



# ON LOVE & LOSS

Ashleigh Cummings treads the boards for only the second time in a tale about the resilience of youth, writes **Phil Brown**

**W**orking with orphaned chimpanzees and living with Masai tribespeople in Africa was unusual preparation for a play for rising star Ashleigh Cummings.

The 22-year-old Sydney actor is starring in *Samson*, a co-production between our La Boite Theatre Company and Belvoir in Sydney, that opens at Roundhouse Theatre on April 17. Queensland playwright Julia-Rose Lewis wrote *Samson* when she was La Boite artist-in-residence in 2013.

For Cummings, it's a chance to strut her stuff theatrically for only the second time. So far, she has mainly made a name for herself on screen in the film *Tomorrow When the War Began* and in *Puberty Blues* and *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries*.

Before beginning rehearsals for *Samson*, Cummings did a six-week volunteering stint in Africa where she had a "life-changing experience" and picked up some acting tips from an unusual source.

"I went to Africa after I finishing work on the next season of *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries*," Cummings says. "It was a strange and shocking juxtaposition of worlds going from here to there. Working with the chimpanzees was really wonderful and I could relate that experience to my work as an actor. They are so instinctive."

An actor who is used to the complex and technological world of film sets, Cummings is reveling in the more elemental experience of rehearsing for *Samson*, first with Belvoir in Sydney and then here as she prepares for the world premiere of Lewis's play.

Set in a small unnamed Queensland town, *Samson* has been described as "a darkly beautiful tale of the resilience of youth". It's not really spoiling things to say it's about a group

of friends coming to grips with the death of someone close. Cummings says she has personal experience to draw on for emotional depth.

"A school friend died two-and-a-half years ago and that had a real affect on me," Cummings says. "I'm passionate about discussing grief and how to work through it. The grief is palpable in this play, set in a small rural town. My friend who died was from the country and we used to have lots of discussions about what that was like."

She also finds it refreshing to work closely with people without the technological intervention of a film set.

"I'm absolutely thriving on the pure concentration of the acting world as opposed to being on set," Cummings says.

Cummings plays Essie and her co-stars are Charles Wu, Belinda Jombwe and Benjamin Creek, a graduate of the Aboriginal Centre for the Performing Arts in Brisbane. All are working under the direction of Kristine Landon-Smith, who teaches at Sydney's National Institute of Dramatic Art, which is another attraction for Cummings.

"I'm learning a lot from Kristine," she says. "It's great, I'm getting free NIDA training."

Landon-Smith describes the play as "sharp and very funny in parts, although there is another world bubbling away beneath the surface".

"I spent my younger years in Australia, but the rest of my career mainly in England. But I still recognise the landscape of the play," she says.

Lewis, who is enjoying watching her first full-length work come to life, has been working closely with the director and actors. Lewis grew up in Maleny and Brisbane, has worked with youth in Logan City and had used elements of all these communities in her play.

The QUT graduate, now based in Sydney, has worked at QPAC and Queensland Theatre Company and says she is experiencing "excitement and terror" at the prospect of seeing her play on stage.

**SEE IT**  
**SAMSON**  
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