



## In praise of Alberta Watson

**Toronto based actress –born Faith Susan Alberta Watson– continues to receive plum roles and glowing reviews after nearly 30 years in the business.**

She has hypothetically weighed 350 pounds, been a prisoner of war, a penguin behind bars, a high priced hooker, a cold-hearted killer, a cool-eyed commander, the mother of a trans-sexual rock star and a mixed-up mom. She's even been a hologram.

She is **Alberta Watson** –and though she may have portrayed a prisoner (in 'Women of Valor', co-starring Susan Sarandon), for the rest of an astonishing career on film and television, she sure doesn't take many.

The actress –born Faith Susan Alberta Watson– who has starred in hit TV shows '24', 'La Femme Nikita', 'Law and Order' and 'The Border', and earned the moniker "Queen of the Indies" for high-profile independent films like 'Spanking the Monkey', 'The Sweet Hereafter', 'Hedwig and the Angry Inch' and 'Away From Her', continues to receive plum roles and glowing reviews after nearly 30 years in the business. And does it firmly based in Toronto.

---

**At 54, the key to her success appears to be consistently aiming for 'actress' not 'star'. She hit the target dead on. Her choice of trajectory has enabled her to keep working when others have hit the wall; she's been able to balance fascinating, quirky and demanding character studies against high-profile mainstream parts.**

---

This combination meant succeeding at a level that enabled creation of a beautiful life for herself with a townhouse in Toronto and a gorgeous cottage on her own private island outside the city.

What is her secret?

"Well, I never really looked like the girl next door to start with," she laughs. "I was dark and different-looking. But I had such passion that I think the casting people and producers and directors just felt right casting me. And I'm lucky."

With a career that began in film at the age of 23 in (ironically) 'In Praise of Older Women', perhaps the luckiest move of all was being cast nearly 20 years later in the prime time TV series that gave her the role for which she is arguably still best known and a place in the pantheon of characters idolized by a

certain sect of fandom. In the hit cable show 'La Femme Nikita' (based on the French film) she was the coldly, clinically, murderous Madeline and audiences, particularly women, ate it up.

"They loved seeing a strong woman operating at the top of her game: one who never compromised or backed down," says Watson. "Madeline was powerfully single-minded and confident; two of the most important qualities, incidentally, in maintaining a career in this business."

Also important qualities when one is trying to survive cancer.

Like a bad movie, just as our heroine was settling into a successful second season starring on Nikita, she was side-swiped by the worst kind of news: a life-threatening diagnosis of lymphoma which required surgery, chemotherapy and a whole host of devastating side effects that for a time left her wondering if she was going to make it.

She made it through the appalling chemo –the strongest sort available. She lost her hair (a heartbreak for any of us –but for a glamorous actress starring on a TV show?) but never her beloved partner of 14 years, Ken Sedgwick, nor the circle of friends and colleagues who rose up to support her in ways she still appreciates beyond all measure. The Nikita producers kept her on –giving her all the time and the wigs she needed to keep working.

And now, a dozen years later, she keeps working –and living– and loving her career. The co-starring role of boss-woman Erin Driscoll on '24' followed, as did the film 'Away From Her' (with Julie Christie) , CBC's popular prime-time drama 'The Border' (where she plays a government MP, and recovering alcoholic) and a host of others.

Most recently Watson was cast as the voice of 350-pound Mary Rutherford in the fascinating, NFB animated film 'The Spine' (produced and directed by Academy Award-winning animator Chris Landreth. Premiering in Toronto this past June, there's Oscar buzz for 'The Spine' already.

"It's very different approaching work as a mature actress," she says. "There are fewer parts and the ones that are there, well, the producers still want you to look decades younger. The pressure on actresses to go to drastic ends to achieve a look of frozen youth has had some scary effects that I think we've all seen. All I can do is keep showing up and doing my best."

"If I've learned anything in this career it's that you have to hold on to the wisdom you've earned and to use it in your work. I bring an authenticity and experience in my work now that only comes with age and time."

"I have an entirely different career now than the one I began with at 16," she adds thoughtfully. "And I wouldn't have it any other way."

"And, oh yeah," she says with that laugh, "you can quote me on this: you really can't sweat the small stuff –you've got to have a little faith."

We could all use a little Faith... Susan... Alberta... Watson.

*Jane Wilson*

[Published online January 4, 2010 at <http://tempotoronto.ca/inspiration-for-over-fifty/alberta-watson/>; retrieved on August 2010]