

TV Close-Up: Anne Heche

by Eirik_Knutzen

Aug. 14, 2006, was a warm, bright, sunny day in Vancouver, British Columbia. Anne Heche was happily making the most of it during a break in the shooting of her new comedy-drama series "Men in Trees."

Heche, 37, plays cute, blond and perky "relationship coach" Marin Frist who has just dumped her cheating fiance and is keeping a low profile in tiny Elmo, Alaska, where men outnumber women 10 to one. The show had been well received.

Heche was perfectly at ease in Vancouver, surrounded by clear water and steep mountains bathed in clean air. She was contemplating the possibility of establishing family roots in Canada for years if "Men in Trees" became a bona fide hit. Vancouver had all the outlets for a creative person while leaving room for a child and a healthy marriage.

ANNE HECHE - Anne Heche, 37, plays a perky 'relationship coach' in a tiny Alaskan town in the comedy 'Men in Trees.' CNS Photo courtesy of Jeff Petry.

One reason for starring in a series was to be able "to provide my family with a sense of stability and home," she said. Her husband of five years, documentary director of photography Coley Laffoon, was then a full-time, stay-at-home dad in charge of the daily care of their son, Homer, then 4.

"I go out and get the paycheck and he takes care of everything else," Heche said.

Heche's often-tragic childhood and sometimes-turbulent adult life seemed part of a distant past. Her life became "better, brighter, more interesting and funner" after marrying Laffoon; her happiness "multiplied times three when Homer came in."

But six months later, on Feb. 1, the euphoria had apparently evaporated. It was a cold, dark day in Los Angeles when Laffoon filed for divorce.

Putting on a good face, Heche has been visible in Hollywood from time to time, usually in the company of a close friend - including her "Men In Trees" co-star James Tupper (Jack).

Making matters worse, the long-range future of "Men in Trees" is in doubt due to tepid ratings almost from the start - despite a full-season pickup and a new day and time slot. But Heche appears infinitely stronger now than in August 2000, when she had a mental meltdown in the wake of her close, highly publicized 3 1/2-year relationship with Ellen DeGeneres.

Soon after their split, Heche was picked up by the police near Fresno, Calif., after knocking on the door of a farm family - total strangers. Allegedly under the influence of drugs, she explained that her name was Celestia and was merely hanging around until a spaceship could whisk her off to heaven. Police took Heche to a local hospital, which released her later that day.

In her 2001 autobiography, "Call me Crazy," Heche explained that "Celestia" was the name of a childhood alter ego used as a defense against the repeated sexual abuse she claims was administered by her

father, a secretly gay Baptist choir director-minister who died of complications from AIDS when she was 13. She characterized her mother as a religious zealot and master of denial. Born in Aurora, Ohio, young Anne and her three siblings had lived in 11 cities before she was 12.

"Acting" - which came about quite by accident when she was 12 years old - "kind of saved my life," explained Heche. "To help the family finances, I was baby-sitting for a couple in Ocean City, N.J., who owned a dinner theater. They knew that I sang in church and needed a young girl to play Amaryllis in 'The Music Man.' I ended up working there for two years."

A couple of years later, a New York talent scout for soap operas watched her in a stage production of Thornton Wilder's "Skin of Our Teeth" at Chicago's Francis W. Parker School. He came back during her senior year to arrange a successful screen test and four-year gig on "Another World" - which yielded one Emmy Award. When her name was announced at the Emmys telecast, Heche was shooting the telefilm "Oh, Pioneers" with Jessica Lange in Nebraska. "That's when I called my agent and said, 'Well, if this acting thing is going to work out, do you think I should need to move to L.A.?'"

laughed Heche. "When she said yes, I took off and that was that. I didn't look back." She hit the big screen in 1993 with "The Adventures of Huck Finn" and "A Simple Twist of Fate," followed by big breaks in 1996 with "Walking and Talking" and "The Juror."

Heche met DeGeneres at the 1997 Academy Awards and, despite their highly publicized lesbian relationship, continued to play romantic film leads, including opposite Harrison Ford in "Six Days, Seven Nights" (1998). As painful as the breakup with DeGeneres was at the time, Heche has put it all in perspective: "The best possible outcome of relationships is that you learn something from them and feel proud of the time that you spend with people who may not be your partner for life, but teach you a lot and help you grow."

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