

Not Just Casting Stones

Risa Bramon Garcia Has Cast a Number of Oliver Stone Films, but She's Taking Center Stage With a Number of Other Projects as Well

BY DAVID HUNTER

I was sitting with Oliver in his office—we were casting *The Doors*—and Arnold walked in. He looked at me and said, 'All my secretaries work naked.' So I started taking my clothes off. And then I made him really uncomfortable. 'I'm not a secretary, but I'll take my clothes off if it will make you happy.'

The storyteller is Risa Bramon Garcia, 37, a theatrical director and producer, and one of the most successful and resourceful casting directors in show business. Oliver (as in Stone) is one of her primary collaborators—she cast all of the director's films from *Wall Street* to his current projects, including the recently released *Heaven and Earth*. Arnold (as in Schwarzenegger) is the star of one of the films she is currently casting—Paul Verhoeven's epic period film *Crusade*. Garcia's story comes near the end of an engaging interview conducted at the offices of her company, Act One, in Hollywood.

Another story Garcia tells is about leaving her native Montreal for the United States. "I crossed the border. My muffler fell off my car and it started pouring rain. There was a flash of lightning that lit up a sign that said 'Welcome to New York.' I turned on the radio: 'Ladies and gentlemen, Elvis Presley has just died.' I'll never forget that moment."

A graduate of York University in Toronto, where she studied theater and dance, Garcia spent her first night living in the U.S. in a motel with her cat and some Kentucky Fried Chicken, watching the news about Elvis' dramatic exit from this world.

Fast-talking but genuine, intelligent but not belligerent, important but personable, Garcia is a woman whose multiple career focus means she's always busy. In the closing days of 1993, she is casting two big films and putting together a festival of one-act plays for presentation next June in Los Angeles. Her "monkeyhouse" office in a venerable Hollywood Boulevard building ("It feels like a Coen brothers movie") is abuzz with activity. The interview is conducted in a quieter realm, a downstairs recreation room complete with ping-pong and pool tables and sundry artwork and props.

With a reputation for unusual (and usually successful) casting choices, Garcia and her partner, Billy Hopkins, made an auspicious start in New York with work on *Desperately Seeking Susan*. She has since gone on to cast about 40 films, including *Fatal Attraction*, *Something Wild*, *At Close Range*, and *Born on the Fourth of July*. Last year alone she cast *The Joy Luck Club*, *True Romance*, *Flesh and Bone*, *Benny and June*, *Heaven and Earth*, and Stone's next film, *Natural Born Killers*, as well as the TNT series *Playwright Cinema*. Her other creative efforts include directing "The Rogue in the Bathroom" for Lifetime's *The Hidden Room*, "The Blind Date" for Fox's *The Sunday Comics*, and *Between Cars* for the Ha!TV Comedy Network.

The rush of casting work last year was to help pay for renovating her



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home in L.A., which she shares with her husband of three years, Rene Garcia. It was Garcia, an executive with Joe Dante and Michael Finnell's production company at Universal, who recommended that Bramon Garcia pull back somewhat this year, let her staff go, and focus more on fewer projects instead of running a casting company. (Garcia and Hopkins still collaborate on casting projects, but he stayed in New York when she moved to Los Angeles in 1988 and set up shop.)

One of those projects is the ambitious theater undertaking she started this year with partner Jerry Levine. Through their company Act One, they and a small, hard-working staff are conducting a nationwide search for one-act plays to present in a festival early next summer. For the past several weeks, Garcia and Levine have worked with an "artistic committee" to evaluate at least 300 of the 550 submissions they have received to date, with the goal of putting on fifteen of the best at the Met Theater. Garcia directed twelve one-acts for New York's Ensemble Studio Theatre Annual Marathon from 1981 to 1992, working with such actors as Bill Murray, Elizabeth Perkins, Marisa Tomei, Saul Rubinek, and Christian Slater.

"What's unique about [the Act One project], I think, is we are trying to combine the talents of novice writers and seasoned veterans." The idea is to have plays by new writers, talented writers who haven't gotten much attention, writers who may have strayed from the theater, and even new plays by well-known writers. The search has encompassed every major university writing program and regional theater in the country, Garcia says, and she's "shocked" at the extraordinary response. "Writers who've said, 'I'm never writing another play!' have called.

"It feels like a lot to do for this little festival," Garcia says about the elaborate process of evaluating the submissions, which includes regular Saturday conferences, "but the goal is to get some of these plays made as short films." The film angle of the project comes from Levine's success adapting a Marathon play into a short film that caught the attention of the cable network Showtime. Though no firm commitments have been made to adapt all the plays in the current project, Showtime is going to give film adaptations serious consideration. "The idea is to do great theater and then hopefully evolve them into this next form."

For Garcia, the one-act is an incredibly exciting form of theater. She likes her stage work edgy and adventurous, and found directing a Jon Robin Baitz play with Naked Angels this past June in Los Angeles especially rewarding. "It was great to see you could do New York theater in L.A., because I became a real theater snob about this town. Most of what I've seen here just didn't have the edge or the pop or the talent. The problem with L.A. theater is that it's fragmented and it's not the main entertainment industry of this town. We're trying to bring those worlds together, so theater people can exist as theater people, but still keep an eye on film and television."

Although she has clearly relished it in the past, Bramon sarcastically refers to her casting work as a way to pay the rent. "I don't do any little, silly movies anymore. After *JFK*, and God knows what else, I feel like I've done it all. What can I do now that's a real challenge?" Although she's "not allowed to speak" about Stone's newest project, a film about Panamanian strongman Manuel Noriega, she alludes to it gamely and carefully. "I will say [Stone] is doing a film with Al Pacino that takes place in a Spanish-speaking Central American country."

Heaven and Earth, Stone's third film about Vietnam, features another Garcia triumph: the casting of newcomer Hiep Thi Li in the lead role of Le Ly Hayslip, a Vietnamese woman torn between ideologies and cultures during and after the war. The search for the right actress to play the physically diminutive but psychologically complex character posed one of the more spectacular challenges of Garcia's career. "I like to do nationwide searches. I figure, why do it small?"

Stone initiated the search without a script for the film, just Hayslip's autobiographical writings. Open casting calls were held in all the significant Vietnamese communities in the United States and Canada, with promising candidates asked to improvise from scenarios contained in Hayslip's writings, often in crowded auditoriums and churches with emotions running high. Suspicions about the project, based on the perceived politics and motives of Hayslip and Stone, led to talk of a boycott by community members who fought for the south in the war. Garcia says a phone call from Stone provided "some reassurance" about the film—presumably, that it wasn't communist propaganda. "He bowed to them to an extent, and they needed that."

Garcia, a Jew who was raised with the charge "never forget," says she understood the pain and anger of

those touched by the events of the war. She claims they met as many as 10,000 Vietnamese people (they were casting other characters as well) over three months.

Although there are surely secrets of the casting director's trade that she wouldn't reveal, Garcia seems to relish the opportunity to explain some of what goes on inside her head. "It's hard to explain exactly what it is when you see it, but there is something. Part of it's instinct, and part of it's training. But after a while there's a feeling when something pops in somebody. Then you just know it."

The discovery of nineteen-year-old Hiep Thi Li at a Bay Area open call was just such a case. Garcia picked out the young science student when she improvised a scene with her real sister in a crowded auditorium. "She took control of the scene. She was emotional. She was centered. She was strong. She was radiant. She smacked her sister across the face and the auditorium burst into this huge applause. And I thought, 'This girl is amazing.'" Garcia called Stone the next day and said the search was over. Nevertheless, she says, "We put her through a pretty grueling audition process after that."

Garcia sees the status of women in Hollywood "getting better" but believes her role as a casting director does not give her much power. "Between this Oliver Stone project and *Crusade*, there are maybe ten women and about 250 men on screen. What [am I] doing, doing these male movies? I don't have any fucking idea. As a producer or director, I will and can have a say about women." She goes on to say that as associate producer of *Heaven and Earth* she fought hard to make Le Ly less of a victim in the script. She wonders now how people will perceive the character, and how women will respond in particular.

But when the subject turns to women directors, Bramon Garcia becomes very enthusiastic. "In the last five years what has happened with directors is astonishing. Women are making hit movies. It has been a boys club. [But] our generation is on the verge of something. I think the next generation will have a much easier time. People are starting to look toward women commercially now, for their vision of things, rather than getting some new guy."

Garcia, who conducts a theater directing workshop one night a week, says she's incredibly happy when directing and that she's a much better director than a casting director. "It's nice to do both. I can cast for six months and then just throw up my hands and say, 'I just cannot serve these people's visions anymore.' It's so hard because you're in the middle of it. You have the agents and the actors on one side, and the producers and the studio and the director on the other side. Everybody wants something from you. But then I'll take a break and direct something. And that'll be really wonderful for me, but it's all-consuming. So then I'll go, 'Just give me some movie to cast.'" ■