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Acting in good faith

Next month actress Cathy Morling, the wife of a local Methodist minister, will travel to India to lead workshops which are bringing hope to severely traumatised victims of sexual trafficking. Caroline Moody reports

WHEN actress Cathy Sara played Stiffy Byng in the Alan Ayckbourn play *By Jeeves*, her character

was engaged to the Rev Harold 'Stinker' Pinker. Little did she know then that one day she would be betrothed to a man in a white collar.

Cathy is the wife of the Rev Tony Morling and mother of their two boys, Columba (12) and Ronan (10).

In her professional life, she uses her stage name Cathy Sara (her Cornish maiden name, which is pronounced Sarah). She is also deputy CEO and creative co-ordinator of Talitha, a Christian organisation which works with therapists in rescue centres for victims of sexual trafficking and violent abuse.

Cathy trained at the Webber Douglas Academy, whose alumni include Steven Berkoff, Ross Kemp and Amanda Root, who is the founder and director of Talitha.

'Acting is a ridiculous career, but I have been very fortunate,' she said. 'I hit the ground running after winning the nationwide Carleton Hobbs radio drama award, which opened doors in BBC radio, theatre and TV work, and for the first eight years it felt like I didn't stop.'

It was around the time that Cathy was playing the part of Stiffy Byng in *By Jeeves* that she met the Rev Tony Morling on the island of Iona. The show had finished its run in Scarborough and she had a week off before a move to the West End.

Cathy headed to Iona. Tony was also staying at the Bishop's House retreat. 'There were eight of us staying there, and it was a bit like an Agatha Christie scene, you have your meals together and there were two Americans, a Tasmanian psychic and her dying father, two German ladies, the Methodist minister and the actress.'

Actually, both the Methodist minister and the actress were engaged to other people at the time. It was another year before Tony contacted her – neither had got married. They met on the steps of St Paul's.

'I hid behind a pillar and I just knew my life was never going to be the same again,' she said.

Life was also never going to be the same again once she had been convinced that she should get involved with Talitha's work.

The charity had been founded in 2010 by Amanda Root, godmother to Cathy's second son. Its vision is to use arts, music, dance and drama to bring healing and transformation to people crushed by oppression, exploitation and abuse.

Working with the International Justice Mission, it has delivered workshops to around 200 girls in rescue centres in Mumbai and Kolkata (Calcutta) as well as



Talitha Arts runs programmes at rescue centres in Mumbai and Kolkata

People have asked if it is depressing and difficult but I only ever come away filled with hope

training for 80 after-care staff.

'Amanda had always had a passion for the creative arts having a great therapeutic benefit,' Cathy said.

At first, although she admired her friend for what she was trying to do, Cathy didn't understand how she could play a part in Talitha's work.

'I was so involved with so many other things, but I felt a very deep inner conviction to say yes.'

'I remember turning to Tony and saying I think I've got to go to India, and he just said, yup, I think we can make that happen. And that started the most extraordinary adventure.'

Cathy's first visit to India was in January 2012, working mainly with 12- to 18-year-olds, though some victims can be as young as seven. 'It was a whole new avenue in my life,' she said. 'It brought everything about "me" together – my creativity, my passion for justice, my motivation, which was my faith, and suddenly I realised all these skills were being brought together for a very particular purpose, to make a fundamental difference.'

She has now led workshops and a training programme for after-care workers who are there year-round. 'We would love to see ourselves out of a job but with the scale of the problem I don't think it's going to happen quickly,' she said.

'The IJM would like to open doors for us in other countries too.'

'There are 30 million people in slavery today. The total market value of human trafficking is \$32 billion – it's the fastest growing international crime. Unicef figures show that 3.9 million children are in the sex trade worldwide. In India there are over three million prostitutes – and more than half of them are children. India is the biggest centre of trafficking and sexual exploitation in the world.'

Cathy works with severely traumatised girls. 'Physically they're broken and so stigmatised. It might have been their parents who sold them,' she said. 'I can't conceive the depth of scarring. Creative arts give them a means to unlock themselves. It's about them discovering their sense of identity, rediscovering who they are, giving them glimmers of hope and coping strategies, because they have no sense of dignity or self-worth.'

'We use icebreaking exercises to gain their trust and establish a rapport, we explore positive emotional qualities, like courage and inner strength, perseverance. 'You bring a lot of joy and a lot of hope. You love them to bits.'

The International Justice Mission is also transforming India's justice system from within. For example, in the past, police who were making an arrest would put the perpetrator and the victim in the same van, and ask them to write statements in the same room. 'Shockingly sometimes the Indian justice system took 13 to 15 years to get the victim to the other side,' she said. 'The IJM have



Cathy at home reading through a script: 'Acting is a ridiculous career, but I have been very fortunate' Picture: ROB CURRIE (5661945)

Cathy's credits

■ On TV, Cathy played Mrs Drake in the first two series of *Downton Abbey*. 'We had no idea when we filmed it that it would be the phenomenon it was. My agent rang and said it wasn't a huge role but did I fancy working alongside Maggie Smith. I have no recollection of the audition because I was so poorly after having my tonsils out.'

■ She has had guest parts in *Heartbeat*, *Casualty*, *Dalziel and Pascoe*, *Kavanagh QC* and, most recently, *Breathless*, in which she played Mrs Mulligan.

■ In film, she played Mrs Jerome in *The Woman in Black*



Cathy weeping and wailing in *The Woman in Black* (starring Daniel Radcliffe)

Black, which starred Daniel Radcliffe, and in 1998 she was in the Oscar-winning Mike Leigh film *Topsy-Turvy*.

■ On stage, parts included being Stiffy Byng in Alan Ayckbourn's play *By Jeeves*, in the West End.

helped bring that down to three to five years.' Cathy (42), who moved to the Island last year when her Jersey-born husband was appointed minister of St Helier Methodist Centre, said: 'I am so glad I did this, this risk taking, stepping out into the unknown. It's a most exciting new chapter.'

'As a family our passion is also to serve this community so we are still discovering what that might look like. And I do wonder what Talitha might look like in Jersey. I am sensing there are a lot of vulnerable people, as there are wherever you live.'

Talitha may have a role closer to home with other needs such as dementia, and it is working with British agencies which are interested in arts therapy.

Cathy spoke of a simple exercise that can have a dramatic effect. They get the girls to wrap themselves in a coloured piece of cloth, and imagine themselves as a cocoon. A caterpillar, she said, feels safe but, in order to survive, it has to break out with strength and determination to be the unique beautiful

individual that it is and have the freedom to fly.

'I'll never forget the first time we did it. With a beautiful piece of music from the *Out of Africa* soundtrack, Amanda and I emerged from our cocoons and danced around the room but everyone else was still hiding within. After a few days we repeated the exercise and a few danced, but what I found so powerful was that on the very last day every single girl was dancing around, and had discovered something of that freedom.'

'It's a metaphor, it's a simple exercise, but it gives just a little insight into what can be done with the power of the imagination.'

Speaking of which ...

Cathy has set up a space in her home for audio work and hopes to do more. This month an audio book that she recorded herself will be launched. *The King Behind the Picture*, written by Marianne Le Boutillier, is about the *Occupation* through the eyes of a child.

the wave, there is so much change. And if I only did it for one girl, I would do it. It's a beautiful thing to be a part of.'

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