

Wheelchair actor reaches beyond expectations



(Kristine Buls/Examiner)
Actors Jackie Julio and Doug Olear discuss a scene in between takes of the short film “Hold On,” which the two also co-wrote.

Michael Olesker, The Examiner
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BALTIMORE -

Today, we take our inspiration from Jackie Julio, who sits in a wheelchair and reaches as far as she can. At The Cloisters this week, off Falls Road in Baltimore County, she is making a movie. It is about a woman in a wheelchair reaching for a man. She says the story is not autobiographical. But it is certainly symbolic.

For Julio, it symbolizes all those who reach farther than anybody thinks they can. She was born with a condition known as Kugelberg-Welander disease, a rare neurological disorder that produces spinal muscular atrophy. When Julio was born, her parents were told she might not live longer than three years.

Instead, she graduated from Dulaney High, graduated from the University of Miami and its law school, worked as an intern in the Miami State’s Attorney’s Office, decided she wanted a career in the arts and enrolled in the writing track at Miami’s film school.

Now, with her friend and professional partner Doug Olear, the two of them have written a short screenplay, which they will co-produce, co-direct and co-star in. It is called “Hold On.” The cast includes Dominic West, who stars in HBO’s “The Wire.” They will shoot it for four days at The Cloisters, edit it and hope to begin making the rounds of film festivals.

“A simple story of a woman in a wheelchair,” Julio said during the weekend, when she finished a final meeting with her production crew before shooting started and then enjoyed a cup of coffee at her uncle Ted Julio’s restaurant, Della Notte, in Little Italy.

“It’s about picking yourself up and going on,” she said. “Things happen in everyone’s life.”

Her movie character lives in a place where the photographs of inspirational women line the walls: Rosa Parks, Mother Theresa, Golda Meir, Eleanor Roosevelt and Josephine Baker.

“They’re telling her, ‘It’s OK. You can do it,’ ” Julio said. “You can’t get discouraged. In that sense, the story certainly reflects my life. But this story’s fiction. I mean, it’s hard to meet somebody. I’m a very social person. The story’s about breaking the ice.”

She’s known Olear as friend and professional partner for about five years. He’s a recurring character on “The Wire,” where he’s played FBI agent Terry Fitzhugh since the show’s first season.

Olear has his own interesting background: grew up in Passaic, N.J., a “horrible student” who moved to Arizona with his girlfriend, became a boxer, won the Golden Gloves middleweight title, took up acting. He was in “Something the Lord Made,” the Johns Hopkins Hospital heart surgery movie that starred Alan Rickman and Mos Def, and he did “Shear Madness” onstage at the Kennedy Center in

Washington.

Julio and Olear met through a mutual friend and began to work up the story line for “Hold On.” The project’s taken 14 months so far. That includes writing, raising funds, putting together a production crew, arranging for shooting.

“Things you don’t think about when you’re just acting,” Olear said. “Like insurance, food, lodging. Like handling 30 people. Actors are spoiled. We don’t have to think about all the pieces that go into a production.” Their company is called Do Not Panic Productions.

“As a kid,” Julio said, “I was always into the arts. I studied music theory, I wrote plays with my cousins. I thought about going into acting. But then I thought my roles would be limited. So that’s when I went to law school. But I realized I missed the arts.”

They knew the lead role in “Hold On” was a natural for Julio. It’s her first movie acting role but fits with the pattern of her life: reaching beyond expectations. For her, this small story’s the beginning of bigger movie aspirations.

Asked her age, she said, “Please don’t put it in the story.”

Why not?

“Hollywood’s sensitive about age. And I don’t want to get typecast.”

Typecast? A listener gestured toward the wheelchair.

“I don’t want to get a bunch of roles as a patient in a hospital,” she said. “Why can’t I play a judge or a lawyer, or any number of parts? It’s not like I’d have to move around a lot.”

But moving the movie around — that’s what comes next. They’re hoping to show it at a series of international film festivals over the next year. They also intend to donate any profits to the Stella Adler Studio of Acting, an outreach program for youngsters who cannot afford acting lessons.

“This story,” Olear said, “is part reality, part magic.”

So is Jackie Julio’s life.

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