

# A Force to be Reckoned With

## An Interview with Jeanne Goursaud

by Maya Avram / photography Katia Wik

Throughout her decade-long career, Jeanne Goursaud jumped head-first at every opportunity she had to learn about and connect with others. Whether she is researching to develop her characters, team-building with her colleagues on set, or getting through to audiences worldwide with her powerful performances, this young actress' laser-sharp focus and vibrant personality make her a force to be reckoned with. Much like her fictional alter egos, Goursaud considers herself an extroverted, determined person who is on a continuous journey of personal growth. Goursaud's pursuit of an acting career began when she was merely eight years old and it's safe to say that her perseverance paid off. Now she is the headline star of the hit Netflix show *Barbarians*, which, upon its release on the streaming platform, was ranked as the most-watched international series in 2020. The actor also portrays Jazz on the socially conscious series *Para – We Are King*. What motivates Goursaud is her wish to deliver stories that are human, relatable and touch upon viewers' innermost thoughts and feelings. According to her, this means performing characters who are perhaps flawed, or find themselves in unfavorable situations, but nevertheless do not lose their sense of resourcefulness and always step up to the challenge. I sat down with Goursaud to talk about her work, what it was like gaining international fame, the life lessons she's learnt throughout her career and most interestingly, what's next for her.

**Maya Avram: You have played a wide variety of characters, some even of historical significance. What do you look for when choosing roles, and how do you prepare for them?**

Jeanne Goursaud: Right now I'm at a point in my career where I'm looking for roles that are challenging and that further advance my personal growth. It's important to me that my work inspires me personally or inspires others, and that they also trigger some sort of an emotional reaction. I want to portray characters who are human and authentic so that the audience can identify with them. To prepare for these roles I do deep research into the project's given topic. In *Para – We Are King*

for example, we visited areas, scene stores, clubs and bars and observed how people talk to each other to convey that later in a really authentic and natural way.

**MA: Can you offer other examples of your past roles that were meaningful?**

JG: I think Jazz from *Para* is a strong character because she always speaks her mind. Since the series takes place in a multicultural environment, viewers quickly get sucked into this world and understand why these characters get into the kind of trouble they do. I think it's important to show that there's always a reason people become

criminals, and watching the series you may think, "that could have happened to me as well". What I like about that project is the subtle way in which it addresses issues like racism or homosexuality. We don't point them out directly nor do they dominate the plot, but instead they linger at the back of the viewer's mind.

**MA: Do the different characters you play share any commonalities – to each other, but also to you personally?**

JG: The characters I have portrayed in the last few years are all very extroverted, a quality I think we have in common – but maybe not to the same



extent. Both Thusnelda from *Barbarians* and Jazz from *Para* know exactly what they want, they have their goals and they fight for them. I relate to that because I recognize that mentality in myself as well, only in my case it had to do with acting. I always knew I wanted to become an actor; it has always been my dream. When I was eight years old, I started badgering my mom about becoming an actor, and at the time everyone dismissed it as a cute childhood dream. But when I was about 15 or so I started sneaking into movie festivals in Hamburg, where I grew up, to get connections in the film industry. Other times I can also learn about myself through my characters, for example the way they solve problems. Sometimes I surprise myself with how I react in character and think to myself, “Ah, ok, I can actually use that in real life.” Things like making decisions and sticking to them without waiting around or overthinking things, following your instincts.

**MA: You mentioned in an interview that it’s important to you to bring a female perspective to productions you are part of. What does “a female perspective” mean to you?**

JG: For me, a female perspective is about storytelling, making sure that men and women are featured on screen in an equally meaningful way and play equally significant parts. When we look at classic literature we see stories that are mostly told by men, but today we are starting to see that change, with female characters becoming more round and more complex. My dream for the film industry is that men and women meet at eye level and work together to tell their stories.

**MA: Some of your roles are quite physically demanding, be it fighting in *Barbarians* or dancing in *Para – We Are King*. What has that been like?**

JG: I’m very happy about that aspect of the job. So far I’ve played a professional tennis player, a professional swimmer, a professional dancer, a fighter... I have a lot of professions! [Laughs] Learning these things helps me grow. Through training I develop a new body language for each of my characters. They each have their own set of movements, they even walk differently. Fighting or dancing, for example, really affects your posture, and training becomes an important way to differentiate characters – not just saying “she likes to dance” or “she fights” – it’s something you see instinctively, it just comes off your body naturally. I do a lot of sports and I really enjoy things that are physically demanding because it’s a challenge, and I love challenges. Before *Barbarians* I was kind of scared because I had never done any boxing or fighting, I was always more of a dancer. But I was always very sportive, so when we had our first sword training session and I held the sword in my hand I thought, “actually, this is interesting.” It was all new moves, but now when I have a sword in my hand I know exactly what to do with it; I can do knife tricks and everything. It was great because I really surprised myself, and I now became interested in learning how to fight or box.

**MA: *Barbarians* was hugely successful on Netflix, the most watched international series in the US for 2020. What was it like having all your preparation and hard work recognized in this meaningful way – in the middle of a global pandemic?**

JG: We had no event for that, no premiere, which was kind of sad because it was such a big project and I wanted to celebrate it with my colleagues – although we do hope to have a great party for season two. On the other hand, because the series was released during the pandemic there were a lot of people watching, and it became clear how important film and television were to everyone at the time. It’s during these trying times that you really need culture, and so it’s a great thing that we were able to reach people all over the world. The response on social media was overwhelming, but at the same time it was cool to see that all our effort and hard work paid off. I was so touched by everyone’s messages, I even got tagged in pictures of fans who got my face in war paint tattooed on their arms or their back. I thought, “wow, there are real fans out there.”

**MA: How has life changed for you since receiving global recognition on this scale? What are some of the up-and downsides?**

JG: After the show aired I got messages from fans from all across the world, the US, England, Argentina and even India! The messages were incredibly nice, filled with love and I was really touched by all of them. There was also a huge city light in Berlin, a whole building featuring my face! Looking at it, I just thought it was insane because that has always been my dream. There was also more international interest and offers to take part in projects in other countries. It’s something I would love to do, go more international in my career.

**MA: You have worked in Hollywood productions before, right?**

JG: I worked with Clint Eastwood on *The 15:17 to Paris*, yeah. It was an amazing project and he gave us a lot of freedom in acting which was great. I went to Hollywood for the premiere. I would love to do more of that.

**MA: You’re multilingual and multicultural; how does that affect your work?**

JG: In the past four to five years, I’ve taken part in a project by painter Helmut Ditsch. It’s a really interesting project which focuses on his art and how he finds inspiration. We’ve been shooting all over the world, speaking German, French and Spanish, and I hope it will end up being a piece of art in and of itself. I have always loved languages, and as I said before, I also love challenges. I would shoot a full feature in Spanish if I got a teacher, I would happily do that.

**MA: You have been an actor for about a decade. What are some lessons you’ve learnt, or how has your perspective on the industry, yourself, or anything else changed during that time?**

JG: There’s really one thing I needed to learn going into the business, and that is patience. I’ll admit I’m not a patient person at all and I hate waiting – always have – but it’s something you need to learn as an actor because magic takes time. You need to have patience while waiting on set, during a take until you can finally let all your feelings out, not to mention waiting for responses from castings. So that is something I really had to learn. I also think I have learnt a lot about myself through my characters and the ways they act in certain situations. Finally, I learn a lot from meeting so many people on set. It’s different from going to

the same office every day; as an actor I change “offices” several times a year and so I always meet new people that offer their input or a fresh perspective. Shooting on location means I meet so many interesting people which is really inspiring, as are the conversations I have with them. I lived in Budapest while filming the first season of *Barbarians*, and in Krakow for the second season, and that way I visit different cities which is always interesting. Of course travelling around also makes you miss friends and family. Even though you meet some new warm and inspiring people. You get to know people on set very fast and connections can become intense because you spend a lot of time together. Sometimes not only on set itself but also living door to door in the same hotel or house. Then the project is over and you don’t know when to see each other again. That is a sad fact... I feel like I grew faster into adulthood.

**MA: You wear many hats, including modelling. How would you describe your relationship with fashion?**

JG: I love fashion! I always have. I won a Style Icon award by a well-known German magazine. It was quite funny because I was being interviewed for the award and I was scheduled to shoot right after the ceremony. Long story short, I actually received the award while I was just coming out of the shower, with wet hair and in a plain white t-shirt, thinking to myself how ironic it all was. But ultimately when I think about it, being a fashion icon or fashionable doesn’t mean that you always need to look super chic or wear the newest brands. To me fashion is about feeling great in what you wear; that is the most important thing. And if you feel great in a white t-shirt then that is exactly what you should wear. That being said, I really love suits. I have a collection of suits in every color.

**MA: What is it about the suit that appeals to you?**

JG: I think they can make for a wide range of looks. Sometimes they’re really oversized, other times they’re really fitted, and I like that they come in many colours. Mostly, though, I like to wear them without a bra or a shirt underneath, keep it simple. I think a suit always looks good like that.

**MA: What would you like to be doing more of moving forward in your career?**

JG: As I mentioned, I would like to do more international projects in English, French or even Spanish. I would also like to take part in more meaningful projects, and by that I mean projects that center around important issues, whether they are political or even just human experiences that resonate with people and to which they can relate. Another aspect I like about my job is that I get to use my platform to promote charitable organisations. I’m currently working closely with a human rights organisation called HÁWAR, help which gives women, children and persecuted minorities access to education and personal development opportunities. It’s a great thing, having this global recognition and being able to use it to help people all over the world. I’d like to keep supporting these types of projects.

**MA: Thank you very much!**







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Stylist: **Charlotte Gindreau**

Talent: **Jeanne Goursaud**

Hair and Makeup: **Philipp Verheyen using Dr.Barbara STURM,**  
**L'Oréal Paris & Hercules Sägemann**

Set Designer: **Sina Kempe**

Photographer's Assistant: **Sebastian Markgraf**

Stylist's Assistant: **Sandra Hemmink**

Hair and Makeup Assistant: **Caralena Schmidt**

Location: **Lux & Asa**