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OU alumna performs in movie starring Julia Roberts

By **Jeff Samoray**, OU Web Writer

After having spent four years taking classes at Oakland University, alumna Michele Hillen found herself sharing a classroom with movie star Julia Roberts.

Hillen, a 1994 performing arts graduate, played an art history student in "**Mona Lisa Smile**," a recent Sony Pictures release starring Roberts. The movie takes place at all-female Wellesley College in 1953. Hillen's character is enrolled in a class taught by Katherine Watson (Roberts), a free-spirited Californian who ruffles feathers at the prestigious, yet snooty, institution with her progressive leanings. Hillen also had the opportunity to rub elbows with classmates played by noted actresses Kirsten Dunst and Julia Stiles.

Thus far, the film represents one of the high points of Hillen's career. It's also an experience she says her OU education helped her achieve.

"I think my teachers at Oakland University made a huge impact on me," Hillen said from her apartment in Manhattan. "People like John Paul White (professor of music), Michael Gillespie, (associate professor of theatre), Karen Sheridan (associate professor of theatre) and Jan Albright (applied music instructor – voice) were very supportive. I also think I benefited by going to OU as opposed to a larger university because I didn't have to wait until I was a senior to get lead roles. Even as a freshman, I had great opportunities. I was constantly performing, which really helped me develop my abilities."

Hillen recently toured the country with the New York-based **Aquila Theatre Company** and played Bianca in Shakespeare's "Othello." Currently, she is a production assistant and understudy with Aquila for the Greek tragedy "Agamemnon," starring Olympia Dukakis.

Previously, Hillen performed as a singer and dancer on Holland America Cruise Lines, sang for Opryland USA, Fiesta Texas and several resorts in the USA and Japan. Her TV credits include bit parts in the soap operas "As the World Turns" and "One Life to Live." She also entertained thousands of children across the country in "Blue's Clues Live," a full-scale theatrical production geared toward preschool kids. And, she acted and produced an off-off-Broadway production of the play "Poor Superman."

For Hillen, one of the most enjoyable aspects of working on "Mona Lisa Smile" was the on-the-set camaraderie she had with Roberts, Dunst, Stiles and the other actors and actresses.

"Working with them was great," Hillen said. "I discovered that Julia Roberts is a really good knitter. A lot of the other girls on the set knit as well, so we spent a lot of down time on the set knitting together. I made a lot of friends because of the closeness and long hours. I almost felt like I was back in high school because Wellesley is an all-female college, and I went to an all-girls high school (Farmington Hills Mercy)."

Hillen had lines in a scene in which the beauty of Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" painting was discussed. Unfortunately, they were left on the cutting room floor.

"My lines were cut, but for my first film, I'm okay with that," Hillen said. "Work begets work, and I also met a lot of people."

"Overall, I really liked the film experience. Nearly all of my experience is in stage work, which is a kind of comfort zone for me. With stage work, you have an immediate connection with an audience. You don't have that with film, but it's equally gratifying, particularly when you see yourself on the screen."

Filming was done on location at Columbia University in Harlem and on a New Jersey soundstage. Hillen followed the

typical routine of a film actress: arriving on the set in curlers at 4:30 a.m. for hairstyling, makeup and wardrobe fittings to prepare for shooting at 8 a.m.

"We couldn't have any highlights in our hair because the film was set in the 1950s. And we wore girdles the whole time," Hillen said. "Even after hitting the hair, makeup and wardrobe stations, you could be waiting for hours for a shoot. So we'd talk, knit or just read. We were also there at night quite a bit. On a couple occasions, we put in 20-hour days."

While working on "Agamemnon," Hillen also spent time chatting with Dukakis, who previously co-starred with Roberts in the film "Steel Magnolias."

"Olympia's life really inspires me," Hillen said. "We've talked about the question of how to 'make it' in this business. People will tell you that you need to do this or do that [to succeed]. I felt like I went with my instincts. Olympia didn't become a household name until later in her career and is very much down-to-earth. She's shared a lot of stories about what she had to do to keep going."

Hillen continues to take acting classes. Most recently, she took a Shakespeare intensive at the American Globe Theatre in New York. She hopes her continued training, along with her appearance in "Mona Lisa Smile," will be the break that leads to bigger roles.

"I really want to do more TV and film work and still do stage work when I can," she said. "My film appearance has definitely helped me in my career. Now I have a better agent who's helping me get the auditions I wasn't getting before."

"I do think my Oakland University classes also prepared me to be a working actor. A lot of university programs just do the academics, but at Oakland, I also had the opportunities to act in a very supportive environment."

Visit the Sony Pictures Web site to view trailers and learn more about "**Mona Lisa Smile**." For more information on Oakland University's performing arts curriculum and faculty, visit the **Department of Music, Theatre and Dance** Web site.

SUMMARY

OU alumna Michele Hillen recently portrayed an art history student in "Mona Lisa Smile," a Sony Pictures release starring Julia Roberts. The movie takes place at all-female Wellesley College in 1953. Hillen's character is enrolled in a class taught by Katherine Watson (Roberts), a free-spirited Californian who ruffles feathers at the prestigious, yet snooty, institution with her progressive leanings. Hillen also had the opportunity to rub elbows with classmates played by noted actresses Kirsten Dunst and Julia Stiles. Thus far, the film represents one of the high points of Hillen's career.

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