

NEW B.C. SERIES TERMINAL CITY MIXES CANCER, REALITY TV AND THE HOLOCAUST

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TORONTO (CP) - If *Six Feet Under* made compelling TV viewing out of death, then why not a series about breast cancer?

Terminal City, a 10-hour series that debuts Monday on Movie Central and The Movie Network, suggests the critically acclaimed *Slings & Arrows* was not a fluke; Canadians, it seems, can create a show of HBO calibre with world-class writing, acting and production values.

At its centre is the magnetic and beguiling Maria Del Mar (*Blue Murder*, *Street Legal*), who runs with the role of a lifetime, that of 43-year-old wife and mother Katie Sampson who learns she has breast cancer.

It has an understandably cataclysmic impact on her loving husband Ari (*Ally McBeal*'s Gil Bellows), their three kids, and Ari's dad Saul (*Paul Soles*), a survivor of the Holocaust who never lets anyone forget it.

"Had somebody told me 'Do you want to do this script about a woman with a cancer?' I would have flinched, I would have squirmed in my seat," Del Mar concedes. "But having read the first two pilot scripts, I was biting at the bit to get my hands on Katie Sampson."

Bellows believes the drama, which was filmed in Victoria, takes Canadian TV to a whole new level.

"An opportunity here to really blow up a bunch of stereotypes all in one creative experience," says the Vancouver native. "I don't know that there ever has been a subject that has come across in this medium, in this country, that has that same effective wallop to it."

During her struggle, Katie benefits from a mate who is calm, loving and easygoing, although Bellows disagrees with the easygoing part.

"I think he's raging silently, pretty much continually, and as the story evolves the cracks occur, and the insights as well."

Real life likes to throw us curves and sometimes a light shines through in our darkest hours and from the unlikeliest places. So it is with Katie who, while at the hospital one day, is interviewed by a reality cable show called *Post-Op* that patrols the corridors for human interest stories. Katie proves so compelling and charismatic the producers fire the doctor host and hire her immediately.

She quickly becomes a popular TV personality, speaking frankly about her own diagnosis (she coyly flashes a bare breast to the camera) and the plight of others in the wards - even joining patients on air as they all sample some therapeutic pot. She also agrees to have her own partial mastectomy broadcast live.

As her ratings soar, the telegenic Katie is given a rare opportunity to focus on an unspoken subject while distracted from her own plight.

Del Mar says pairing two latter-day scourges - cancer and reality TV - gives the series some unexpected levity, making Katie a multi-dimensional character.

"Cancer was not defining Katie. That wasn't her one defining moment in her existence. That's part of her life, absolutely, but that's not Katie. Katie is many things." Though filled with wit, Terminal City also allows Del Mar some potent dramatic moments. In one scene, Katie attempts to take some control over the effects of chemo by cutting and shaving her own shedding hair. It was, of course, a one-take scene.

"Hair is such an issue for women," the actress says, conceding the sequence was both terrifying and empowering.

"They had two cameras rolling at the same time, and it took over nine minutes. And what a rollercoaster ride. It was one of those cathartic moments for an actor."

Then the graphic surgery scene which, she insists, was not a digital effect nor real operation footage spliced in.

"They brought in a real surgeon to do the cutting," she says. "And it was a prosthetic I was wearing, that was built to reflect exactly what it would be like."

Creator-executive producer Angus Fraser (Kissed) was inspired to write the script from an experience during a family gathering when his mother got a phone call from her doctor. Although a tumour eventually proved benign, Fraser says he found the cancer clinic to be an intense place but was so impressed with the courage of the patients and the compassion of the nurses.

It was unthinkable "not to write about it and not to feel, and feel for the people who are not going to make it."

Which raises the subject of how Terminal City will end. The title notwithstanding, it is agreed a happy ending would be trite, a downer ending perhaps more depressing than viewers would want.

Bellows and Fraser are suitably enigmatic.

Fraser believes no two people will come away from Terminal City's finale with the same conclusion.

"Conceptually, you'll find our ending to be highly evocative and not what you expect."

Bellows says when a family crisis comes to an end, the family still has to go on, life goes on.

"It offers you a lot of different ways to look at where we finish," he says. "I'm going to steal a quote from (The Shawshank Redemption): 'You get busy living or get busy dying.' "