

The Devil Can't Wear Manolos

By Rita Zekas

It's all about the shoes and underwear. That's what helps define characters for Toronto actor Ellen Dubin, who appears in the indie film *Napoleon Dynamite*, an entry in the dramatic competition category at Sundance festival, which runs Jan. 15 to 25 in Park City, Utah.

"I remember being in Preston, Idaho, doing this black coming-of-age comedy," recounts Dubin, who plays Ilene, deranged soccer wife. "The writer is 23 and the producer tracked me from *Lexx* (a cult hit sci-fi series in which she plays Giggerota The Wicked who wears human skin). We stayed at the Ritz Hotel but it was the Ritz cracker; I slept in my coat.

"I play a woman in pink and purple polyester. I'm a really cheesy woman who is always perky — Mary Tyler Moore on acid. She's a character like Catherine O'Hara in *Best Of Show*. I think it's fabulous to work with new, young directors because they love wacky people who will take risks. They don't want a subtle performance."

Subtle Dubin is not. She is 5-foot-10 1/2, leggy, sexy and in incredible shape. She doesn't smoke or drink and eschews carbs. "My big treat is a yam," she says.

Toronto born and bred, Dubin became an actor when she outgrew ballet.

"I never wanted to be an actor," she insists, "my parents put me in ballet school because I was shy and had flat feet. The kids teased me, threw rocks at me and pulled my hair. I grew tall at 16; I grew six inches in one year. I was a late bloomer in the puberty department and my career has taken me a lot longer than my sweet ingénue friends who were cute."

Acting was a fluke, she swears. "In ballet, I'd be doing extra arm waves in the dying swan and my teacher would say to me, 'You'll be an actress.'"

"I started acting as a teenager; I took acting in school. I was a gangly girl and I did musicals — I was skinny, flat chested with this long and really flexible body. I used to be called Long Noodle."

Dubin did a lot of what she calls "comic relief."

"My first paying role was playing the sweet daughter in *Fiddler On The Roof*. Then I did blonde bimbos on stage, Judy Holliday characters, playing dumb in blonde wigs."

Which is the antithesis of her investigative journalist character on the supernatural series *The Collector*, on which she wears nerd glasses and serviceable suits. The series is shot in Vancouver and Lithuania and skedded to air in the spring.

Her character, Jeri Slate, is a reporter for the *Vancouver Star* and a single parent raising an autistic child, who may be the spawn of the devil.

Morgan Simm (Chris Kramer) is a 14th Century monk who fell in love with a woman dying from the plague. He makes a pact with the devil, which prolongs her life for a decade. The pact however, binds him into being a collector of souls.

Dubin's character is trying to uncover Morgan's story.

"Chris is a little hottie, a sweetie," she says. "Our relationship is adversarial; I'm trying to find him. There is no romance involved. "

Besides, he's much too old for her. "He's 650 years old but well preserved for his age," she qualifies. (Kramer is 28.)

Alas, as a journo, Jeri's footwear is sensible.

"No Manolo ankle boots," she sighs. "I'm always running. I'd do anything for a story. What's so great about Jeri is that she's ballsy and sexy but there is a vulnerability because of her son."

And Jeri is a cipher. "The audience doesn't know if I'm good or bad," Dubin allows. "Holly Dale, who directed a couple of episodes, says 'Don't be afraid not to be liked in a scene. Brush him off if you're too busy.' I'm so blessed because I'm meek in real life."

Hardly. Dubin has a fabulously dirty laugh and a warped sense of humour. And she does her homework. She watched Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday* for inspiration.

"Jeri is into multi-tasking, doing 42 things at once," she explains. "I'm going for this fast talking, wise-cracking dame."

To play a 19th Century sharp-tongued Cockney housekeeper in the TV-movie *Except The Dying*, she rented *Sexy Beast* and *Alfie* to nail the accent.

"I watched *Gosford Park* to see how maids worked," she says. "I went on Google to see how to set a table and I had a Helen Mirren (*Gosford Park* housekeeper) key around my waist."

And authentic Victorian underpinnings. "I'm a lingerie freak," she confesses. "I learned about push-up bras in the theatre — underwear defines the character. There are thong characters and a character with no money wears ugly underpants."

"I wore corsets and Mary Poppin button shoes (in *Dying*). In the late 1800s, they had pigeon boobs. Corsets squashed you down — only the whores had their goods hanging out."

She's been both bimbo and brainy. "I've been slutty Ellen (in *Tammy And The T-Rex* with Denise Richards) and now I'm the brains of the series."

She was sexy in *Tamara*, the fully interactive drama mounted by the Necessary Angel Theatre Company at Graydon Manor Hall last April. She played Emilia, the passionate Italian maid, reprising the role she'd played in Los Angeles 10 years ago.

"I had just moved to L.A. and I didn't know anybody so at nights, I had something to do."

She's spent years splitting her time between Toronto and Los Angeles. She is back in T.O. for the holidays and guesting in *Mutant X* as Dr. Robinson, a telepath with the power of altering and erasing memories with something called psionic blasts.

In June, she was in Vancouver doing the film *Lightning Bolts Of Destruction*.

"I play an ex-con and I was wearing jeans, T-shirt and jean jacket. In sci-fi, I wear costumes: 'Let's get Ellen. She'll wear the skin of a man.' People send me designs for kitchen wallpaper with *Giggerota* on it."

Which is ironic since Dubin doesn't exactly know her way around a kitchen. She is no domestic goddess. When the role of Emilia in *Tamara* called for her to ice a cake, friends asked whether she had a stunt double.