

TV Close-Up: Catherine Bell

by Eirik_Knutzen

With an extensive military career spanning nine years as fiery Marine Corps attorney Lt. Col. Sarah ("Mac") MacKenzie on "JAG" (1996-05), it seemed only natural that Catherine Bell would be approached by the producers of the television series "Army Wives."

CATHERINE BELL - Catherine Bell, seen here from a 'JAG' scene, portrays Denise, a devoted housewife and mother married to no-nonsense Major Frank Sherwood in the TV drama 'Army Wives.' CNS Photo courtesy of Gale M. Adler. But instead of utilizing the dark svelte of Bell's background as an officer and a gentlewoman, the show's powers-that-be only saw her as a civilian, Denise, a devoted housewife and mother married to no-nonsense Maj. Frank Sherwood (Terry Serpico) who is frequently deployed overseas.

A huge drawback is Jeremy (Richard Bryant), their physically abusive son who is literally tearing his mother to pieces.

Set on an Army base in the deep South and shot entirely in and around Charleston, S.C., the program focuses on a mutual support group of military spouses composed of several women from varied backgrounds (played by Kim Delaney, Brigid Brannagh and Sally Pressman) - and one man, a shrink (Sterling K. Brown) whose officer wife (Wendy Davis) recently returned from Afghanistan suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome. All are struggling with dark secrets, some darker than others.

"Basically an offer, I took a look at 'Army Wives' pilot script about caring, family and friendship, then fell in love with the character, the ensemble cast and all the creative people," explained the 38-year-old actress, who also hit the big screen as the sizzling Susan Ortega in Jim Carrey's "Bruce Almighty" (2003) and reprises the role as a cameo in Steve Carrell's current "Evan Almighty."

"Working in Charleston was a deciding factor, too. It's a unique city with beautiful architecture going all the way back to the colonial era."

"Not having to work every day, I have lots of time for my husband (Adam Beason) and 4-year-old daughter, Gemma," she continued. "We live right on the water and take our boat out at least three days a week. Gemma has been with me on the set since she was 3 months old and knows the drill. When she hears people yell, 'Rolling!' she goes after anyone talking with, 'Shush, they're rolling!'"

Bell met her husband - now a screenwriter - when Beason was an assistant to director Robert Zemeckis on "Death Becomes Her" (1992). Bell was Isabella Rosselini's nude body double. A Polaroid picture of her exposed rear end nailed down the job, one of the last booked by her old modeling agency. She endured lots of

catcalls from the crew of the mediocre movie, "but Adam wasn't one of them." Two years later, they tied the knot.

The daughter of an English architect and an Iranian-born nurse was born in London, but raised in Los Angeles from the age of 2 with her mother and grandparents in the wake of her parents' divorce. Bell is fluent in Farsi because of the Iranian household, but attended a local Catholic school where she was taught by nuns. A very bright student, she matriculated to the University of California Los Angeles with every intention of becoming a biomedical engineer or studying medicine.

Bored, the beautiful Bell dropped out of school a year or so later and was immediately snapped up as a print and catalog model on the Los Angeles scene. A four-month modeling assignment in Japan opened her eyes to a strange new culture where she was frequently groped on Tokyo streets by short men. She was "very homesick," and was angry and fast enough to turn on unknown assailants with punches to the nose and elbows to the ribs.

Tired of long runways and hot photo studios, the 5-foot-10-inch Bell soon turned her attention to acting by enrolling in classes taught by heavyweight teacher Milton Katselas at The Beverly Hills Playhouse.

Eventually self-employed as a massage therapist (singer Peter Gabriel was among her clients) while auditioning for parts, she finally made her professional debut with one line on "Sugar and Spice" (1990) - a tasteless little sitcom with the 30-second shelf life.

Over the years she has played a number of aggressive military women, including her role in the feature film "Men of War" (1994) with Trevor Goddard - a strange Englishman passing himself off as an Australian in the U.S. who wound up playing Bell's off-and-on love interest Mic Brumby on "JAG" a year later.

"We had amoebic dysentery at the same time while shooting in Thailand and became friends," Bell said about her first meeting with Goddard.

Goddard - who lived a lie, claiming among other things to have been a professional boxer - died of an accidental drug overdose in June 2006. In the throes of a divorce, he left two young sons behind.

The announcement of his death, according to Bell, "was horrible. I was very shocked, very surprised - I think we all were. What a wonderful, sweet human being. I just adored him. But I knew he liked to party"

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