

Lights, camera, action in city

Couples moves from L.A. and opens acting school in New West

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Professional actors Patrick Sabongui and Kyra Zagorsky recently traded in the bright lights of Los Angeles for New Westminster - and the husband-and-wife team has now opened a school to share their knowledge with aspiring local actors.

The Actor's Centre for Transformation Vancouver (ACT Vancouver) shares a space with Ammara dance studio at 40 Sixth St., downtown.

Working as an actor, stunt man and acting teacher, Sabongui's career has led him from Montreal to California and has included TV and film roles in productions such as 300, The Day the Earth Stood Still, Stargate Atlantis and 24.

Zagorsky has been a professional actor in theatre, TV and film since 1998 and is now a mother to their two young children.

Ashé, 3, and Bodhi, 1, were the main reason behind the move to New Westminister.

"There is something about L.A. that is a really harsh environment. There is this pace and hustle," Sabongui said.

When the family looked to move somewhere more relaxed and friendly, they chose somewhere that reminded both of them of their hometown.

Sabongui said New Westminister had the hip edge of Montreal, while the nature and mountains nearby reminded Zagorsky of her native Colorado.

"The perfect combination is New West. Around where we live has got antique shops, bridal shops, coffee shops. It's got that sort of Montreal aesthetic, and we're surrounded by the beautiful B.C. mountains. It's ideal," he said.



CREDIT: Larry Wright/THE RECORD

All the world's a stage: Patrick Sabongui and Kyra Zagorsky have opened an acting school, ACT Vancouver, in downtown New Westminister. The two moved from L.A. to set up a new life for their family in the Royal City.

Greater Vancouver's strong film industry was another draw card.

Upon arrival, the couple, who both have master's degrees in acting from the University of California and teaching experience, noticed a lack of acting schools to cater for the industry, especially in New Westminister, Burnaby and Surrey.

The couple also believed they could cultivate a more rounded acting education than the two standard approaches for young actors: appearing in school plays and theatre, or getting an agent and promoting themselves.

"What we found was missing was a school that offers a combination of cultivating creativity and the art form of acting, and also channelling that into a career," he said.

"We wanted to combine the two extremes of the industry because acting, as an industry, is fraught with contradictions. On one side you have this creative improvisational artist, on the other side you're a businessperson. You're selling yourself, and you're trying to tap into this market that is very commercial.

"There are also a lot of technical things to learn - camera technique, vocal technique, specific industry vocabulary."

A key plank of the school's philosophy is that a camera is always in the room, which has the feel of a movie set.

If familiarity breeds contempt, Sabongui said it also breeds uninhibited creativity.

"People think of the camera as so final. They think, 'Oh my God, there's a camera, everything I do now is captured for eternity, I better get it right.' That desperation to get it right squashes all the creativity," he said.

"If it's always there, people forget about it ... and feel free to be silly, make mistakes, be creative and go outside their comfort zone."

Currently, the school has three small classes which take place on Sundays. The second phase of classes begin in February and, with a waiting list growing, Sabongui expects classes to run on Saturday and Sunday.

The school offers four different streams - Actor's Playground for those aged six to eight, Discovery Programs for ages nine to 12, Actor's Bridge for 13- to 15-year-olds and the Focus Program for those aged 16 and older - as well as private coaching and workshops.

Sabongui admitted it was tough to get the school started and make its name known with limited resources, but he said it was a "passion project" for the pair.

He said positive word of mouth was vital to get the ball rolling and to gain the trust of the community.

"If you're an acting teacher, you've got the power of the world in your hands. ... To be an effective actor you need to bring everything you have, everything you are as a person - you have to have access to it. And as an acting student you're putting yourself at the mercy of the teacher. At advanced levels you really have

to dig into your life and your past. So it's a very intimate and personal thing. ... It has to be someone you trust."

A college sportsman, Sabongui followed an unorthodox path to the acting profession. His dream was to be a professional football player, and, while that didn't happen, Sabongui had learned something about himself.

"There was something about being watched on the football field or the basketball court. I knew that I was comfortable in front of a large amount of people," he said.

His athletic background, and martial arts training as a kid, led him to the world of stunts - and onto his first movie sets. Watching actors at work, he thought, "I can do this."

He transferred from studying religion to theatre, and started juggling both theatre and stunt work.

Sabongui, who still works in both fields, said there are definite differences between the professions.

"I had this kind of double life, where I was starting to work professionally in theatre doing Shakespeare and classical works - very formal, intellectual, theatrical - and then I was going to work (as a stunt man) and getting shot and falling down and getting hit by cars," he said.

Among the acting fraternity, stunt men are seen as tough guys who can't act, Sabongui said, although it's something he wants to change.

"Personally, I want to be an action hero. I want to be the action hero character from all those films, but I want to be able to do all those scenes myself," he said.

Working on the historical battle epic 300 was a career highlight for Sabongui as he landed work both as a stunt man and also in the role of the Persian general.

He met Zagorsky through a mutual friend and, after the pair toughed out a period of long-distance, they became engaged.

Shortly afterward, Sabongui was sitting in the audience preparing to watch his fiancée act for the first time.

"I suddenly thought, 'Oh my God, I've never seen her act. What if she sucks?'" he laughed.

"But she came out and was brilliant. She took my breath away."

Being part of an acting family is not easy going, Sabongui said, but at least both partners have an understanding of the nature of the business.

"It's tough because it's so unpredictable. It's feast to famine, and sometimes famine to famine. And it's hard when there is no steady income for the family. But we've stayed positive and supportive of each other," he said.

ACT Vancouver is enrolling for February. Classes cost between \$195 and \$320 for 10 weeks.

For more information call 604-628-6519 or go to www.actvancouver.ca.

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