

TV Close-Up: Lucy Lawless

by Eirik_Knutzen

After six profitable years working her butt off in a leather microskirt and a strangling-tight bustier - come sun, rain, sleet and hail - in the title role of the fantasy action series "Xena: Warrior Princess" (1995-2001), Lucy Lawless became understandably selective about her projects. This is why she turned down a leading role in "Battlestar Galactica" and the pilot for "Lost in Space" some three years ago.

"I wasn't ready to go back into something spacey and culty," said Lawless. "They came to see me about 'Medium,' too - which I knew would be successful, but I didn't want to work that hard. It was like I had been tortured by success."

LUCY LAWLESS - Lucy Lawless plays D'Anna Biers, No. 3, in the sci-fi series 'Battlestar Galactica.' CNS Photo courtesy of Justin Stephens. But "Battlestar Galactica" executive producer David Eick (an old friend from their "Xena" days) kept pushing, even as Lawless took on short-term gigs in such feature films as "The Darkroom" (2006), the leads in the telemovies "Locusts" (2005) and "Vampire Bats" (2005), plus recurring roles in "Less Than Perfect" and "Veronica Mars."

"I didn't know what kind of part I was looking for, but I didn't want to play a 'Joe Normal,'" said Lawless, the statuesque former brunette. "Then David offered me the recurring character of D'Anna Biers, affectionately known to her Cylonese friends as No. 3, who had just about everything I was looking for."

Lawless, 38, joined the production in Vancouver, British Columbia, at the end of the 2005-'06 season in time for her wild new blond tresses to make a dramatic impact. Biers is on a terminal hit list after 10 episodes of the 2006-'07 season. "It was a wonderful experience" facilitated by the tight production schedules leading up to Biers' dark, droll demise.

"It's lots of fun playing the beautiful and sexy Cylon D'Anna because she's a very mixed-up girl," said a laughing Lawless. "She is a spy by trade and a spy by nature, but undercover as a journalist. Clearly, it was her job to be a spy, but there's a glitch in her makeup. She can't help but question the nature of God, the afterlife, reincarnation and other taboo subjects. Although beyond her control, she double-crosses her own kind and herself."

Going blond was a brilliant move at the time, personally and professionally, according to Lawless. "I went to see a (Beverly Hills) hair stylist named Craig Gangi, telling him that I was feeling like a housewife with a naturally mousy, weird brownie-blondie color - and to do something about it.

"When he made me a blonde with a new cut, new look, I sat in his chair and cried," the gutsy actress said,

"because I'd been living like a housewife with two little children for so long, and all of a sudden he made me look really glamorous. I started to cry because it was such a shock to my system. Craig also said it was the biggest moment in his professional career."

Bold, brassy and opportunistic as always, Lawless signed up for the competitive reality show "Celebrity Duets" during hiatus from "Battlestar Galactica" last year - coming in second on the Simon Cowell-produced program with help from recording artists Chaka Khan, Clint Black and Macy Gray.

A natural singer with a taste for rock and soul in the Etta James mode, Lawless performed "I'm an Old Cowhand from Rio Grande" on "The Rosie O'Donnell Show" in 1996, which gave her a shot as Rizzo in the Broadway revival of "Grease!" the following year.

She recently concluded a two-night, sold-out gig at The Roxy in Los Angeles and is set to perform at the Hotel Zoso Ballroom in Palm Springs, Calif., on March 30 as part of the "Pure White Party," a focal point at the world's largest lesbian gathering during Dinah Shore Week and its classic women's golf tournament. "It's a Friday late-night gig there," says Lawless. "It will be full of large women in comfortable shoes."

Looking back, her huge lesbian following appears to be a natural, but it came about by pure accident, according to the Auckland (Mount Albert) born and raised New Zealander who seems to have achieved success by equal amounts of luck, pluck and skill.

"Xena and Gabrielle (Renee O'Connor) started out as two females without husbands, boyfriends or male love interests," explains Lawless.

"Two women on their own in a dangerous world - there aren't many female characters like that on television anywhere - none, really," she says. The program quickly found a large and extremely loyal lesbian fan base that she will always be grateful for.

"I'm told there is a short list somewhere that names Xena and Gabrielle as the No. 1 and No. 2 dykes in the world."

Meanwhile, the Lucy Lawless Express shows no signs of running out of gas. She recently signed to play a lead role in the ABC network pilot of an Americanized version of the sexy British series "Footballers' Wives" and a "Xena" movie (based on the international hit series co-created by her husband, Rob Tapert) is suddenly feasible again. "If it happens, my hair will go dark again in seconds."

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