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## ***Australian Story* - Monday September 18, 8pm ABC and ABC iview**

### **ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE - KIRUNA STAMELL**

*"It's hard to explain, but I don't feel different. The only time it ever feels different is when I see people looking at me."* Kiruna Stamell

*"Kiruna's dwarfism is a big deal for everyone but me. For the rest of the world it's fascinating, but for me, I'm married to a really clever, beautiful woman who's a very talented actress, and that's bottom line."* Gareth Berliner, husband

*"She's either got people gawking at her or they're afraid to look at her. When Kiruna's whole fight is: Watch me. Listen to me. Watch me perform."* Kate Mulvany, actor and friend

Born with a rare form of dwarfism, 36-year-old Kiruna Stamell has overcome every hurdle thrown in her path, forging a successful career on stage and screen.

Her parents unknowingly carried the gene for dwarfism, also passing it on to Kiruna's younger twin sisters. While the three girls found strength in their common experience, their parents taught them to adapt to an often-hostile environment.

"I meet a lot of discrimination in the street," Kiruna says. "I'll be photographed, I'll be filmed, I'll have things yelled at me from cars. I have had periods in my life where I've sought counselling to deal with it. Because as much as I know that it's not my bag of rocks to carry what somebody thinks of my body, sometimes I need help putting those rocks down."

Kiruna was determined to perform from an early age and by her teens she was an accomplished dancer. Her big break came in 2001 when she was hired as an extra on Baz Lurhmann's *Moulin Rouge* and was quickly promoted when Lurhmann saw her dance.

"Baz Lurhmann had something that everybody in my career that has helped had, which was an open mind. Which was, I'm not going to write you off because you're different, I'm going to embrace it," says Kiruna.

Inspired by her experience on *Moulin Rouge*, Kiruna sought formal training, but following a rejection from NIDA she decided to try her luck in Britain where there were more opportunities for disabled performers. It was an inspired decision. She has worked consistently ever since on stage and screen, including roles in *EastEnders*, the Ricky Gervais comedy *Life's Too Short*, and three plays at London's prestigious National Theatre.

Kiruna's mission is to challenge perceptions of people with dwarfism by refusing to settle for stereotypical or demeaning roles.

"I think part of the mocking of disabled people is because it's been encouraged in the media," she says. "When Austin Powers came out, Mini-Me was the insult I heard then for the following five years. So I need to be careful. My thing is what can I affect? What can I change?"

In 2010, Kiruna met Gareth Berliner, an average-height actor and comedian, and they married in 2012. "Gareth just sees me as a person," Kiruna says. "He doesn't *not* see me as a little person but he doesn't get all excited because I'm a little person either. He just connects with me."

Australian Story filmed with the couple, Kiruna's family and her close friend, actor Kate Mulvany, while Kiruna was back in the country recently for the Belvoir Street production of *The Rover*.

This is a story of resilience, achievement and self-belief in the face of prejudice and discrimination. Combining candid interviews with intimate childhood videos and performance footage, it provides a unique insight into an extraordinary life.

Produced by Greg Hassall

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