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## United States of Toni Collette

by Gail Eisenberg

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**As her acclaimed Showtime hit *United States of Tara* wraps for the season, Oscar-nominated star of *Little Miss Sunshine* and *Muriel's Wedding* Toni Collette sounds off on Diablo Cody, motherhood, and why Dissociative Identity Disorder satisfies her creative needs.**



Aussie actress Toni Collette has multifaceted covered. At thirty-six, she's a stage and screen veteran with more than thirty films on her ever-growing resume, including Golden Globe nods for *Muriel's Wedding*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, and HBO's *Tsunami*, *The Aftermath*, an Oscar nomination for *The Sixth Sense*, as well as Tony consideration for her lead role in the musical *The Wild Party*.

Showtime

So, when *United States of Tara* co-executive producers Steven Spielberg and Diablo Cody approached the versatile performer to play the part(s) of Tara Gregson, a woman with Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID)—the American Psychiatric Association's updated term for Multiple Personality Disorder—Collette was more than ready for the multitasking. "I choose stories and characters that inspire and interest me. I want to learn and be enriched somehow. I want to feel alive. Awake. Tara ticks all those boxes and then some. I haven't felt so creatively satisfied in years."

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Throughout the show's first season, the actress transitioned seamlessly from wife to thong-wearing teen tramp (T) to mother to weiner-less Vietnam vet (Buck) to working woman to Stepford Wife-like homemaker (Alice). As for which of the "alters" was the most demanding to play, Collette says, "I really don't know. Tara is living with the weight of the unknown. Alice takes ages to get ready. T and Buck smoke, which I can't stand. Plus, Buck is quite physical. I came away with more than my fair share of war wounds. But I live for demanding, so I am really not complaining."

Adding to the demands of the role is the sensitive subject matter. But Diablo Cody, the Academy Award-winning screenwriter of *Juno*, who wrote many of the season one episodes, knew what would play best. "Diablo thought it would be more original not to treat Tara's disorder as something taboo. And she was right. It's more exciting and unusual to be accepting and open. It's not a show about mental illness. It's about a complex and very real family trying to get through the day. It's very honest."

It's both Collette's and Cody's first foray into series television. While the actress enjoyed Diablo's signature quirky dialogue and the quick pace of TV in general, the diverse performer has had a change of heart in another medium: "I used to love a live audience but it sincerely frightens me now. It's kind of akin to torture. Film and TV feel safe. You're working with the same group of people for months. Having said this, I force myself on stage. It's a real trip. Nobody would have clue about the petrified chaos going on inside. Then it's over. Funny."

Funny, indeed, considering Toni Collett (she added the extra "e" years ago) began her career as a singer, and then "waltzed her way into musicals," before her breakout role in Muriel's Wedding at age twenty. Today, she also fronts Toni Collette and the Finish, the band she and drummer husband, Dave Galafassi, started.

The two recently collaborated on another project—their one-year-old daughter, Sage Florence. "I love being a Mum. She has made me a better person," she says about her first born. As for others on the way—children, alters, movies, albums? "Nothing to report," she tells The Daily Beast. "Just riding the lightning."

*The United States of Tara season finale airs tonight on Showtime at 10 pm. Season two begins in 2010.*

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