

# MADELEINE STOWE'S THIRD ACT

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**NEARLY TWO DECADES AGO**, SHE ABANDONED AN A-LIST MOVIE CAREER TO LIVE ON A TEXAS RANCH AND RAISE HER DAUGHTER. TODAY, REVENGE STAR STOWE IS THE TOAST OF TV, PERFORMING HEROIC DEEDS IN HAITI—AND SHOWING THAT THE BEST OF LIFE CAN BEGIN AT ANY AGE

PHOTOGRAPHED BY PEGGY SIROTA

# WHEN PEOPLE RECOGNIZE HER THESE DAYS,

**MADELEINE STOWE** notices, they tend to whisper and give sidelong glances rather than come up and chat. “I think they’re a little scared of my character,” she says with a laugh. Fair enough. Victoria Grayson, *East Hampton*’s lady of the grandest house, a 24,000-square-foot nest on ABC’s hit drama *Revenge*, is a force to be reckoned with. To maintain her social standing, she must keep the lid on her Pandora’s box of a past, and to that end Stowe’s regal Grayson seems prepared to perpetrate untold wickedness. Inspired by Alexandre Dumas’s *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Revenge* is a riveting stew of lies, sex, murder and greed smothered in endless reserves of cash—a mix so addictive that in the show’s first season it beat out its long-running Wednesday night competition, *CSI* and *Law and Order: SVU*. Stowe’s character, fond of Leger bandage dresses and Louboutin heels, presides coolly over the feast, a gorgeous sphinx whose history has yet to be revealed.

The actress is something of a riddle herself. In 1994, at the height of a movie career that included acclaimed turns as the aristocratic beauty who wins Daniel Day Lewis’s deer-slayer heart in *The Last of the Mohicans* and the constantly deceived wife of Tim Robbins’s philandering cop in *Short Cuts*, she quit Hollywood and moved to a 400-acre cattle ranch in Fredericksburg, Texas. “I’d worked with the best filmmakers on the planet,” Stowe says. “But there were other things I wanted to do, other lives I wanted to live. I just got to the point where I wanted to be somewhere else.”

She has settled into a leather sofa in the lobby of Santa Monica’s Casa del Mar hotel. Wearing a black fitted motorcycle jacket over a black turtleneck and black leggings, and black lace-up heels that fall somewhere between biker chic and nun shoes, the 53-year-old Stowe effortlessly turns heads. As her friend Mudcat Saunders, a Virginia-based political strategist, drawls, “Madeleine is one of those women who are 10 times as beautiful without makeup.” Much like her TV character, Stowe is notable for her penetrating eyes, erect bearing, deliberate diction and thoughtful speech. They have complexity in common. Indeed, before the

*Revenge* role came up, she told her agents she was through with acting, but Grayson’s cunning appealed to her, she says, as did “her capacity to love but to be so damaged that she would in essence annihilate herself and the person that she loved at the same time.”

“Madeleine’s character could have been the most one-dimensional, typical villain,” says Emily VanCamp, 26, who plays Grayson’s nemesis. “But she’s brought so much humanity to this woman. As much as Victoria does these terrible things, you feel for her. You really want to know where she’s been.”

When Stowe returned to Hollywood, audiences wondered the same about her, and the answer was simple, if surprising: She’d been living life as a cowgirl. When she and her husband, actor Brian Benben (*Private Practice*), moved to Fredericksburg (population at the time: under 7,000), they went Western. The couple rode horses, cleaned stalls and raised cattle. They threw Fourth of July barbecues, set off fireworks at their lake and hiked for miles. After their daughter, May, was born in 1996, “Maddy would put the baby in her pouch and take her along, too,” says Carolyn Kyle, who ran the ranch with her husband, Ted. “Maddy was always in jeans, a flannel shirt, a straw hat and sunglasses.”

Stowe commuted to L.A. for projects—*The General’s Daughter* with John Travolta, *The Proposition* with Kenneth Branagh—but left celebrity decorum on the tarmac. One night in Texas, Ted Kyle, now 75, saw her drive past with Benben and “noticed something in their car’s window,” he says. “I couldn’t make it out. Later Maddy told me she’d thought it would be a good idea to moon me. She was a lot of fun.” When a gaggle of cowboys dared her to snack on a pair of bull testicles, freshly harvested and briefly seared on a branding iron during a castration roundup, “well, she jumped right in and ate them,” says her friend Macy. “That is so her.”

At night on the ranch, the Kyles would sit on the back porch and tell stories about the area, including one about Quanah, a famous Comanche chief whose mother was a white woman kidnapped by the tribe as a young girl. The abduction of white children by Native Americans was common in Texas in the mid-19th century, and Stowe became obsessed with the phenomenon. “I started doing research,” she says. “If these kids survived, they’d often become so acculturated that when their parents finally found them, they never wanted to come back.” The experience of being caught between two worlds resonated. “I guess,” she says, “I always felt that way myself.”

The eldest of three, Stowe grew up in Eagle Rock, then a working-class L.A. neighborhood. Her mother was Costa Rican, from a well-to-do family that counted presidents of that country in its lineage. Her father, born into a poor Oklahoma family (his father was a gravedigger), was a self-taught civil engineer prone to rages. “Sometimes he would come home at night and destroy everything in the house,” says Stowe. Diagnosed with multiple sclerosis at age 28, he was forced to retire when Stowe was six and was eventually confined to a wheelchair. “He would fall off chairs and his bed, and my mother and I would have to pick him up,” she recalls, adding, “He was six foot one.” The disease also took

his memory, making communication rudimentary. “He’d answer questions monosyllabically,” she says. “He watched one television station and smoked two packs of Winstons a day. But as a child, you have great devotion to your parents.” Stowe would hover over him with water lest his lit cigarette fall into the sofa. “I don’t want to go dark,” she says, “but it was full-time care.”

She didn’t bring friends home. “I was always afraid of being deeply humiliated,” she says, and that fear left its toll. “I don’t think, Oh, I wish I’d had another life, but it did create a split in me,” she admits. “I always had a recessive quality. I could never come out of the shadows too well. When I did and my film career was really going, it would create a certain stress level, and I would sort of disappear. It was as if I didn’t want to be exposed too much.”

Fredericksburg afforded her privacy and freedom but didn’t erase her anxieties. “As a mother, I was always looking under my daughter’s bed and checking her closet every single night with the idea that somebody might take her from us,” she says. “It was my worst nightmare.” It was also the genesis for a passion project. With her thirties in the rear window, Stowe found herself “unmoored.” She made a few movies—*Impostor* with Gary Sinise, a TV version of *The Magnificent Ambersons*, the straight-to-video *Octane*—but “it was a lost period for me,” she says. “The pieces weren’t coming together. In your thirties, you’ve come into your own. It’s a glorious era—most women now have children in their thirties. When the forties creep up, unless you’re so crazy driven, they just knock you on your behind.”

Stowe decided to focus her energy—and create a role she could get excited about—by turning her research on Native American abductions into a movie. In 2003 she and Benben wrote the first draft of *Unbound Captives*, a sprawling Western about a white woman whose children are taken by Comanches in the 1860s. “I have a very romantic sensibility,” she says, “and at its core, this is a large love story. I wanted the landscape and characters to be inextricable in an almost otherworldly sense. I think love is an otherworldly thing that we can’t define easily. I can’t.” In 2003, 20th Century Fox offered \$5 million for the script but no role for Stowe. “Without a moment’s thought,” she says, “I turned it down.”

Stowe didn’t grow up dreaming of becoming an actress. She studied piano with renowned Russian pianist Sergei Tarnowsky, who’d taught the young Vladimir Horowitz and who, she looked to as a surrogate father. “He had two grand pianos, side by side,” she remembers. “He’d sit on the bench with me and place his fingertips on my wrists to see if they were loose. I always remember his hands.”

Music was one escape, films were another; she drank up their fantasy worlds and idolized the characters who inhabited them. “In the late ’60s and ’70s, there were Pacino and Hoffman and DeNiro and Nicholson, and they blew your mind,” she says. “I loved the sprawling epics, like *Dr. Zhivago*.” She spent a year at the University of Southern California, studying journalism and film, and earned gas money working as an usher at a playhouse in Beverly Hills. There she met Dennis Quaid, her first date and the first boy she kissed. “I was very shy,” she says. “He told a friend of mine

he thought I was a virgin, and he couldn’t take that responsibility. Very sweet!” When the two worked together on 1998’s *Playing by Heart*, Stowe reminded Quaid that they’d dated. “He said, ‘Did we . . . ?’ I said, ‘No. We didn’t.’”

While handing out playhouse programs, Stowe was spotted by legendary agent Meyer Mishkin. He told her to get in touch if she was ever interested in acting (she had no formal training). When the semester ended, she did, and he signed her, making Stowe one of only two actresses (Mare Winningham was the other) on his roster. Mishkin was known for handling men—Lee Marvin, Richard Dreyfuss and Charles Bronson among them.

Far from being intimidated, Stowe was invigorated by the macho company, and over the years she has proved herself to be a guy’s kind of girl. Several years ago, when Oscar-winning screenwriter and director Paul Haggis (*Crash*) invited her and Benben to one of his “boys’ night” gatherings, her husband declined, but Stowe accepted and spent the evening on her own with Haggis, Oliver Stone, Josh Brolin and other men she calls “mega-intelligent.” She attributes her ability to bond with the opposite sex to her incomplete relationship with her father: “I didn’t know him. I found myself gravitating toward very powerful men. I have a real

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ease when I’m around them, because the need to connect to them has always been great.”

Under agent Mishkin’s direction, Stowe’s acting career grew slowly. As a wide-eyed Mary in 1978’s *The Nativity*, she convinced a befuddled Joseph (John Shea) that she had conceived their child through an angel—a far cry from her steamy embraces with Kevin Costner in a 1990 movie called (coincidentally) *Revenge* and a comic grapple that same year with Jack Nicholson in his Chinatown sequel, *The Two Jakes*. “I felt very free,” Stowe says of those scenes. “I still do.” Which explains Victoria Grayson’s lusty *Revenge* interlude with an old beau played by James Purefoy. “The network was like, ‘Oh my God, what are we going to do with this?’” says Stowe. “But it’s psychological. You’re not seeing anything explicit. I feel very relaxed about it.” Nor does she expect Benben to object. “Brian did *Dream On!*” says his wife. “He had at least one naked woman in bed every episode.” »



Though she has lived with Benben since 1980 and has been wed to him for 26 years, Stowe claims she's "the worst person" to approach for marriage tips. "I've never known a perfect marriage," she says. "We've definitely had peaks and valleys. I hate saying that marriage is work, because I don't think of it that way, but sometimes you find yourselves on different paths. Then you converge again. I think our convergences are longer in duration than our separate paths." It no doubt helps that she considers Benben "the funniest human being you'll ever meet."

It was 1992's *The Last of the Mohicans* that made Hollywood stand up and take notice of Stowe. "She was absolutely terrific," says Michael Mann, who helmed the movie. "As a

director, you start out imagining what you want the character to be. With Madeleine, she was all that and more. She could be extreme, and you can only do that if you're totally authentic. In every way—intellectually, hormonally—she was this character. She gave everything to those moments."

And those moments begat more moments in *Short Cuts*, *China Moon* and *Blink*. She starred opposite Bruce Willis and Brad Pitt in *12 Monkeys* and joined Drew Barrymore, Andie MacDowell and Mary Stuart Masterson for an all-female gunslinger posse in *Bad Girls*. It was going on location for that film, which was shot near Fredericksburg, that convinced Stowe to buy up a chunk of Texas and relocate.

She stayed there for over a decade. Then, six years ago, not long after the *Unbound Captives* deal fell through with



Fox, she and Benben moved back to L.A., where Stowe continued to revise and peddle her script. “This is my thing, and Brian’s stepped away from it,” she says. “He’s an unusual man that way.” Different actors were attached—Russell Crowe, Robert Pattinson—but the movie never lifted off. Then she turned 50 and had an epiphany: Instead of playing the lead (a woman now much younger than she), Stowe would direct. “I’m visually oriented,” she says. “It seemed like the right thing to do.” Since she made that decision, Hugh Jackman and Rachel Weisz have signed on to star, Oscar-winner John Toll (*Braveheart*) is on board as the cinematographer, and the funding is falling into place. “I’m on fire with this idea of what I want this film to be and bringing together these incredibly gifted people and having

a dynamic conversation,” she says. Director Terry Gilliam, known for his works of mad genius (*Brazil*, *The Imaginarium of Dr. Parnassus*) gives his *12 Monkeys* star a thumbs-up: “Madeleine’s been so determined to do what she wants to do in her own way,” he says from his home in London. “She’s pigheaded and smart, and she knows film. She’s got it.”

*Unbound Captives* is not Stowe’s only passion project. In 2008 her friend Haggis invited her to Haiti to meet Father Rick Frechette, a Catholic priest dedicated to providing the country’s poor with essentials for living. Haggis heads up Artists for Peace and Justice, a group that helps fund Father Frechette’s work at Nos Petits Frères et Soeurs (Our Little Brothers and Sisters), and he asked Stowe to join him for the same reason he asked her to be the centerpiece of his boys’ night: “She’s ballsy, and she can hold her own.”

Many celebrities have gravitated to Haiti, but, Father Frechette says, “It’s easy for us to see who’s here for adventure and who’s here for commitment. From the start, Madeleine was here for commitment. We engage in a lot of dialogue about a lot of things: the horrors we see, the things we’re planning, what crazy idea might be worth trying out. Her feedback is poignant and astute and wise.” Ironically, the exposure-phobic actress has persuaded the priest to increase his visibility. Stowe recently burnished his website and brought him to Washington to explain his progress and the need for funds.

Since 2008, Stowe has flown to Haiti several times a year. If she’s in the country on a Thursday, she goes with Father Frechette and his team on their weekly trip to the General Hospital morgue, helping to slip bloated corpses into body bags, tucking a rosary and a prayer card into each and taking them for burial. “It’s tragic,” she says. “Little babies are the hardest to see. The men have to light cigarettes and drink rum to obliterate the stench—which I can’t do because I’d be on the floor. These guys are committed to taking the dead on to the next world. They sing incredible Creole songs.” And why would she engage in such difficult work? “It connects me to the living,” she says. “I see these broken bodies as a reminder of what has to be done down there.”

Once again, her father’s specter looms. Caring for him, Stowe says, gave her the wherewithal to persevere through the most heart-wrenching moments in Haiti: “While I’m there, I experience the joy of the people who are living. When I come home, I weep. It’s a little like PTSD. But

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within a week, I’m dying to get back there.” In October at Manhattan’s Lincoln Center, Father Frechette’s order of priests, the Passionists, will present Stowe, Haggis and the Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli an award for their support.

With her TV show, her film project and her commitment to bringing attention to Haiti, it’s unlikely that in the near future anyone will be asking where Madeleine Stowe has gone. Still, the star predicts, she will “probably continue to drop off the face of the earth from time to time.” In your fifties, she believes, “you really want to put the burn on, to do as many things in life as possible, go where you haven’t been, experience what you haven’t experienced, leave a body of work that’s significant to you. I feel very good about this period of time.” \*