



VALENTINA CARDINALLI *CREATING A STIR*

by David Morrison

As we do most years, last Christmas Day my wife and I sat down with her parents and aunt to watch the delightfully silly seasonal romp, 'Elf.' (For the uninitiated it stars Will Ferrell, supported by a cast including Zooey Deschanel, James Caan and Bob Newhart.) We had not watched it with the family before, or since learning something very specific about its closing scenes.

Watching intently, we suddenly hit the remote control's pause button and yelled, "There she is!" We had spotted our friend, Valentina Cardinalli, an extra in a Central Park crowd scene! It was and remains a surreal experience to see someone we know so well, who lives just up the road, in a big movie – just as it was when we saw Russell Crowe (as mathematician John Nash) open a door for Cardinalli in 'A Beautiful Mind.'

In the grand scheme these brief movie appearances represent a tiny fraction of a lifetime of performance and creativity from Cardinalli. This is a woman who simply cannot keep still, her desire to make art or entertain seemingly an uncontrollable urge that has her "dibbling and dabbling" in this or that project pretty much every day. Her Chase River home is full to bursting with amazing art, including hundreds of wildly diverse pieces of her own. There seem to be no parameters to the media Cardinalli works in, no limits to her imagination, and no cap on her energy. "I want to do it all, and do it all NOW!" she gushed.

Cardinalli was born in Campbellford, ON, to artistically gifted parents. "My mum and dad are both visual artists," she began. "My mum does primarily non-functional work, while my dad has gravitated towards functional pottery over the fifty years he's been doing it. I was obviously influenced by them, and

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they showed me what they knew, but where I veered off is with performance.”

When she was four-years-old, Cardinalli’s parents moved the family from a hippie commune with no electricity or running water to Belleville, ON, where the youngster quickly settled into a creative routine. “As a child I was always making stuff,” she recalled. “I loved sewing and figured out how to make patterns, so made stuffed animals, clothes and little tchotchkes. I was also sculpting and made a lot of pottery, as well as drawing, then at around the age of eight I found the Belleville Theatre Guild and I was, like, ‘Oh, this is cool!’”

It was initially the glamour of ballet, especially the costumes, which sparked Cardinalli’s fascination for the stage. At the age of eight she played a small part in the Thornton Wilder play, ‘Skin of Our Teeth,’ then as first fairy in ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream’ the acting bug took hold.

Following a move to Toronto, Cardinalli continued to pursue acting and experienced some success in film and television. “The breakthrough role was in ‘Road to Avonlea,’ with a recurring character named Jane Spry,” she said. “From there I landed a full-time role in a 26-episode YTV sitcom called ‘Dog House,’ when I was sixteen.”

The next step for the young actress was relocation to New York City to attend the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. Hustling for roles and attending scores of auditions (without the help of an agent) found the tireless and ambitious Cardinalli in some interesting situations. She met the legendary filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola and hung out with Richard Dreyfuss while doing extra work on his television drama series, ‘The Education of Max Bickford.’ When working on the movie ‘PCU’ in 1994 Cardinalli met Jon Favreau, an encounter that in a roundabout way led to her extra work in 2003’s ‘Elf,’ which Favreau directed.

In 2005 Cardinalli, by now married with a baby son, decided to wave goodbye to the glitz and frenetic pace of life in New York City to head to Nanaimo to start a new life. While she welcomed the considerably more leisurely pace, this new environment stimulated her creativity to hitherto unforeseen heights. “Yes, since moving here I’ve done lots and lots of performing,” she continued, “and the work I’m doing now has made me happier than I’ve been in years. I’m doing things like spoken word, live art, putting on talent shows at a school, and all-day performance events at coffee shops. These are things that make me feel alive, while living at the perfect pace.”

The key to Cardinalli’s inspirational and infectious approach to making art is the joy she gleans from involving others in her creative process. One recent example was her Frankenstuffie

project, in which she supervised a group of children as they made wacky plush toy creatures and made up life stories for them. “It had less to do with the objects and more to do with the collaboration,” she explained. “I like to find things that everyone can do and share that experience. I’ll have an idea and think, ‘Wait... I could bring twenty people in on this!’”

There are no empty minutes in a Valentina Cardinalli day. As well as being the busy wife of an equally busy music industry veteran, and mum to a young son already exhibiting acting and stand-up comedy chops, she continues to make remarkable original pottery, multi-media artworks with creatively recycled materials (“I see a piece of junk and think, ‘That could be an eyeball!’”), drawings, paintings, toys and... the list goes on and on. New projects pop into Cardinalli’s mind every day, with one of the latest typically involving as many people as she can possibly draw into it.

“I’m trying to work on the ‘Mortify Nanaimo’ event,” she revealed. “It’s not really a totally original idea, but it is exciting because it’s a slice of human life that can involve a cross-section of people. If you kept a journal when you were younger, and still have it, or an excerpt from it, will you get on stage and read from it, hopefully with a photograph of you at the age you wrote the journal entry? We were all idiots when we were young, so you can imagine the fun we’ll have hearing all that stuff!”

As brilliant at many artistic disciplines as Cardinalli is, because she has never formally studied she considers herself an ‘outsider’ artist. “I have to say I’m glad about that because I like to play!” she laughed. “With acting you take direction and need the feedback, but with my visual art I never wanted to be corralled, because I was much happier playing and roaming free.”

Cardinalli says that had she had the right breaks in the movie world she feels she might have made it big. Considering her compelling presence and effervescent personality, I totally believe her. But it is not how things worked out, and she is very happy with her lot. “Sure, I wanted to be famous, but now I just want to do creative and interesting things. And being a good person is so much more important. I’m proud of what I did, but I’m happy simply to be here on this planet, putting stuff out there, and proudest of all of the act of creating.”

You should be, Valentina, as you are damn good at it! ~

Valentina Cardinalli can be contacted on Facebook: www.facebook.com/valentina.cardinalli