank you for allowing me and your fans to interview you! Would you tell us a little about yourself? What was growing up like for you?*

JESSICA GRACE SMITH: My pleasure! I grew up in a small town called Dannevirke in New Zealand on a farm. I had a part time job all the way through high school at the local supermarket and then also at the Fish 'n' Chip shop. I went to 3 different high schools. In my final year of high school I went to Argentina on an exchange for a year, where I learnt to speak Spanish and met some of my best friends. I've played field hockey since I was about 4 years old until last year - I actually had to miss the last bit of the season because of filming. I love to keep fit and active, and I LOVE the beach - (in NZ I live about 5 min walk from a beach). I'm really close to my family, I have two brothers (one who lives in Philly actually) – I'm the middle child and I guess because of that I've always been a bit of a tomboy. My parents are great and really supportive of my career choice, even though the lack of stability and uncertainty of it freaks them out a bit I think!

THE BRINGER OF RAIN.NET: *How were you approached for the show? Did you audition? Did you do a screen test?*

JESSICA GRACE SMITH: Yes, my agent here in NZ (Johnson & Laird) sent me the brief and asked if I was keen to audition, which I was - and it was that simple, I found out I got the part the week after I'd done the audition. Actually it was lucky I even made it to the audition because I was driving back from working on another show about 4 hours away, and I made it with 5 mins to spare!

THE BRINGER OF RAIN.NET: *When you saw yourself on the screen for the first time, what was your first thought?*

JESSICA GRACE SMITH: Hmmmm.... Good lighting!! Haha.

THE BRINGER OF RAIN.NET: *Which genre is your favorite?*

JESSICA GRACE SMITH: I suppose... Drama. I would love to work in more period projects as well, love the costuming. And you can't beat a good rom-com. For watching I would say the only genre I would veto is horror. I can deal with a good psychological thriller, but movies like the Saw series for example are way too hard core for me!

THE BRINGER OF RAIN.NET: *What do you think you would do if you weren't an actress?*

JESSICA GRACE SMITH: That's tough. I'd say it'd be something in the creative area still. One of those people that sits around trying to come up with the next awesome kids toy. Or around the writers table at 30 rock, or Shameless, or Modern Family. Now that'd be fun.

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THE BRINGER OF RAIN.NET: *Is there anyone you'd really like to work with? Who was your favorite actor growing up?*

JESSICA GRACE SMITH: Oh man. Yes. Lots. Judi Dench, Toni Collette, Meryl Streep... Clint Eastwood, Steven Spielberg, Tom Hardy, Ed Norton, Tom Hanks. When I was a kid I think my favourite actor was Macaulay Culkin. My Girl. Home Alone. Genius.

THE BRINGER OF RAIN.NET: *What your first day on the Spartacus set was like? Did you know any of the cast before the filming started?*

JESSICA GRACE SMITH: I didn't know anyone but I'd met them all at a dinner at Lucy's house and at the episode read thru's, so I was acquainted. I'd say I was a little shy but Lesley-Ann was awesome, she took me under her wing from the beginning, I just remember her taking my arm on the first day and talking to me about Diona/Naevia's relationship and how close they are. We got along really well and still skype each other to catch up with the latest.

THE BRINGER OF RAIN.NET: *How would you describe your character, Diona, in Spartacus: Gods of the Arena?*

JESSICA GRACE SMITH: She's naive, young, excitable, quite full of lust in the beginning. I think she is desperate by the end, but still strong and brave.

THE BRINGER OF RAIN.NET: *What's next for Jessica Grace Smith?*

JESSICA GRACE SMITH: There are things in the pipeline! I am waiting to have complete confirmation on a specific project, Spartacus has been a great platform already. I plan to shift to Sydney very soon and will be in LA for a spell in April as well.

FAN QUESTIONS

CZARINA GOMEZ: *How do you feel about working in a show like Spartacus, and how do you think it has impacted the way an audience views Ancient Roman society?*

JESSICA GRACE SMITH: I feel lucky to have worked on a show that gave me material as challenging as Spartacus. I think through watching Spartacus people are possibly more aware of the general Christian values held in society these days, even if we don't personally believe in them. Back in Ancient Rome these didn't exist, people didn't deny their sexuality and lived more passionately – everything was a matter of life and death. I really like the portrayal of Barca in this world for this reason, there is a lack of shame within him and generally with everyone around him.

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MARK: *Your role as Diona had limited dialogue requiring facial expressions and body language to convey emotion. How did you prepare for your scenes? By the way, I think you were wonderful!*

JESSICA GRACE SMITH: Thanks Mark! I prepared for my scenes by reading about the times we are portraying, and understanding the world Diona lived in: her routines, what she liked, which gladiators she had crushes on, what her worst chores were, where she could hide, where her mother was, how she considered Naevia a sister, when she could steal the grapes off the table without Domina seeing! I thought about all of the things that make up a person, I wanted Diona to be a three dimensional character, someone you believed.

MEG: *Who is your favorite Gladiator?*

JESSICA GRACE SMITH: Hmmmm. That's tough!! I think Ashur, because he's sneaky and I think Nick really layers the character well. Even though we don't really like what Ashur is up to a lot of the time, we can see that this is his method of survival – even more obvious from the GOTA background now shown.

QUEEN: *Hi Jessica, First off, I want to say that I loved your portrayal of the slave girl Diona on Spartacus: Gods of the Arena. My question is, was it difficult for you act out the scenes of your character being so violated and used as a sex slave?*

JESSICA GRACE SMITH: Thanks Queen. To be honest, and this may sound a little odd, but I really relished the chance to play such a destroyed character. The directors I worked with were all fantastic, and everything was really professionally handled the whole time. I felt extremely comfortable while I was working on set, and the crew especially helped in that area. I think as actors we have a desire to understand what different experiences are like, no matter how awful, and portray them so others may have an empathy or an understanding too.

BRANDON: *First let me say that you are the most beautiful woman on the face of Earth. Okay for the question; I read online that you grew up/spent several years of your life on a farm I was wondering did you enjoy that kind of life and upbringing? Many thanks!*

JESSICA GRACE SMITH: Thank you Brandon! I did enjoy the small town farm life growing up, but I have to admit I was always looking for the next new thing and often felt like things were a bit slow. I did learn to drive a tractor and ride quad bikes - I love all that stuff! I have always been really independent though and when I left home at 17 to go and live in Argentina, I never went back to live with my parents. I moved to the capital city when I got back to NZ and I moved to Auckland last year (where Spartacus is shot) and will move again in a few weeks to Sydney! So I'm a bit of a gypsy :-)

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CRIS/OLANSAMUELLE: *From episode 3 your character's storyline kind of barreled its way to tartarus, and most of your scenes, really hard ones are based on non-verbals (wow, kudos and thanks for your brilliant performance). Were you given / did you figure out a backstory for Diona (origins, relationship w/ Naevia...) to help you prepare what seems a really emotionally draining character? Thankies:)*

JESSICA GRACE SMITH: Hey, oh I think this is really similar to Mark's question above, or at least my answer is pretty much the same. Yes, definitely, I spent a lot of time developing who Diona was to me, and because of the lack of dialogue and exposition about her past, I did work on her backstory. Lesley-Ann and I often talked about how good Diona & Naevia had it when Titus was Dominus and how things were slowly changing and making us worried and scared. I think the smallest of details can really inform a character so I like to spend time getting to know the characters I play.

MIRRIAM: *Your performance as Diona was brief but haunting - you definitely left your mark on a very sympathetic audience (I totally cried). My question is: what's next? Another dramatic role? Or will we get to see a silly side of you?*

JESSICA GRACE SMITH: Oh, I wish I knew but time will tell!! I would love to do a comedy of sorts (check out [Diagnosis: Death](#), a film I did a couple of years ago for a bit of comedy/horror/craziness!). I'd be very keen to do more period work, but also something modern with a bit of sassy drama.

BRANDON: *You are such a talented actress and have such a bright future ahead of you, do you think it is important to not fall into the same dangerous trends and temptations that most young stars do? ie, Lindsay Lohan, Charlie Sheen, etc.*

JESSICA GRACE SMITH: Yeah, It's important to surround yourself with generous people that support and build you up, and aren't jealous or try to bring you down. I think it's best to focus on the work. To me acting is my job, and consider it just as valid as the next person's line of work, but not more. My friends and family definitely keep me grounded.

LISA SWANSON: *First of all, I want to say that your performance in Gods of the Arena was phenomenal. You really made your character come to life for the audience. I would like to know what prompted you to try for a role in Spartacus, and did you just begin acting or have you been doing it for a while?*

JESSICA GRACE SMITH: I've been acting for a while now and have been in a couple of films and some television, but by no means was I an early starter. I was completely terrified of public speaking in high school, I always wanted to try acting but I was too scared. But at some point my passion outweighed my fear, and I recently graduated from Toi Whakaari: NZ Drama School

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which is a fantastic school. To be honest I was slightly apprehensive about doing Spartacus at first because of the nature of the role, but after meeting with the producers I felt really comfortable and I'm really happy with how it's turned out, I feel that the story has been portrayed brutally honestly. Which I like.

NiomiN: *I read you lived in Argentina and speak fluent Spanish. Was there any particular life experience you had in Argentina that influenced your decision to become an actress? And if so, what exactly?*

PS: do you have Twitter or a Facebook page? Thank you!

JESSICA GRACE SMITH: Yes, just recently a Facebook page has been made, you can find it here: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Jessica-Grace-Smith/208970919120510> I will check in every now and then to let you all know what is coming up for me!

Interesting question actually. It wasn't so much that it influenced my decision specifically towards becoming an actress, however I lost someone very close to me in Argentina, and that made me realise life was really short, and that it should be filled with doing things you love. So I made a list of jobs I thought I might love. Acting was first on the list and so far I haven't had to move down to number two (luckily as it was becoming a professional field hockey player and I really think I've missed that calling!)

AUDREY GORMAN: *I just loved the character Diona and your performance in that role. Going from an innocent girl to being savagely raped several times, how were you able to express the emotion or the lack of emotion necessary for these difficult scenes? You did it so well! I was so sad to see your character executed in the finale. I was so hoping you would be returning in Season 2. All the best in your career. Looking forward to seeing your future work!*

JESSICA GRACE SMITH: Thanks so much Audrey. I have always had a big imagination. And I think that's what it takes to express what a character is feeling. Once I really asked myself what such a horrifying ordeal like that might be like, it was very easy to let my imagination run wild. I think it's sadder when Diona becomes kind of numb, and stops feeling because it hurts too much. The writers did very well to trick everyone that I may escape forever and return in season 2!!

BONNIE ARMENDARIZ: *Jessica, you were very captivating and memorable in "GOTA". You totally drew us in with your talent... very saddened to see Diona's fate and what was done to her. Who have you looked to as a role model when studying to be an actress? Will we be seeing in any new films soon, maybe even in a Spanish speaking role? Totally look forward to following your career!*

JESSICA GRACE SMITH: Thank you!! I would love to do a Spanish speaking role. But they are very few and far between at least down under, when I was in Argentina last year I was making enquiries about this so maybe one day. Role models to me... to be honest I keep them quite close

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to home - Miranda Harcourt, Sophie Roberts - these are actresses here in NZ who just keep working, making their own theatre and films, and are paving the way for themselves, it's inspiring. There's something about having the power over your own career in this industry that is incredibly attractive.

JACKIE INGRAM: *Is there an academy winning role that you wish you could have played?*

JESSICA GRACE SMITH: It is fresh in my mind, but I would have to say Natalie Portman's Black Swan. Beautiful.