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# High Velocity

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## Victoria Rowell

In spite of difficult early years as a foster child, Portland native **Victoria Rowell's** ties to Maine are unshakable. Here's what she's up to now!

BY COLIN W. SARGENT

**O**N MAY 10, 1959, future ballet principal, dazzling actress, Ph.D., bestselling author, and movie mogul **Victoria Rowell** was born at Mercy Hospital in Portland.

This summer, she's shooting a film in which she's the executive producer, director, screenwriter, and a lead actress. We caught up with her as her production company, Days Ferry Productions, LLC, revs up to full throttle.

The village of Days Ferry goes way back in Maine history before it became Woolwich. Established in 1754 on the banks of the Kennebec, it seems almost like a fable—a magic place, like *Brigadoon*. Is Days Ferry your Castle Rock? Well, I'll tell you, I love history. I cover my Maine connections in my memoir *The Women Who Raised Me* [Harper Collins, 2007, a *New York Times* best seller]. My mother's side of the family is buried in the Castine cemetery. In our family plot, one of our family members was the drummer boy for the 16th Regiment in the Revolutionary War. I named my production company Day's Ferry in 1999, when I was house-hunting along the coast. I was very close to buying a fabulous house on Peaks Island, with mature trees I loved but no septic. I couldn't be 3,000 miles away [in Hollywood] and have no septic tank! Anyway, I kept looking. And during this journey I saw a spellbinding place set on the water. It had gone many years unattend-



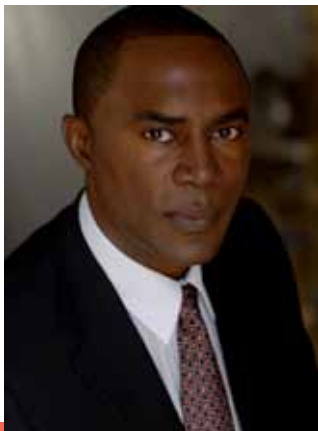
ed. It was in Days Ferry.

What's the name of your new film?  
*Jacqueline and Jilly*. No ampersand.

Since you're the executive producer, director, lead actress, and co-screenwriter, how did you pitch it to yourself?

The logline is "An American family drama—three women, two shattered dreams,

## ISN'T THAT...



Featured in *Jacqueline and Jilly*, from left: Daphne Reid, Richard Brooks, and Nikko Austen Smith.

one addiction.” The father’s a well-heeled lobbyist in Newport News, Virginia—horse country. They share a charmed life. They live in the perfect house with a perfect, manicured lawn. There’s the pious grandmother, the mother, and the daughter, training to be an Olympic equestrian. She has a nasty fall. When she turns to opioids, her mother goes into denial. How could our daughter possibly have become an addict? This couldn’t happen to us. How could she possibly behave this way?

**“You know what big is for a storm in Maine. Well, a bolt of lightning went through one window and out the other!”**

What’s the heart of the story?

It’s about the family peeling back the onion. I started tinkering with this story in 2006. Now we are in a pandemic with opioid addiction, with a 13-percent uptick in the last year. In the story, first there’s the denial, then the acceptance, then the resolution. I pitched it to the Government Film Office in Washington, D.C. We’re negotiating a Lincoln Theatre debut in Washington. The reason everybody’s interested is because there’s such a need. That’s why it’s PG-13. It’s less on the optics of drug addiction than on the person who’s in recovery, and the importance of family in contributing to that re-

covery. The goal is to have family early on have a conversation.

You directed all six episodes of *The Rich and the Ruthless* last year. Working in all three dimensions as executive producer, writer, and director, not to mention acting in the movie this summer, do you think you’ll experience, at least creatively, multiple personality disorder?

Hollywood has changed because the industry has changed. UMC, HULU, Netflix—the business morphs every day. There is heavy lifting as an executive producer, but luckily I’ll have help there. I’ve been to Virginia twice for the scouting process. We start production on July 21 and wrap on August 4. We’ve been blessed with the Riverside Regional Hospital allowing us to film at an annex that is not being used at this time. I’ve met the mayor of Newport News. Hampton University is allowing us to shoot on their historic campus.

What script software do you use?

I like WriterDuet. It’s an amazing piece of software that allows multiple writers to work on one script. My main co-writer is Patricia Cuffie-Jones. I’ve already worked successfully with her—I did one of her plays in D.C. For my computer, I use a Macbook Pro. You’ll laugh, but as a Main-er, a daughter of Maine, I’m an extremely practical person. My Timberland boots must be 18 years old, and this Macbook



## Back Story

Victoria was a cast member of the long-running soap opera *The Young and the Restless*. According to her filmography on IMBD, she filmed 657 episodes playing Drucilla Barber Winters.

*Wasn’t she in...*

- Yes! Rowell played Dr. Amanda Bentley-Livingston, who helped Dick Van Dyke’s character, Dr. Mark Sloan, solve crimes in *Diagnosis Murder*.

- Just some of this multi-award-winning actress’s movies: *Water in a Broken Glass* (2018), *Of Boys and Men*, *The Feast of All Saints*, *A Wake in Providence*, *Dumb and Dumber*, *The Distinguished Gentleman*.

- She has a doctorate from The University of Southern Maine and Boston’s Wheelock College recognizing her work in foster care and adoption.

- In 1990 she started the Rowell Foster Children’s Positive Plan, which provides fine art scholarships for foster children and adopted youth.

Portland native Taurean Green was selected for the program when he was 11 years old. He went on to study with San Francisco Ballet and danced with Pacific Northwest Ballet before joining Dance Theatre of Harlem in 2011.

- Victoria was eight years old when she received the Ford Foundation Scholarship to the Cambridge School of Ballet in Harvard Square. She would go on to receive scholarships to the School of American Ballet, The American Ballet Theatre, and the Dance Theatre of Harlem. She studied at the American Ballet Theatre School before joining the American Ballet Theatre II Company.



Pro must be eight years old! It reminds me of the 1955 Thunderbird I used to drive. Just because something's old doesn't mean it's broken.

Who are your lead actors?

Richard Brooks, a star from *Law and Order*; Daphne Reid [*The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*], a consummate actress; myself; and I believe in casting newcomers. Nikko Austen Smith plays the daughter.

Alfred Hitchcock says, "Great villain, great movie." Who's your great villain?

The villain in this case is the opioid, the addiction. By virtue of the therapist and the doctor, who's played by Lamont Easter [*House of Cards*, *VEEP*, *Madame Secretary*], we're able to get facts to the viewer dramatically. I'm consulting with Dr. Jocelyn Cox, a leading addiction psychiatrist in Atlanta [Associate Addiction Psychiatry Fellowship Program Director at Emory School of Medicine]. She's been reading the script.

Is there a figure who's the conscience of the film?

Yes, the grandmother, Zillah Stuart, is the conscience. As is the case with many grandparents, she might lament what's happening to her granddaughter, but she dotes on her. She's astonished that her granddaughter could be addicted to painkillers or worse. She is the North Star in the narrative. She offers levity too, which is important with this subject matter. There has to be a balance. The audience has to have tension and release, tension and release.

How much does your longtime foster mom in Maine, Agatha Armstead, float into Zillah's character?

Agatha is in all that I do. She's very regal and wise and humorous, like Zillah.

What's the funniest thing Agatha ever told you?

It's more mystical than funny. On her 60-acre farm in West Lebanon, Maine, where I grew up—I went to school in Berwick—we had an over 200-year-old farmhouse, a barn, and some outbuildings. She purchased the property after the war in the 1940s. She was a proper Bostonian—very religious. I'll never forget what she told me. There was a big electrical storm that caught the house by surprise with its windows open. You know what big is for a storm in Maine. Well, a bolt of lightning went

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: RLB SOUL; COURTESY PHOTOS



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## ISN'T THAT...

through one window and out the other! Agatha was my inspiration, the quintessential mentor. She studied piano at New England Conservatory, and it was she who saw my love of dance. Some people are meant to be raised by one mother. I was meant to be raised by many. Agatha guided me toward a dance scholarship in Boston [Cambridge School of Ballet] that lasted for eight years and started so much for me.

You've acted with so many talented people: Forest Whitaker, Christina Ricci, Samuel L. Jackson, Dick Van Dyke, and even that force of nature Eartha Kitt. When you were in New Orleans to shoot *The Feast of All Saints* with Forest Whitaker, novelist Anne Rice was the executive producer. Did you watch her in action? Was there something you learned from her that you'll be taking into *Jacqueline and Jilly*?

We shot *The Feast of All Saints* in Canada. I didn't see much of Anne. Of course she was on top of the story. But all of that factors into the changes that are happening in Hollywood. The push for diversity. Fair economic exchange on both sides of the camera. For every 22 opportunities, one woman gets one. Right now, there's a sea change of change. I've been diligent. And I appreciate all the influences that have come my way.

*Jacqueline and Jilly* explores themes of denial and the dangers of looking the other way. One of your earliest movie experiences was in *Leonard Part 6*, starring Bill Cosby. In the wake of #MeToo, our readers would expect me to ask you if he harassed you in any way.

I never had a problem with Bill Cosby, but I have no reason to doubt the women who have shared their painful experiences. I've met Camille Cosby and at least two of his daughters, but that does not diminish my sorrow for the women who have had this experience. I don't think every experience with every person is the same. In my case, it was paternal. I was a recurring character on *The Cosby Show*. What's happened is devastating.

Looking the other way really is an overarching theme with conflict. It's easier to look the other way from poverty, from the Israeli and Palestine conflict, from millions of hungry children, from immigration injustice, from people coming from many parts of the world looking for a better way. We are in a crisis. People are looking the other way when Hawaii is on fire. [As a culture], we look away from sexual harassment or addiction. In *Jacqueline and Jilly*, every-



thing is perfect; everyone's driving the right car. One of the catalysts is the daughter taking responsibility for her addiction. But her mother wants to

keep her quiet. Many generations of success are at stake. The father is a lobbyist [with a reputation to protect].

You really can't get sober and fight addiction quietly behind closed doors. It's not just the family, it's the community. Oftentimes when families are embroiled in this war—this incredible struggle—to keep a child or family member alive, the community should be involved.

I've met with Mayor Price in Newport News. There's not a community in our country that's not touched by addiction. Addiction does not discriminate. It is staggering. It doesn't matter if you're the CEO of a global company. It doesn't matter if you're a doctor or the president of a college. *Jacqueline and Jilly* is important not because I'm a part of it, but because we're all a part of it.

Since you grew up on a 60-acre farm in West Lebanon, I'm guessing you know horses. When did you first ride one? Our neighbors up the road were the Nadeaus. They had fabulous horses. I must have been seven or eight years old. I remember I was on a smaller pony and I got thrown. That really shook me up. I'm a ballet dancer. I don't like to fall. I've never been a horse person.

Is that where you got your inciting incident for the movie? My daughter Maya was a rider. And she'll be on set as an assistant producer for the film. But I don't believe my early fall figures into the story. I just really wanted to give dimension and production value to the movie. And Maine always informs me on where to go—nature and being outdoors. So much of story becomes interior, especially in a low-budget film. This helped me take the action outdoors. The whole idea of nature. I wanted the daughter to be athletic. I found a wonderful stable in Virginia. We're the sum of our experiences. We can pluck them out, and they're there. It's like a massive library.

I blasphemed this morning when I refreshed my memory that your first foster family in Maine couldn't keep you



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because raising a mixed-race foster child was forbidden to white parents by Maine law. I know you've said you love Maine. What in your heart keeps you from hating Maine?

When your history is lost to you, you lose everything. I'm currently looking for my African-American father. Dead or alive. Dr. Herb Nelson is helping me, and now we have some new advantages in modern science. My mother's family is of European descent. John Howland of the *Mayflower*, an early settler in Maine, is my ancestor.

Mine too! Nice to meet you, cousin. What a small, wonderful world it is.

I'm the 13th generation. Why I don't hate Maine... I love Maine. I love my mother, Dorothy Collins, though she was unable to care for me due to mental illness. I'm grateful to her for giving me life. She had no prenatal care. [In 1959] I guess they were feeling she was not going to be able to take care of this mixed-raced child. She got no support from her illustrious family, who turned its back. But that's too bad. We



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existed. Thanks to Mercy Hospital in Portland, those nuns [Sisters of Mercy] took care of me. I keep in touch with them. I'm grateful to Mr. and Mrs. Taylor for campaigning to take me out of the Home [Holy Innocents on Mellen Street]. They were able to take care of me. Then [two and a half years later] Maine stepped in. They said, "She's black—you can't keep her." The state of Maine took me away from the Taylors because Maine was one of 16 states where it was against the law for white parents to raise a black foster child. Maine gave me life. Maine inspired me. My second mother, Agatha Armstead, gave me this farm life: swim in the lake, pick blueberries, learn about flora and fauna, shovel snow and skate. This was a true childhood. I believe God gave me this experience because God knew that I could share it with others. HBO has optioned my memoir *The Women Who Raised Me* twice. When we get that green light one day, we can shoot some of the movie in Maine! The Maine Film Office does offer some incentives. ■

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