

TV Close-Up: Amy Brenneman

by Eirik_Knutzen

After receiving several offers she couldn't refuse, Amy Brenneman reluctantly got into bed with the ABC network a couple of years ago. It was an amazing feat, as the comely actress was perfectly happy as a stay-at-home mom nursing a brand-new baby boy and keeping close tabs on a lovely, giggling, 4-year-old daughter skipping, jumping and staggering their huge, well-appointed Los Angeles home.

AMY BRENNEMAN - In 'Private Practice,' Amy Brenneman portrays Dr. Violet Turner, an obsessive psychiatrist who works at a Southern California wellness center. CNS Photo courtesy of ABC. Already independently wealthy after an incredible run as the star, creator and executive producer of "Judging Amy," the powers-that-be at the house Mickey Mouse built knew they had to come up with a very special project before Brenneman would disturb her domestic bliss and tear herself away from her favorite TV program, "Grey's Anatomy."

A year ticked by in a flash as Brenneman turned down several drama series developed specifically for her by network and studio honchos trying hard to whip writers and producers into shape. When nothing piqued her interest, she decided to do a cameo in a dramatic independent film, "Downloading Nancy," in Regina, Saskatchewan.

The entertainment suits in Hollywood tracked her down in Canada and made her sign a confidentiality agreement basically swearing that she had never heard of a "Gray's Anatomy" spinoff series titled "Private Practice."

Intrigued by the premise of "Private Practice," Brenneman, 43, sat down with creator/executive producer Shonda Rhimes (also the creator of "Grey's Anatomy") and executive producer Betsy Beers in L.A. a few days later. By the time the meeting broke up, she was set to play Dr. Violet Turner, a seriously obsessive psychiatrist working at the Oceanside Wellness Center in Santa Monica, Calif., with Dr. Addison Forbes Montgomery (Kate Walsh), a brokenhearted refugee from the damp and dreary Seattle Grace Hospital.

The large, seasoned cast includes Audra McDonald and Taye Diggs as Drs. Naomi Bennett and Sam Bennett, a cranky, recently divorced couple who co-founded Oceanside; Tim Daly as Dr. Pete Wilder, a cocky

specialist in alternative medicine; Paul Adelstein as loser pediatrician Dr. Cooper Freedman; and KaDee Strickland as Dr. Charlotte King, the chief of staff at a local hospital.

"I already knew some of the cast," said Brenneman, "including Kate (Walsh) a little bit socially and I did a Eugene O'Neill play with Paul (Adelstein). And I knew Tim - I know the whole Daly family from the 'Judging Amy' years. His sister, Tyne, played my mother (Maxine Gray); their sister Pegeen was her stand-in on the show. Their mom, Hope Newell. They all know how to connect as actors."

The working hours are brutal despite the sizable ensemble cast, according to Brenneman, but the environment on various Los Angeles sound stages are definitely child-friendly. Off the set, her husband of 12 years, director Brad Silberling ("Lemony Snicket" with Meryl Streep and the upcoming "Land of the Lost" with Will Ferrell), is very much a hands-on father who loves driving their 6-year-old daughter, Charlotte, to kindergarten every morning before dropping off their 2-year-old son, Bodhi at Mom's set.

"My life changed in every possible way down to my cellular level when Charlotte was born, then heightened when Bodhi came along," she explained. "I'm now a different person who feels vulnerable for the first time in her life. I'd always been an invincible kind of gal. A friend of mine puts that love for my kids this way: 'It's like having your heart walk around outside your body.'"

A Connecticut native born in New London and raised in Glastonbury, Brenneman is the daughter of parents who were the first couple to meet and marry while students at Harvard Law School. Her mother, Superior Court Judge Frederica Brenneman, inspired the concept for "Judging Amy;" her father, Russell Brenneman, is a semiretired expert on environmental laws and founded the Connecticut Chapter of the League of Conservation.

The five-time Emmy Award nominee (who also received three Golden Globe Award nods) fell in love with performing during childhood and never missed a single musical production at Glastonbury High School. A top student, she majored in comparative religion at Harvard, which included seven months studying sacred dances in Tibet and Nepal with Buddhist monks. She loved the majesty of the Himalayas, but soon found that yak bells kept her awake at night.

Brenneman co-founded the Cornerstone Theater Company before she graduated from Harvard in 1987, then spent the next five years in repertory in the hinterlands. After a tepid TV start, she garnered national attention for her work on "N.Y.P.D. Blue" as Officer Janice Licalsi, sometimes directed by her husband-to-be. On the big screen, her credits now include the recent "Jane Austen Book Club" and the future psychological thriller "88 Minutes" with Robert DeNiro - but as Al Pacino's lesbian Girl Friday.

"It's a small part, but I loved it."

Â© Copley News Service

TV Close-Up: Amy Brenneman by Eirik_Knutzen