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Busy actress' next dream role might be behind the scenes

Author(s): Carolyn Jack Plain Dealer Arts Reporter **Date:** August 18, 2006 **Section:** Friday

Q&A In the nine years since she's been back in Cleveland, actress **Bernadette Clemens** has become the area's onstage personification of complex intelligence.

She grew up in Shaker Heights and Beachwood and spent her childhood going to plays with her parents. It was at a Great Lakes Theater Festival performance of "Romeo and Juliet" that – at age 8, probably a second after she realized the Juliet was too old for the part – **Clemens** decided she wanted to act.

After earning a degree in theater at Columbia University's Barnard College, studying in England and acting for two years at various New York theaters, **Clemens** returned home, where she already has fulfilled a few dreams by playing some of the best female roles in English-speaking drama: Vivie Warren in Shaw's "Mrs. Warren's Profession," Nora in Ibsen's "A Doll's House," Anya in Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard" and Olivia in Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night."

Now 33, she is raising her two young children and working on a master's degree in English literature at Case Western Reserve University. But **Clemens** still has big goals for Cleveland theater.

Q What acting tools did your school training give you?

A Clown [training] informs every role I do. The moments that become effortless and beautiful for me are the moments when everything drops . . . and you're just left with a human moment. [In our clown class], you had a clown nose, and you couldn't leave the circle until you had made everybody laugh. It could go on for days – people would cry, tear their hair. Eventually, every human being will do something that's 100 percent honest, and that's where the laugh will

come. [**Clemens** won her laugh by firing an imaginary machine gun at her classmates in complete frustration, she said.] It's all accidental. Some of the greatest actor discoveries are accidental.

Q You act, you're a mom, you're earning your master's, you work in development at Case, you read six classical novels at a time, and you mow your own grass. What can you possibly still want to accomplish?

A Boy, I'm tired [laughs]. But I've always been pigheaded, and I'm a pressure junkie. . . . In 10 years, I'd like to found a [classical] company here, modeled after the Pearl Theatre Company in New York. [She'd stage everything from Renaissance and Restoration theater to 19th-century stuff such as "Pirandello," she said.] I think Great Lakes has lost that niche that it used to have. I think there would be a following, absolutely.

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