



**Kerry Armstrong at home
and at peace on her new farm
just outside Melbourne.**

Kerry Armstrong: Back to *basics*

She commands attention, writes JULIE McCROSSIN, but is happiest when she's invisible — or at home away from the limelight

Meeting actress Kerry Armstrong face-to-face is a compelling experience. Not only is she attractive and affectionate, but her intelligence and intensity demand your attention. To me, she is like a champion racehorse in the marshalling yards before a race, emotion flickering across the surface of the skin.

This equine analogy is not new. On *Australian Story*, her mother Bev Armstrong said of her, “You were like this wild horse and you had somewhere to go. And nothing any of us could say or do would stop you.”

Armstrong, 48, is best known for her award-winning performance as Sonia Zat in the film *Lantana*, as well as for playing Heather Jelly, the shire president's wife, on ABC TV's much-loved *SeaChange*. In those roles, in 2001 she became the first and only actress to win an Australian Film Institute Award for best actress in both a television series and a feature film in the same year.

A year or so ago, Armstrong bought a farm near Melbourne where she now lives with her three sons and her partner of two years, barrister Greg Lucas. You reach the house after passing through small villages on the outskirts of Melbourne.

It's a simple, open-plan house in an idyllic location, the kind of spacious and comfortable country home where you immediately feel relaxed. You reach it along a winding dirt road that would be treacherous to navigate at night. Behind the home is a field of grapevines and Lucas tells me he's hoping to produce a small family vintage in future years.

As we walk around the garden, Armstrong points out nests in the eaves of the verandah and we spend time photographing small, colourful birds that swirl about the house. It's clear that living in the country still feels like a new adventure for her, but the space, the light and the long views into the distance with no neighbours in sight seem to suit her.

When she was in her early 20s, she lived a very different life. She went to New York on an acting scholarship to study at the HB Studio under Herbert Berghof and his wife Uta Hagen, who played the corrosive Martha in the first production of Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

During the course, Berghof wrote a note to director Mike Nichols: “Here is my wild Australian horse with the headlights and the beating heart. Look after her because she won't look after herself. She'll give you whatever it is that's needed and she'll keep going.”

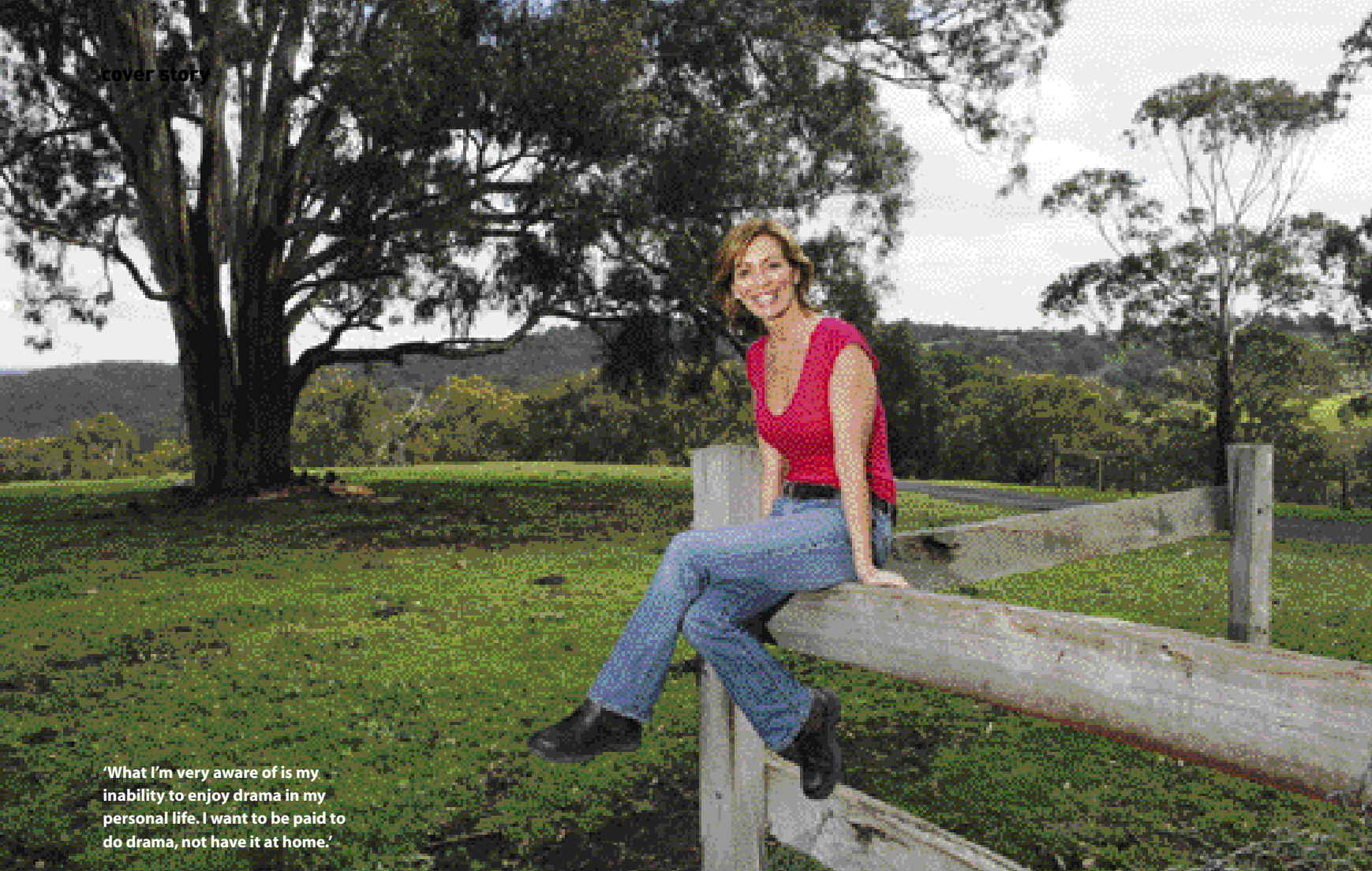
Armstrong's entrance to the HB Studio classes required a tough audition by Uta Hagen, described by CNN on her death at 84 as well-known for saying exactly what she thought and “sparing no one, including herself”.

Hagen's formidable reputation made Kerry Armstrong's experience with her even more significant. She stopped the young Armstrong halfway through her audition and simply said, “I'm taking you.”

Armstrong was so shocked she thought Hagen had said, “I'm hating you.” But, in fact, she'd invited her to join a group of only 15 students and told her, “You can rest now. You're safe. You're meant to be doing this.”

Armstrong smiles as she describes this experience as “thrilling”. This early affirmation of her talent underpins her successful approach to immersing herself in a character. ➤

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'What I'm very aware of is my inability to enjoy drama in my personal life. I want to be paid to do drama, not have it at home.'

Heather Jelly in *SeaChange* made us laugh, but she was never a parody of a dumb blonde. Armstrong calls her “the goddess of small things”. She explains Heather like this: “If a Japanese businessman is coming over to dinner, she would throw on a kimono and have a few chopsticks in her hair. She was caught up in what the world said she should be. She was dying to please.”

She sums up her approach by saying, “I won't give you a dumb blonde. I'll give you a dying blonde.”

Her search for authenticity can lead to intense experiences for her fellow actors. Anthony La Paglia told *Australian Story* about his first meeting with Armstrong in preparation for their roles in *Lantana*: “She walked into the rehearsal room and just sat on my lap. It made me a little uncomfortable. And she just looked me in the eye and said, ‘Get over it. We're playing husband and wife.’”

Armstrong explains, “We only had six weeks to make a home and a family and be a husband and wife. I realised that part of the alchemy is you need to be both emotionally and physically centred. The hardest thing in rehearsals would be to feel his weight and I

My little guys are like tugboats and have pulled me through some rough passages. I'm not allowed to curl up in a ball and die. I have to be a mother, so I stand up.

thought, ‘You've got to know what I feel like from day one.’ So I sat on his lap.”

Armstrong's skills in comedy and drama will soon be on display again in the Australian film *Razzle Dazzle*, due for release in March, a black comedy in which she plays a mother with high ambitions for her dancing daughter.

Later in 2007 will see the release of the US production *Reservations*, which follows the fate of a group of people trapped in a hotel fire in New York. Armstrong plays an Australian flight attendant.

She recently appeared in *Dancing with the Stars* and is actively involved as a mentor and board member in new productions by Big hART, a theatre company that involves marginalised people in professional

productions for film, television and theatre.

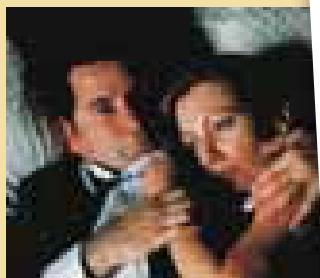
At last year's Sydney Arts Festival, Armstrong acted in *Sticky Bricks*, sharing the stage with public housing tenants from the huge Northcott flats in inner Sydney. More recently, Big hART produced *Radio Holiday* in the Melbourne Festival and *Ngapartji Ngapartji* at the Sydney Opera House.

Ngapartji Ngapartji, a drama from Alice Springs involving local Aboriginal teenagers, explores displacement and the importance of language. The title means, “I give you something, you give me something”, and an on-line Pitjantjara language course is part of the experience on offer. The Sydney Opera House will present a full-scale stage production of *Ngapartji Ngapartji* in 2007.

“It's right in my core,” Armstrong says of



Anti-clockwise from top: Kerry Armstrong as Heather Jelly in the ABC TV hit series *SeaChange*, as Sonia Zat with on-screen husband Anthony LaPaglia in the 2001 award-winning movie *Lantana*, as Justine with Shayni Notelovitz as Tenille in *Razzle Dazzle: A Journey Into Dance*, which will screen in early 2007, and with eldest son Sam, one of her children, whom she likens to 'tugboats' pulling her through difficult times.



her passion for Big hART, "because we've created a place where people stop being invisible and they are no longer numbers, but individuals with their own special story to tell".

She's "happy to be a hook" to attract attention to people we don't generally see. Indeed, she once slept in Melbourne's Federation Square as part of a Bed Vigil, an earlier creative project under the Big hART umbrella designed to raise awareness of Australia's 26,000 homeless young people.

The irony of all this talk about visibility for the marginalised is that when Armstrong's life story was featured on ABC TV's *Australian Story*, in a show that attracted one of the series' largest audiences ever, with 1.3 million viewers, she insisted, "I act to disappear, not to be seen."

She says, "I'm finished with needing any attention for myself. I'm full. I've had 400 MCGs [Melbourne Cricket Grounds] full of people clapping me again and again. I don't need any more attention or scrutiny for Kerry Armstrong. What I need to do is to work out how to be a member of the community that adds to its peace of mind."

She says the "joy and freedom" of acting "is disappearing into someone else's life".

Yet she feels the "business itself can demand the opposite" — something she feels sits uneasily at times with her true nature.

Her personal measure of success is when "Kerry disappears completely and the only person you're witnessing is Sonia in *Lantana* or Heather Jelly in *SeaChange*".

She explains, "I don't want women sullied in any way. I'm happy to have a character that's flawed and to represent that character with authenticity, but not as just a parody."

Her early role models were Greer Garson and Charles Laughton, who "disappeared into their roles", and Katherine Hepburn who "always played strong, intelligent women opposite wonderful men like Spencer Tracey, James Stewart and Cary Grant".

Perhaps the key to her success in *Lantana* is that director Ray Lawrence understood her approach and, she says, had the generosity to say, "I'm going to let you do your thing. I trust you enough to let you encase yourself in the character."

On the personal side, Armstrong says, "I think I have spent a life where I've been chosen. I'm always the one who gets chosen. All I am seeking now is peace."

Has she found peace now with her

partner, Greg Lucas? "We're still in the early parts of it. It's only a couple of years. What I'm very aware of is my inability to enjoy drama in my personal life.

"I want to be paid to do drama, not have it at home. In my personal life, if you want to come in and make a drama from something that doesn't need to be, then having my support will be rare as the years go on."

Her three sons — Sam, 16, and 10-year-old twins, Callum and Jai — are the steadying influences in her life: "They are my absolute joy. My little guys are like tugboats; they've pulled me through some very rough passages. I'm not allowed to let the world have its way with me when all is going wrong. I'm not allowed to curl up in a ball and die. I have to be a mother and so I stand up." She's also close to stepchildren Shanti, 33, Ally, 21, and Julian, 19.

Kerry Armstrong's quest for peace continues. Her first book, *Circles*, was published in 2003 and, according to publisher Hardie Grant, has sold 36,000 copies. It explores a strategy for assessing the quality of relationships of all kinds through seven concentric circles in the search for "life-expanding" connections.

Armstrong is working on a second book that will explore relationships between women: "There is a lot of anger in women, and at times men. I get wild attacks from people. My next book will look at women's relationships."

In *Circles*, she encourages people to regularly assess all their relationships and place the names of each person within seven concentric circles. The relationships that bring the greatest peace and fulfilment are in the inner circles. Is this designed to give people control over their relationships?

"It's not about control; it's about recognition and awareness," Armstrong says. "If you try to exercise control, the master carpenter will get you and cut your hands. I am an incredibly simple person who loves people and who has little difficulty unless people are unkind."

Just before we part, our photographer requests a wardrobe change and Armstrong suddenly appears in a new, pink shirt. As she turns, smiling, I see a rearing black horse on the back. It's an image that captures the spirit of this talented and complex woman. ■