

Off camera



From Teachers to Party Animals via Lead Balloon, Raquel Cassidy is rarely off our screens these days. Julian Hall talks to the actress sleeping late, empathising with murderers and ‘getting mucky’...

I've arranged to meet Raquel Cassidy at a cafe next door to the Royal Court Theatre in London's Sloane Square where her fellow actor Kristin Scott Thomas is appearing in a play. On my way there I can't help drawing parallels between them; they are both pale, brunette, serene actors who often put in mesmerizing performances. Scott Thomas has a reputation for being difficult to interview - would Cassidy also share this trait?

"I am not sure what I am going to be like today," Cassidy opens. It's an inauspicious start but soon the 39-year-old actress' sensitive side comes to the fore when the conversation turns to a shared love, the TV series Six Feet Under. "The characters in Six Feet Under are just so perfectly vulnerable, they are desperate to make connections and be loved. When I watch things like that it makes me cry because human beings are really passionate individuals. I feel the same way when I watch programmes like those celebrity singing things [Celebrity Fame Academy]. When people sing their hearts out I see someone trying to do their best and revealing so much about themselves."

It's this sense of revelation that is pivotal to Cassidy as a person as well as to her work, from her character's breakdown in Teachers, her television breakthrough, to the drinking problems of Jo Porter MP in Party Animals, the series that, along with Lead Balloon, has made her ubiquitous of late. "A director and writer friend of mine said he would like to see me do things where you don't see what's going on underneath, I do have a tendency to do that" she admits. Despite this tendency Cassidy needn't worry about being typecast just yet. Her portrayal of Mel opposite Jack Dee in Lead Balloon, for example, is one of someone "really

together", although notably she says this makes it a harder part for her to play.

Some of Cassidy's roles, it seems, can be demanding for her to watch as well as to act: "I mostly don't enjoy watching myself and there are some things I have never watched. The smaller my part the more I like the job so I am really enjoying Party Animals at the moment because I am not in it that much and I like watching what the others are doing."

There's a sense that Cassidy likes to stand outside of what she does so that she can still derive sheer entertainment value from it, but also to try and get some perspective. "When you are in a show you don't realise that you've maybe done something that people like or that you wouldn't like if you hadn't been part of it. I think about some of my role models, like Cate Blanchett and Helen Mirren, and I wonder if they realise how brilliant they are and if they enjoy a great piece of work while it's happening?"

"My life or my career doesn't make any sense to me, I spend/waste a lot of time trying to make sense of it."

I remind Cassidy that she once described working on Teachers as a laugh and ask if it was an example of something that was as entertaining to do as to watch? "It's the first series I ever did, so it does have a special place. I was really lucky to be in it and have the part I did." Cassidy does not, however, identify herself with a kind of 'Britcast' phenomenon that appeared to come about post-This Life and prosper during the Teachers era, although she knows from experience that the public association is strong: "I did a film with Daniella

Nardini [Festival] and when we went out shopping together people would recognise one or other of us but mistranslate where they had seen us and go 'Oh Daniella you were great in Teachers' or vice versa."

Meanwhile, the gruelling Teachers filming schedule in Bristol, away from her London home, meant that the series wasn't all fun and games: "There were times, at the tail-end of filming, when the cast just wanted to go home. It's not natural to work that many hours, socialise with the same people and not have that much sleep." Sleeping late is something that Cassidy values and one of the bonuses of keeping up her theatre work, despite being engrossed by 'telly land': "I love getting up late, having something to do in the evenings with a bunch of people, and then staying up late."

As well as television and theatre work Cassidy sees independent film as making up her holy trinity of career goals but it doesn't complete her story. Though harbouring a desire to act from a young age

Cassidy came late to it professionally and via an unfinished PhD in biological anthropology. Her mother and father, a journalist, encouraged the academic route initially but when acting prevailed, were ultimately supportive. However, their daughter's interest in the human condition has never gone away: "My life or my career doesn't make any sense to me, I spend/waste a lot of time trying to make sense of it. My ideal life would be acting for half of the year then going off and working in a different



"I've done a bit of protesting in my time. I was working in a theatre near the Newbury bypass before it started and I used to go down and spend weekends there and be generally naughty"

country every year with street children or old people. Maybe I would be rubbish at it, maybe it would break my heart but I think that it would give me a hell of a lot. You get if you give, that's what they say."

The need to be 'hands on', above and beyond the role of the politician she plays in Party Animals for example, is clear: "I want to be right in there and get mucky." In the past she has taken her advice literally: "I've done a bit of protesting in my time. I was working in a theatre near the Newbury bypass before it started and I used to go down and spend weekends there and be generally naughty, climbing trees - but I'd never go in the holes because I get claustrophobic."

It's activity such as this, potholes notwithstanding, that helps distract Cassidy from, as she puts it, "bouncing around in my own little bubble". "Ever since I was a kid I have had my own little fantasy world going on and it's still a surprise to me that other people don't see the world exactly how I see it, just as it is a surprise to them and that's how miscommunication happens." But, I ask, isn't acting all about empathy? "Maybe more empathic people are more likely to be actors, but there's a huge difference between finding the humanity of a mass murderer who eats their victims and being empathic with the person who has just pushed in front of you in the queue: ironically that's when you probably feel most like a mass murderer."

Luckily there is no such rage during our meeting and the only thing really weighing Cassidy down was a backpack full of recycling that she brought to the interview via an audition - a fitting image for someone with a such pro-active approach to her life and work.