

## FEATURES



### From “Nikita” to “Entourage,” MELINDA CLARKE proves there’s life after “The O.C.”

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Melinda Clarke has a lot going on, and when you meet her it’s easy to see why. She juggles photo shoots, P.R. obligations, and preparations for Toronto — where the upcoming season of The CW’s “Nikita” will be filmed — all while radiating television stardom. Add to her beauty and charisma an intense devotion to her craft and highly developed acting chops, and it’s no wonder the Orange County native has not stopped working since she arrived in Hollywood.

Clarke grew up in Dana Point, California, in an environment conducive to artistic pursuits. Her mom was a ballet dancer who operated two dance studios and her father is actor John Clarke, whose credits include stints on “Gunsmoke” (1959-1963) and decades on “Days of Our Lives” (1965-2004). Clarke followed her parents’ lead and joined her high-school drama

club, performing in several plays and racking up extensive stage experience. At 18, she moved to L.A. and began her career on daytime TV with a 17-episode run on “Days of Our Lives” (1989-1990). She continued clocking screen time with the CBS series, “Jake and the Fatman” (1991), Brian Yuzna’s horror feature, *Return of the Living Dead III* (1993), and E. Duke Vincent’s TV series, “Heaven Help Us” (1994). In 1997, she gained worldwide cult status with her portrayals of Velasca, the Amazon chief, on “Xena: Warrior Princess” (1997) and Jessica Priest in the superhero film, *Spawn* (1997).

Following guest spots on “Nash Bridges” (1997-2000), “Charmed” (2002), and “Everwood” (2002), and a recurring role as dominatrix Lady Heather on “CSI: Crime Scene Investigation,” Clarke landed her breakthrough role, the scheming and materialistic vixen, Julie Cooper, on the Fox series, “The O.C.” (2003-2007). Clarke’s turn on the wildly popular teen drama led to her guest starring on HBO’s “Entourage” (2005-2009), appearing on The CW’s “The Vampire Diaries” (2010), and starring alongside Maggie Q and Shane West on The CW action drama, “Nikita” (2010-2011).

This summer, along with her ongoing role as a master manipulator who turns young recruits into assassins on “Nikita,” the hardworking actor returns to “Entourage,” reprising her role as a fictionalized version of herself on the show’s highly anticipated final season.

Venice catches up with the charming and industrious artist at a Ventura Boulevard café near her Studio City home. She is leaving for Toronto the following morning where she’ll be shooting for the next several months. She hasn’t packed yet.

**Venice: When did acting first become important to you?**

**Melinda Clarke:** My father was an actor and my mother was a ballerina, so I think performing came naturally to some degree. When I was younger, I did a lot of musicals and a lot of dancing and singing and I don't think I ever had any more fun or ever felt more satisfied than I did when I was onstage playing Maria in "West Side Story." So, I think that's when it first became important to me. And I've always enjoyed the connections and relationships you develop with people and directors and actors on different projects. I love the whole process. It's the reason I'm not sitting somewhere in a cubicle staring at a computer. I don't think that would be a correct path for me. *[laughs]*

**How long do you think you'd last if you had to work a job in a cubicle?**

Not even a day. *[laughs]* I definitely feel lucky to be able to go to work and make a living as an actor. I have an attitude of gratitude and I'm at a very humble place in my life.

**Do you remember your first theatrical performance?**

My sixth-grade Christmas play. We did "Mork & Mindy." We had to draw names out of a hat to see what role we would play. And I picked Mindy. *[laughs]*

**Who are your acting influences?**

My first influence was my father. When I told him I wanted to act, he threw Stanislavski books at me and said, "Okay. Read them and write a report for me." *[laughs]* Judy Davis. I was obsessed with her when I saw her in *Naked Lunch* (1991). Jennifer Jason Leigh, Jason Patric, Gary Oldman, Helen Mirren, Cate Blanchett, and I'm completely fascinated with Dame Judi Dench. She possesses such texture and depth. And, of course, all the greats like De Niro and Pacino. I really appreciate what the 1970s were producing in film. The other day, I watched the original *The Bad News Bears* (1976). What a gem of a movie! Just a slice of American life, with Walter Matthau holding his beer in one hand. You become unaware that you're watching a film. The '70s were a different era. Much more about art and less about corporate America.

**Did you have any idea that "The O.C." was going to be such a phenomenon?**

No. I don't think any of us did.

**How much did growing up in Orange County help you relate to the material? Did the writers nail the essence of a privileged life in Newport Beach?**

When "The O.C." started, it was almost like putting a mirror up to the life I saw around me growing up. I could relate every story line to a similar story that actually happened. I was shocked at how well they portrayed life in Orange County. Even though I wasn't living that privileged kind of life, I saw it. I knew kids growing up that drove Ferraris and Porsches, but my parents were liberal Democrats. I drove a 1964 Volvo. *[laughs]* The area of Orange County portrayed on the show really is a very homogenized area. I mean, I never knew what matzo-ball soup was until I came to Jerry's Deli. *[laughs]*

**Julie Cooper was such a wonderfully over-the-top character. Do you have a favorite line from her saucy dialogue?**

I have so many! There was a whole arc on the show where Julie was living in a trailer. Someone asked her how she was doing and she said, "Well, I'm living in a house that I can put in reverse, chewing tobacco, and watching NASCAR. I'm great! I'm going to the dogfights later. My money's on the feisty Weimaraner." I can't believe I remember these things. *[laughs]*

**Your character on "Nikita," Amanda, is responsible for making killers out of recruits. How did you prepare to play her?**

Amanda is a master manipulator. Obviously, she's very intelligent and strong and also enigmatic and very mysterious. But all of this just seemed like a traditional villain to me and I didn't want to play a villain as a villain. She's still a human being in a specific set of circumstances. So, what I came up with was the idea of looking at her as the ultimate tiger mom, meaning that she is not motivated by a desire to get and kill Nikita or anyone. Instead, she is motivated by a desire for her recruits to be the best that they can be and so she trains them to be the best that they can be. She tortures these characters in their training so they

can be successful at what they do. So I'm coming at it from a place of, "I care," even if it's misguided. She does care. Also, with intelligence- gathering being so important in espionage, I found myself asking a lot of questions. The writers called her "The Inquisitor." Finally, I asked them, "How many times can Amanda say, 'But first I just have a few questions?'" [laughs]

**How do you handle all the technical dialogue on "Nikita"?**

Amanda is an expert and speaks in a way that I do not typically speak, so, for me, there is no such thing as over-preparing. It's like learning a piano concerto. You practice it over and over again until the dialogue becomes second nature so you can forget the words and be in the moment. It's important to me to spend a lot of time with the material.

**What does "Nikita" deliver to an audience?**

Action. Escapism. Entertainment that, in some ways, reflects graphic novels and comic books. Maggie Q is just so incredible and incredibly hot. And the show keeps getting better and better.

**You're coming back to play yourself on the final season of "Entourage." How did you get involved with the show?**

I believe that ["Entourage" creator] Doug Ellin was a fan of "The O.C." They just asked me to come in and play the role of the fictitious Melinda Clarke, who is the wife of Terrance (played by Malcolm McDowell).

**Are you anything like the Melinda Clarke you play on "Entourage"?**

Even when I'm playing myself, it's still a character. It just so happens that they are calling the character Melinda Clarke. She is an actress on a TV show, but she drives a Ferrari and I drive a Prius. She's in high heels all the time and I'm not. [laughs] And yet it's almost as if *that* Melinda Clarke is who people expect me to be in real life. The "Entourage" episodes are funny and raunchy and I am so happy that they wrote me in for the final season! I love the show. It's exactly the kind of show I'd want to be a part of all the time. But that Melinda Clarke is just not the way I am. [laughs]

**As an actor, what's it like playing a fictionalized version of yourself as opposed to playing an entirely different character that you can completely lose yourself in?**

When I started acting and was first learning about the craft, I found that hiding in a character was easier, but there is something about playing yourself that teaches you a lot about the power of just being simple and natural. And that's what I found fascinating about playing myself. You really don't have to do too much to be effective.

**I'm sure you were happy to get a job you didn't have to audition for.**

Yes! I love when that happens! It's very flattering because they definitely take a risk by not asking you to audition. Everyone has to audition for everything nowadays.

**Do you remember your worst audition?**

It was for a movie of the week on TNT called "George Wallace" (1997). It was one of those times when you go into the room and everyone is looking at you and the energy in the room, for whatever reason, is just not great. I'm sensitive to it, but you really need to just let it roll off you. I didn't have the preparation time I needed and my read fell flat. My energy wasn't right and it just didn't feel real. When I finished, there was an awkward, "Well ... thank you very much." And as I was leaving the room, I tripped over a chair and fell down. [laughs]

**Who got the part?**

Angelina Jolie. She won her first Golden Globe for it. [laughs] She's stunning.

**Of all the roles you've played, which one do you relate to the most?**

The likable, goofy, funny side of Julie Cooper from "The O.C." There were moments when she was completely turned around and humbled by life. Those moments, when she was very real and humbled, felt similar to me.

**You've worked with George Carlin [“The George Carlin Show,” 1994] and Jerry Seinfeld [“Seinfeld,” 1997]. Who are some of the people in comedy that you'd like to work with?**

Judd Apatow, of course. He's doing some of the best come dies. The Farrelly brothers. I think Steve Carell would be a lot of fun to work with. It would be great to be able to do a show like “Entourage.”

**You're constantly working and you're also busy being a mom [daughter, Catherine Grace, is 11]. What would a perfect day of relaxation look like for you?**

A perfect day for me would be to get up in the morning and go for a hike with some friends. I love going to the movies, so I'd then go and see a movie and I'd get a lot of popcorn and butter. And I'd eat at my favorite restaurants. I love that the French demand a quality of life. Five-hour dinners, political discussions, food, wine, laughter. It's all about connecting with people. That's what really inspires me. We are on this planet to connect with people. I'd definitely go out to dinner with friends, a good bottle of wine, and some really amazing cheeses. *[laughs]* ▼

*The final season of “Entourage” premieres July 24th at 10:30 PM on HBO. “Nikita” airs Thursdays at 9 PM on The CW.*