

# Stepford shrink

In *Desperate Housewives* she plays uptight Bree, clearly a candidate for the couch; but in real life the actress Marcia Cross is more used to being the therapist than the patient, says Sharon Krum

Imagine if one day your therapist suddenly announced that she was mandating you and your fellow patients and putting the couch and tissue box in storage. And that she had landed a starring role in the most popular show on TV, playing a housewife who is in equal parts Martha Stewart and Diana, Princess of Wales. How would you feel? This is, in fact, not a hypothetical question.

The actress Marcia Cross, who trained at the acclaimed Juilliard School in New York, was that therapist and her former patients are likely to be in shock as they watch her every week on *Desperate Housewives* ("I can't believe I confided my deepest fears to her"). Perhaps they find comfort in the thought that compared to Marcia's problems on the fictional Wisteria Lane (perfectionism, a cheating husband, a friend's suicide, a rebel son, conviving neighbours) their issues are a day at the beach.

She is, of course, Bree Van De Kamp, arguably the most interesting character on the TV series that is both a cult hit and worldwide phenomenon. Women from London to Sydney are fixated on the oestrogen-soaked residents of Wisteria Lane, wives so desperate that they take their children's Ritualin, burn down houses and bake scones for their husband's mistress in prison. Yet before *Cross*, 43, became Bree she had stepped away from Hollywood for a year — breaking from a successful career that included a soap opera, two Shakespeare plays and the TV series *Melrose Place* — to take a different role: Marcia Cross, the psychotherapist.

"I have always loved psychology, so while I was acting I took an introductory class," she says. "Then I thought, why not keep going?" So she enrolled in school (obtaining her masters in psychology from Antioch University in 2002) and was studying as well as acting for a number of years. But there came a point where I wasn't getting any acting work and I was getting bored, and I didn't want to act just to be on TV. I need to do something that has meaning to me, so I decided to devote myself to clinical training."

For a year (in 2002) Cross worked at the Maple Counseling Centre in Beverly Hills, practising one-on-one psychodynamic therapy — a talk therapy with a specific aim, such as sorting out a particular phobia, as opposed to the more free-ranging psychoanalysis with adults. She can't discuss individual patients, citing confidentiality. "But I take seriously the work that I did with them and I have a pang of guilt for moving on and being in the public eye. But I loved the work. I think therapy is an amazing profession and sacred career."

Cross herself went into therapy for the first time in her early twenties. "I had to break up with my first love and didn't know how to do it. It didn't want to hurt somebody. So I had therapy and saw the value of it. This idea people have that we should cope on our own is erroneous." She has since returned a number of times. "I had some hard things to deal with in the last decade — a lot of soul searching and growing. Someone I loved died," she says referring to her partner, the actor Richard Jordan, who died in 1993 of a brain tumour. "You go to doctors for everything else, why not take care of our emotional health?"

We are sitting in Elixir, a Los Angeles herbal tea and tonic cafe, and in these meadow surrounds Cross fits right in. Wearing green khakis, leather thongs, a white shirt and "om" (as in the yoga chant) necklace, she has a soft voice and particularly serene disposition. Recent newspaper headlines crowing over a reported fight between Cross and her *Housewives* co-star Teri Hatcher on a Vanity Fair swimwear shoot — the article claimed that Cross, taking exception to Hatcher having the first pick of the swimsuits, launched into an angry tirade — seem impossible to square with the calm woman before me. This Marcia Cross seems too emotionally evolved to succumb to diva behaviour (she was happy to step away from Hollywood, after all), and too interested in what makes other people tick to make an exhibition of herself.

So aside from the bright red hair and porcelain skin, she appears to share little with her controlling, perfectionist television alter ego. "Oh I'm nothing like Bree, that's for sure," she laughs. "I'm kind of messy." But she is a careful, thoughtful listener in conversation, and you can see clearly the therapist that she once was.

"I love acting," she says, explaining why she returned to it. "I just think it's the most fascinating, creative, process that you can go through — inhabiting another person. But I've been interested in human behaviour my whole life. As part of my audition for Juilliard, I wrote an essay about taking the train (from Massachusetts, where she was born, to New York) and passing all the small towns and wondering who

was in those houses, what their lives were like."

Though Cross has studied everyone from Freud to Jung to R.D. Laing, she refuses to pledge allegiance to any one school. "I think they all have merit, the approach depends on the person. I do, however, believe strongly in attachment theory. So much of our lives is set up when we are children. Look at children who are not tended to and you see a failure to thrive. To me the key to developing all healthy interaction is early nurturing."

Asked about the first time she counselled a patient, Cross puts her head in her hands. It was, she says, more fraught with nerves than any acting job. "If I had a bad take or don't remember my lines, who cares? Worst-case scenario you do it again or I get fired. But these were real lives. You can't do another take." Unlike when they are acting, Cross puts her head in her hands. It was, she says, more fraught with nerves than any acting job. "If I had a bad take or don't remember my lines, who cares? Worst-case scenario you do it again or I get fired. But these were real lives. You can't do another take."

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she plays Bree. This character is a housewife whose picture-perfect, obsessively tidy life (in one episode she started cleaning while having sex) elicits a mixture of pity, laughter and recognition from women. So much of our lives is set up when we are children. Look at children who are not tended to and you see a failure to thrive. To me the key to developing all healthy interaction is early nurturing."

She nods. She has theories. For one, there is a groundswell of overwhelmed, under-appreciated housewives out there whose frustrations with demanding children and husbands suddenly have a voice: "Women project on to the characters, they identify with them. They enjoy watching some characters, such as Bree, just to be able to say: 'Thank God I'm not like her.'"

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Behind the mask: Marcia Cross, main picture, in full war-paint and au naturel, shopping in Beverly Hills

Cross herself has tremendous empathy for women such as Bree, modern-day Stepford wives whose lives are falling apart beneath the facade: "There are women bred to believe that they have to keep up a good front at all costs. I understand Bree. She's doing what she thinks is going to keep her safe in the world. And I think there are a lot of Brees out there, from Park Avenue to Park Lane. It doesn't make them bad; it's just how they cope."

In fact, by becoming the poster girl for professional housewives everywhere, Cross has also morphed into her own psychological experiment; the lab rat undergoing megadoses of fame. Kicked now everyone from the paparazzi to the supermarket clerk who bags her groceries wants a piece of her. Curiously, she chooses to view the experience as an opportunity for personal growth: "I do understand why people get so excited about seeing celebrities. I do, too. It's normal. You are magnified on television. So I have a theory that I use. I look at it as my spiritual work on the planet, when people stop and get excited to see me or whatever. It's in those moments that I get called upon to be my best self and to give something back and respond with love and openness and gratefulness."

However, she will concede that celebrity can test one's commitment to all things Zen. "Being well-known, it is a little nutty. You can see why people go cuckoo. You can be so inflated as an actor because all your needs are met. I never had a publicist before this but, eventually, you have to protect yourself. Suddenly, it went around the world that I was lesbian, based on an internet rumor. (She is not. Currently she is dating the actor Tom Maloney.) I had no interest in responding because I don't care what people think. I don't need to discuss or defend my sexuality in public."

Thus to stay sane amid the mania, Cross attends therapy, practices yoga, eats organic, and hikes: "I find exercise and therapy keep me clear and slow me down, which is important because you can become crazy with this." Still despite her decided spiritual bent, she did break down and acquire that most Hollywood of accessories, a personal trainer. "I did it after I saw footage of myself in bed. And I thought, I have to get help." The camera can be a cruel beast, she says laughily.

For now Cross is content inhabiting the body of a *Desperate Housewife* but, one day, she plans to hang up her perfectly ironed apron and become a therapist full time. "I think there will come a time when I am done creatively with acting and I will practise; but not yet. I'd like to have a family soon and that will obviously take up some time. And then I keep thinking, there is the issue that people know who I am, and that brings extra baggage into the room. There is a lot of projection when you are in the public eye."

Then again, there are some actors in Hollywood who have become therapists (Pamela Stanborough, for one) and in some ways they can cater to actors better because they've been there. Maybe I'll work with kids or teenagers who (not watching the show) won't know me. One thing I know, Cross's patients would be there. We just don't talk enough to each other."