

Beauty & the Bard

Carmela Corbett returns to South Coast Repertory to star in *Shakespeare in Love*, the popular play based on the screenplay of the Academy Award-winning film

AS TOLD TO **BETH PHANER**

Actress, singer and writer Carmela Corbett returns to SCR's stage to perform the role of Viola de Lesseps in *Shakespeare in Love* (Jan. 13-Feb. 10), the delightful, romantic comedy-drama named the most-produced play of the 2017-2018 season. A dual citizen of the USA and UK, who divides her time between Los Angeles, New York and London, Corbett studied acting at the Lee Strasberg Institute NYC and attended The Juilliard School. Upon graduation from Juilliard, the aspiring thespian headed to L.A. to audition for film and television work, although she found her first professional success in theater. Corbett has appeared onstage in L.A. and in London's West End, as well as on the small screen, most notably in an episode of TV's *Mad Men* entitled "Severance." We recently spoke with the lovely actress about her upcoming turn in *Shakespeare in Love*, a romantic feast that the *Daily Telegraph* calls, "A joyous celebration of theatre."

How do you relate to the character of Viola in *Shakespeare in Love*?
She is a young woman in a man's world. Finding her voice for the first time. Taking risks. Standing for something she believes in passionately. Falling in love with a man who inspires her, a man who encourages her. All these things resonate with me at present.

Tell us about your previous experience at SCR.
Sarah Ruhl's *Eurydice* in 2012, Noah Haidle's *Smokefall* in 2013, workshops and readings of plays by Steven Drukman, Julia Cho and Lucas Hnath. Everything I've had the great fortune of working on at SCR has challenged and inspired me. The community is vivacious and supportive; and the development and nurturing of new plays and playwrights is such a rewarding and exciting thing to be a part of as an actor.

What was the defining moment that convinced you to pursue acting professionally?
I auditioned for a play at The Royal Court in London when I was

17 and still in high school. I was called back and ended up getting very far in the process. The director wrote me a letter after my last audition and encouraged me to go to drama school and really pursue this career after training. That was the first moment that I thought, 'OK,' I can do this. Cate Blanchett has said that you only need one person to believe in you and I have found that to be true. Jeremy Herrin writing that letter shaped the trajectory of my life.

What was it like to appear on an episode of *Mad Men*?
When I first moved to New York and started Juilliard, my mother and I watched one of the early episodes together. We were both just sitting there agape. What is this amazing new series?! The costumes! The actors! The elegance of the whole piece! And we had this moment where we looked at each other and she said, 'Carmela, you're going to be on this show—you do realize that right?' I think we both knew then that in some capacity, big or small, that series was going to have an impact on my life. And it absolutely did. It was a dream realized.

What play has had a lasting impression on you?
There have been many that have been poignant at different moments in my life. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* continues to fascinate me. Most recently, I saw *Girl from the North Country* at The Old Vic in London and was deeply moved. I think the profound thing about the music and lyrics of Bob Dylan is that it resonates in all ages and stages of life.

Your reflections on returning to the stage at SCR?
I'm thrilled to be returning to work with [SCR's Artistic Director] Marc Masterson and the whole creative team at SCR. Masterson gave me my first-ever professional job in the [theater]—working with him on *Eurydice* in 2012, so it feels perfectly full circle to be joining him on the last production he will direct there. It feels like coming home.

Alex Knox and Carmela Corbett in South Coast Repertory's 2012 production of *Eurydice* by Sarah Ruhl



Photo courtesy of Henry DiRocco/SCR