

**An interview with Susan Danford about her role of Vivie du Preez in *Land of Thirst*, conducted by Julie Frederikse, producer, Vuleka Productions**

**WHAT DREW YOU TO *LAND OF THIRST*?**

The script excerpts I got to prepare for the audition gave me a sense of how well it was written. It is story-driven and the role of the character I play, Vivie du Preez, is quite different for me, not in my theatre work – but different from my TV work. I have played a huge range of characters in theatre, but in TV I've played more of the straight characters. All characters one plays are flawed but Vivie hits a big crisis in her life and does something one wouldn't normally do – she's the anti-hero. Through that, I believe in her journey – I think she has a very interesting journey, and one that viewers will relate to.

Vivie means “life” (in the romance languages), doesn't it? She's clearly having a mid life crisis. And on another level, she hasn't quite grown up, and she is living in the past a little bit. Through her attempt to run off with her first love, she has to revisit that and see how she's moved on. There's great humour with Vivie. I'm not sure the character intends to be comedic in any way, but her naivety resonates a recognised humour. I think people who watch and experience her will recognise some of her naivety – they will laugh with her, not at her.

There's a wonderful scene when she takes care of Margaret and says “I didn't think that a native could be such a gentleman!” There are moments like that which are shocking, but also endearing, coming out of Vivie's mouth. It's such a funny, ridiculous thing to say. I think if she lived in the 70s she would have been a hippie, she would have been at the edge of that societal shift. She's quite a freethinking woman, for the times – encouraging her son to follow his dreams, in those days. Now as women we have more opportunities but in those days there were so much less options. To be an actress – because Vivie apparently met her husband when she worked in an acting troupe – they weren't looked highly upon, yet she was very happy in that world. Vivie is a child at heart. She is still quite child-like – not jaded. Even what happens to her in the drama, the negative things, she doesn't come thru that experience jaded.

**HOW WAS IT PLAYING THE WIFE OF ACTOR IAN ROBERTS?**

I hadn't played opposite Ian before, but we've worked on the same projects before. It was wonderful, it was like we know each other but we don't. Also, I've been living in Canada and only got back two and a half years ago now. I have done some TV (*Known Gods*) and some theatre, at the Baxter in Cape Town, for which I won the Fleur de Cap for Best Actress, which was a nice boost mid-career. That was the first time I had been on stage since my baby was born.

**HOW HAS IT BEEN WORKING ON LOCATION IN MATJIESFONTEIN AND THE OTHER LOCATIONS?**

I think the setting working at the Lord Milner just puts you back in time – the minute you put your costume on, seeing as my husband, looking so authentic – I really felt that history was being captured. And the way Meg (Rickards) has been directing, she is really

interested in performance, for the right reasons, to tell the story directly. She has a very strong sense of the focus, who the characters are. Vivie is a smaller part but integral to the main character, Margaret's life. As an actress on set sometimes you have to work at believing that, because you can often be ignored, with film directors often so busy with the technical aspects. Meg showed a very strong balance between performance and technical needs.

#### HOW DID YOU FIND IT, ACTING IN A PERIOD DRAMA?

My last period piece I did was my first period experience: I did *Meester*, which was a big SABC period piece back in 1990. So it was a wonderful treat to go back to period, and I was thrilled to see that you could find a place like Matjiesfontein to shoot in. It brought you straight back to where you need to be – the whole life just slows down to a different pace. The hotel is authentic – it was not like a set. It was not like cardboard painted to look like the real thing – it was the real thing. I remember I saw a woman who works in the little village leaning out a window, and she was watching for the train to arrive. She said the train is late, she was waiting for it to bring her weekly magazine. So it was just like old times as she was waiting for the weekly train that brings the magazine for her.

#### HOW WAS IT ACTING WITH THE YOUNGEST AND NEWEST ACTOR IN THE CAST, JACQUES STRYDOM, WHO PLAYED YOUR SON?

Jacques has got a wonderful talent. I can see how he is completely settled in Paul, completely steady in his body about who Paul is – and how he relates to his parents, Vivie and Christiaan. He knows how to play a scene, he played off Ian and me and responded in a very honest, connected and truthful way. He's not trying to act, which is always a disaster. In film and TV, the best thing you can have is concentration. The days are long so you can lose it – but Jacques was very present in every moment. Watching him getting into that horse-drawn cart, helping Margaret get in, he was absolutely present. I can't believe it was his first acting job.