

Survival INSTINCT

Australian actress Emilie de Ravin is forging a strong career in Hollywood, despite the fickle nature of Tinseltown.

By Sharon Krum



CORBIS

The formative years of an actress usually take one of two paths. There's the girl who compulsively performs plays in the backyard, and the teenage beauty queen who packs her crown and gown and gets off the bus in Hollywood. Then there's Emilie de Ravin, who preferred to take an altogether more ingenious route: ballet and Alfred Hitchcock. While she was the little girl who danced around the house in a tutu and ballet shoes, she was also the kid parked for hours on the lounge devouring the career of the master of suspense.

"I never watched kid movies growing up," she admits. "Instead I was crazy about classics, Hitchcock. Murder mysteries always fascinated me. *Psycho*, *Dial M for Murder*, *The Birds* — they were so innovative. They had such an impact on me about the power of a story well told."

Little could de Ravin (her family is of British and French heritage) have imagined, when she was growing up in the Melbourne beach community of Mount Eliza, that her working life as an adult would echo that of a Hitchcock heroine. But today the blonde 24-year-old actor seems to be channelling Hitchcock courtesy of her small-screen alter ego Claire Littleton, the only Australian survivor of the plane crash that is the driving narrative of the hit television series, *Lost*. The storyline pits survivors against magnetic forces, malevolent co-inhabitants, wild animals and psychological experiments. It's Hitchcock by way of Robinson Crusoe.

If de Ravin was not on your radar before *Lost*, there is a reason. She left Australia at 19 to work in Los Angeles, skipping the usual thespian pit-stops of *Neighbours*, *All Saints* or *The Secret Life of Us*. "I kind of skipped over the rites of passage of a lot of Aussie actors," she says. "Ninety per cent of my jobs have been with an American accent. I was never really recognised in Australia as an Australian actor until *Lost*."

The truth is that de Ravin didn't harbour serious ambitions to be recognised as an Australian actor, but a dancer. She began studying ballet at nine, and at 15 she was accepted into the Australian Ballet School. Curiously, she left one year later to try her hand at acting. "It wasn't that I fell out of love with ballet," she explains. "I miss it a lot. But I had always wanted to explore acting, which to me is just another outlet of the performing arts." De Ravin is too much of a diplomat to talk about the competitiveness in the ballet world that may have been a part of her decision to shift gears, but does admit the prospect of injuries were a concern. "In the later

years of training, there is a lot of strain and stress put on your body," she says.

De Ravin tested the waters via did a week-long NIDA workshop, "to see if, a) I enjoyed it, and, b) if I got good feedback, which I did". From there, a series of auditions led her to a role in the American series *BeastMaster*, shooting on the Gold Coast. All those years absorbing Hollywood movies suddenly came in handy when she was required to work in an American accent. "I had a dialogue coach on the set, but it's a hundred times easier when you are in the US and hear it around you." Two years later she auditioned in Los Angeles for a part in the teen alien series *Roswell*, landed the gig and packed her bags.

"My career moved very fast, I admit." When her character, Tess Harding, returned to orbit, de Ravin's career trajectory similarly went on the ascendant. There was a role in *The Handler*, the television movie *Carrie*, and then *Lost*. "I didn't know if I wanted to do TV again," she says of *Lost*. "The downside of any series is you don't know where your character is going," she says. "But then I met with [series creator] J.J. Abrams and I saw how exciting the show could be, with so many ages, sexes, races and plots." She wasn't alone. Since it first aired in 2004, *Lost* has become a global phenomenon, with only the ladies of Wisteria Lane beating it to the No. 1 spot. She understands the fascination. "It taps into our fears and our fantasies of being deserted on an island. And there's the idea of starting over because nobody knows your past, which people find very intriguing."

De Ravin lives in Los Angeles with her fiancé, actor Josh Janowicz, and commutes to Hawaii for shooting. "Who's going to complain about flying to Hawaii for work?" she laughs. "It's one of the most gorgeous places I have ever seen. But it's odd being there working, because it's a place where everyone else is on holiday."

Don't ask de Ravin about upcoming plots for the show — the actors are kept in the dark — but of her career, this much she is sure: when *Lost* is done (or her character is killed off; sudden deaths are famously built into the plots), she is looking to carve out a film career. Having recently starred in the horror flick *The Hills Have Eyes* as a young woman who does battle with mutants, and in the Sundance Film Festival crowd-pleaser *Brick* as the missing girlfriend, the plan is to strike a balance between the indie and commercial. "I really enjoy film-making," she says. "You have a much stronger idea of the plot, so you can make decisions about your character's past and present." Ask her for a wish list of directors she

would like to work with and she names Wes Anderson and Quentin Tarantino. As for genres, well, she will consider anything. Working in the Australian film industry is also high on her list of priorities. "I would love to explore comedy, but I am also mad to do a period piece," she says. "Yes, I want that corset!"

It's an occupational hazard that if you are an Australian actor in Los Angeles, your American counterparts think you know every other expat for a hundred miles and that you eat Vegemite sandwiches together every week as some kind of homesickness ritual. De Ravin laughs. "I know some Australians in Los Angeles, but I am very integrated into LA," she says. "You know, people like to knock LA — you hear all those stories that everyone wants to use you — but there are also great people here, creative people that make this city really inspiring."

But Los Angeles is also the capital city of thin, the industry pressuring actresses like never before to resemble models as opposed to the real people they are purportedly playing. "The obsession with body image will always be around in this town," she admits. "But I saw it in ballet, too — girls being told they were too fat. But I think it depends if you succumb to it or not. I ignore it. I focus on living my life healthily." A mad hiker and gardener, de Ravin says she eats well, but "nothing is deemed forbidden", especially a nice glass of wine.

In the past two years, de Ravin has gone from cruising her local mall anonymously to being stopped for autographs inside every store, but you won't find her whining about the perils of celebrity. "It's flattering when people thank you for what you do," she says. New-found fame has also meant repeated trips down the red carpet, a terrifying place where the fashion police lie in wait. Again, there are no complaints. "I love fashion and I love to get dressed up, so I enjoy it. I don't consider myself someone who is a slave to trends," she says when asked to pinpoint her style. "But I do love Marc Jacobs, Stella McCartney, sass & bide, and tsubi jeans are amazing. Rebecca Taylor does the most beautiful, pretty dresses." How ironic that a woman who appreciates a beautifully cut garment wears virtually the same outfit every day at work, and most of the time the shorts/singlets/sarongs are covered in island mud and sand. "I know, hilarious, right? But I've learned something in the process of working on a show where you don't wear designer clothes in every scene. It's actually quite liberating for your work not to be about your appearance sometimes." ■