



Rachel Griffiths on the set of "Underground: The Julian Assange Story."

PHOTO BY ROBERT CONNOLLY/FLICKR

Rachel Griffiths

The "Six Feet Under" actress is taking more activist roles, most recently as Diane in the drama "When We Rise," a miniseries about the personal and political struggles of the gay rights movement in the late '60s. The Australian star reflects on how she got here.

BY RACHEL GRIFFITHS (AS TOLD TO ANASTASIA SAFIOLEAS)
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

When I was 16 I was drinking too much and killing far too many brain cells. It's so frightening as your own children approach that age, knowing what you got up to – the self-destructive behavior, the self-loathing and the risk-taking behavior. I think we understand now that at that age there are even more challenges and you take risks that aren't great. But I think my 16-year-old self would now say I'm really awesome. I think she would be hugely relieved that things ended up pretty OK.

I went to Melbourne University and had a very unhappy year. I didn't know that university would be three years of no collaboration – school was so much more

collaborative than university, so that was kind of a revelation. I didn't have any interesting or challenging tutors; the lectures had, you know, 2,000 people, which is too much.

I knew I wanted to study in a way where I would be more engaged and had a greater purpose. So I went to teacher's college to do a degree in drama. At that stage I was more media-oriented. I was interested in communication beyond the essay form. It was smaller and more intense and I just fell in love with the acting while I was there.

"Muriel's Wedding" was a huge opportunity. It also had international reach. I love telling Australian stories. And I love that I've been able to put myself in the shoes of a Yorkshire working-class lass from the 1860s, or a spoilt upper-middle-class product of two psychiatrists in Los Angeles. It's just great to

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have that range. Without that I wouldn't have been able to play a lesbian nurse who is critical at a devastating moment during the HIV/AIDS epidemic in America (Diane Guy in "When We Rise") and the amazing impact she had by leading a life of courageous example.

The kind of Catholicism I was raised with was social justice. For me the core Christian message is to defend the weak against the powerful. When I sat down and watched "Roots" – I've been calling "When We Rise" the gay "Roots" – it made me see the impact storytelling can have, and how much stronger emotion is than facts. Emotion is what changes people's lives. You can tell people a string of facts, but put them in someone's shoes for an hour or a day, it changes how they view things. We are entering a time of fear in which we seem to be trying to marginalize those who are already lacking power, and that never sits well with me.

Growing up with the nuns within our own community, they were very strong authoritative figures. My first role models were my teachers growing up. I had extraordinary teachers, their love of communicating about their subject, and their authority and conviction. I discovered Joy Hester very young. I did a project on Nancy Wake at school and she was massively influential. Even Marie Curie, Helen Keller, Vida Goldstein, Enid Blyton and actors like Judi Dench and Sissy Spacek. You find these role models among artists; you find them in those with a political voice, as well as among women community leaders.

My speech at Breakthrough (the Victorian Women's Trust gender-equality event) was about me being a bad feminist. I've coasted on the sacrifices made by my (metaphorically) older sisters and aunts for the kind of work-life balance that so many of my contemporaries require. I think we've taken certain things for granted and I think they are inevitable. It is very shocking to see a pullback in female representation in cabinet and in Parliament in the last few years. But at the same time I'm also really humbled by how we live in a time where Channing Tatum says he's a feminist and Beyoncé says she's a feminist and Taylor Swift says she's a feminist and how very proud young women are about the ownership of that word. As for the misogynistic media, which was very male-dominated in the '70s and '80s, I think they were very afraid of the word and its power and did a great deal to discredit us from brandishing it more proudly. It means continuing to insist on women's equality and women's representation, and to laugh when people say they couldn't find more women to do the job. You know when there are six men in a picture and they say, 'we couldn't find a woman'? We just have to laugh.

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