TV Close-Up: Teri Polo

by Eirik_Knutzen

Taking a wild leap into the unknown, Teri Polo dropped out at the age of 17 after her junior year at Dover High School in Dover, Del. She hit the ground sprinting to auditions between acting classes in New York City. Almost a year later, she portrayed beautiful, blond ingenue Kristin Larsen during the 1986 season on the ABC soap opera "Loving" (1983-95).

For a goof, she went home to Delaware to say "Hi" to all her friends in what would have been her graduating class at Dover High. It turned out to be more inspirational than fun. The whole thing started when one of Polo's classmates - the popular, well-constructed, cute blond cheerleader who dated only star football players of whom she was "extraordinarily jealous" - came over for a little chat.

TERI POLO - Teri Polo plays Jane Bell, head of a family-owned wedding planning business, in the drama 'The Wedding Bells.' CNS Photo courtesy of Art Streiber.

"The first thing she said to me was, 'Oh, it's so great and I cut school all the time to see you on "Loving" - it looks so cool and like so much fun that I could do that ...'" Polo recalls, not amused.

"I got so mad I wanted to rip her head off; I couldn't believe that someone would so flippantly say, 'Oh, I could have done what you've done if I wanted to' after busting my butt to get there. It was tough, but I knew that I had a flair, a drive and a desire to do what I was doing."

As far as Polo knows, the cheerleader is no longer cheerleading and never cracked showbiz - remaining nameless and anonymous. The lithe, lovely actress, on the other hand, has been working since the encounter. She has always been able to fill those inevitable slack periods of thespians with fashion modeling, off-Broadway shows and regional theater.

And now the resourceful performer - who earned an Emmy Award nomination for her work as Helen Santos on "The West Wing" during the 2005-06 season - stars in "The Wedding Bells" (9 p.m. EST Fridays, Fox) a midseason replacement "romantic dramedy" series co-created by heavyweights David E. Kelly ("The Practice," "Ally McBeal," "Chicago Hope," "Picket Fences") and Jason Katims ("Roswell," "Relativity").

First among equals in an ensemble cast breathing life into "a family-owned wedding planning business" until death, boredom or another person do them part, Polo, 37, portrays Jane Bell, the queen of The Wedding Palace that she inherited along with her two sisters, Annie (KaDee Strickland) and Sammy (Sarah Jones) in the wake of their parents' divorce.

The part was practically handed to her on a titanium platter - as Kelley and company had sold the show complete with 13 episodes to be shot at Los Angeles' Raleigh Studios/Manhattan Beach just minutes from her recently purchased home.

Her brain said, "Where do I sign?" But her ego cautioned, "In Hollywood, you don't really want to be cast as the older sibling in her mid-30s who has two younger sisters in their prime."

Polo finally agreed to play the "elder" female wearing "sweater sets" in the bunch after the creators made her character rich and a bit less dowdy.

"Look, I used to be cast as the ingenue," she laughs, "then hot chicks in their 20s and 30s."

Of course, chances are that Polo never will see a frame of herself in "The Wedding Bells" anyway, partly by accident, partly by design.

"I don't really like to watch my own stuff," she explains, "I don't even watch TV at my house. I have a 4 1/2-year-old son," Griffin by ex-husband Anthony Moore, a photographer, and a 9-year-old "stepson," Carter from her boyfriend, musician Jamie Wollam's previous relationship.

"The boys watch cartoons on TV," she continues. "I didn't even see my recent television film, a romantic comedy called 'Love is a Four Letter Word,' or anything of the last season of 'The West Wing' - which I'm told is pretty good.

And I rarely go to see movies, because I'm very picky about them. If it isn't a perfect movie, I get angry because I feel it's a waste of my time."

Meanwhile, she hopes there are long lines at the box office for her current motion picture, "Full of It," opposite 19-year-old Ryan Pinkston. She plays his oversexed high school teacher, a hot creature crawling across desks and tossing books on the floor in order to rip his clothes off. And it's a distinct possibility that she will team up again this summer with Ben Stiller, Robert DeNiro and Blythe Danner to shoot "Meet the Little Focker" - the third installment of the highly successful film comedies "Meet the Parents" (2000) and "Meet the

Fockers" (2004).

Best of all, her personal life now appears as solid as her career.

"It's a testosterone-filled house, but they all know I rule the roost," she joked. "Jamie and I are happy; we've had some tough times, but we're finally getting out of the forest and into the clearing. I would like to get married again and have another child - family is absolutely paramount to me."

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