

A conversation with actress and screenwriter Dorothy Tristan

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Dorothy Tristan appears deep in thought. Her chin rests in one hand, a cup of tea in the other. Her gaze drifts to the tiny drops of rain pelting her kitchen window.

She's been discussing the prevailing themes in her latest screenplay. On one level, she suggests, it is about the healing power of music. On another, the story touches on a universal desire to arm ensuing generations with the power to achieve their hopes and dreams.

But Tristan's silence hints at something deeper. Her attention returns to the interview at hand. At its core, she says, the movie is a love letter to the woman who had the most profound impact on her.

She calls her Aunt Mabel. The woman was not a blood relative, but she may as well have been.

Tristan's childhood, she admits, was an often unhappy one because she suffered from tuberculosis. When she was 10, her family, living in New York City, learned of the Herald Tribune Fresh Air Fund, which sent city children to stay with volunteer families so they could experience fresh air and sunshine.

Through the fund, Tristan stayed with a family in Connecticut. There were four children, including a girl her age. But the person she connected with most was Mabel, mother to the four children.

"Mabel entered my life, and a lifetime relationship began from there," Tristan said. "She was very positive. She saw I could paint so she bought me a paintbox. She could do just about anything. She was everything to me. I worshiped her.

"So in a sense with this movie, I am playing Aunt Mabel."

Tristan's untitled screenplay, to be directed this summer in La Porte County, South Bend and Southwest Michigan by her husband and longtime collaborator, John Hancock ("Bang the Drum Slowly," "Prancer"), centers on Karen (Tristan), a former actress living in rural Indiana whose granddaughter, Julie (13-year-old Grace Tarnow of La Porte), comes to live with her. The two clash until Karen discovers Julie has a remarkable singing voice. The girl scores the lead role in a stage production of "Alice in Wonderland," right as Karen exhibits signs of Alzheimer's disease. What ensues is a race against time as Karen tries to impart her legacy, her life lessons, onto her granddaughter.

Tristan's career over the years has spanned everything from modeling, to singing, to painting, to writing. Her love of acting began in the theater, where she played everything from Helena in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" to Blanche Dubois opposite Jon Voight in "A Streetcar Named Desire." She later ventured into TV and film, including roles in "Klute" and "End of the Road," the latter a performance Oscar-winning director Steven Soderbergh ("Traffic") celebrated through the film's Blu-ray release.

But it is her relationship with Hancock that has afforded her the most freedom and creativity. She appeared in the director's "California Dreaming" and wrote "Steal the Sky," "Weeds," "A Piece of Eden" and "Suspended Animation." She also did the final polish on Hancock's Christmas classic, "Prancer."

"I entirely trust him," she said of Hancock. "I do whatever he wants, and I also follow my instincts. We think so much alike, particularly when we work on scripts, it all just flows."

While her performances over the years have drawn praise, she confesses to preferring the writing process.

"What I love about writing is that you can do it all by yourself," she said. "You enter this kind of dreamlike state, and it's wonderful. You have the power to create your own world. It's a great escape."

Tristan also has forged the kind of life she wanted, and on her terms. She and Hancock lived for years in Malibu, Calif., but returned to Indiana, where Hancock grew up, after the couple lost their home in 1994 to fires that frequently ravage the state.

“The people there are so superficial,” she said, “So we said, let's go back to the farm. And we've had no regrets.”

By “the farm,” she means land owned for years by Hancock's family near Rolling Prairie, Ind., complete with a peach-tree orchard. Their return to Indiana, in fact, partly inspired “A Piece of Eden.”

Does she have a favorite among the films she's created with Hancock? Again, Tristan grows silent. Then, a melancholy smile spreads across her face.

“This will be my favorite,” she says. “This is not someone else's script. This is entirely me. Doing something like this, it's a very profound experience. I can't wait to see how it turns out.”