

## THE LAST LAUGH ON BREAST CANCER

In Terminal City, Maria Del Mar is a mom fighting for her life -- and for ratings on a reality show about her illness. The result is a new breed of must-see Canadian TV

By GAYLE MACDONALD  
Monday, October 24, 2005

Most of us have had at least one life-changing phone call. The kind where you answer, expecting to exchange the usual mindless patter, and hang up a dramatically different person. The news delivered -- not good -- leaves a sickening hole in the pit of your stomach.

Terminal City, a new 10-part series that debuted last Monday on The Movie Network and Movie Central, opens with that same kind of hollow hammer blow. Katie Sampson (played by Toronto actress Maria Del Mar) is hitting golf balls with a friend when her cell phone rings. She ignores it, but her pal picks it up. Cancer has come calling -- and whack! goes another golf ball -- this 43-year-old mother of three confronts a radically altered landscape.

If the show's premise sounds too depressing, don't snub it just yet. Cancer as gripping television? In this case, yes. The series, created, written and executive produced by Vancouver native Angus Fraser, is a new breed (and calibre) of must-see Canadian TV, a riveting family drama, about a deadly serious topic, that happens to be hilariously funny when you'd least expect.

Landing in the same ground-breaking genre that includes HBO's Six Feet Under and The Sopranos, Terminal City embraces taboo topics in a respectful, honest manner, and ends up leaving viewers eminently entertained.

Fraser (who co-wrote Kissed with director Lynne Stopkewich) crafts a script with a rapier wit that never gets saccharine. And his lead character, Katie, is presented as a vivacious life force, a beautiful woman who is funny, fierce, strong, vulnerable, and scared to death.

"She's the kind of woman who will blurt out, 'Yeah, I've got breast cancer. Big deal.' " agrees Del Mar. "And that's her form of denial. Katie Sampson is full of life, has a joie de vivre, a lust and a passion to exist: to be a mother, a wife, a lover, a neighbour, a friend," continues the actor, who has starred in Blue Murder and Street Legal.

"And she'll continue to be that regardless of her cancer. I loved the fact that the script wasn't trite. The show wasn't earnest. And that the characters were flawed. It's not a portrayal of your typical TV family. It was closer to my reality. But the role was also daunting. On paper, she was such a huge character . . . and I wasn't sure how I was going to get to all these different places."

In Terminal City, Katie is an affluent, stay-at-home mom married to successful architect Ari (Gil Bellows). After 20 years of marriage, the couple still have a spark, and think nothing of shipping off their three kids (Katie Boland, Adam Butcher and Nico McEown) to stay with cantankerous father-in-law (Paul Soles) so they can indulge in an evening of martinis, marijuana and good sex.

On her way out of a biopsy, Katie is unexpectedly stopped by a camera crew shooting a hospital-based reality show called Post-Op. Still shaken from her test, she gives the crew some hilarious one-liners and flashes them her boob. Soon after, she's asked by a hard-nosed producer (Jane McLean) to be the host of the TV show. It becomes a huge hit, as viewers join the indomitable Katie as she tries to come to terms with -- and fight -- this insidious disease, all the while trying not to burden her family, who are suffering right along with her.

Fraser says he looked long and hard for the actor to play Katie. Del Mar's audition happened one night in Toronto, when she was flustered after having to take one of her kids to The Hospital for Sick Children. "She'd had a crisis with her kid that night and she was trying to quit smoking so she was chewing Nicorettes," says Fraser. "I told her to take the gum out of her mouth. And she said, 'I can't. I'm addicted to cigarettes and I can barely hang in there.' Well, she finally took it out and then she went on this hysterical monologue, this jag, about heroin addiction [not hers], cigarette addiction, and babies with large heads," laughs Fraser, who immediately turned the camera on her. After that, Fraser adds, the networks were sold.

"She was a character, and once she started to act, she absolutely went for it," he says. In one scene, Del Mar shaves her head. At first she balked -- arguing with Fraser that it would be just as good to use a skull cap. Fraser says he insisted. "I told her she couldn't cheat this moment," he remembers. "I went in, and sat down with a bottle of Jack Daniel's. We drank half of it. Then she went to set. We put two cameras on her, and the scene ran for nine minutes and 50 seconds. There was not a dry eye."

Fraser says he tried to marry two themes in his series that he believes dominate contemporary culture: breast cancer and reality television. "Who are we?" he asks. "We're watchers of TV and we're victimized by cancer. But this show is about laughter before it's about breast cancer. And it's about life before it's about death. Because death animates our lives, right? We're all going to die, and I think the more you accept that, the richer your life is."

Part of Fraser's inspiration for Terminal City came from a close call his mother had with a cancerous tumour several years ago. (She, luckily, got a clean bill of health). But a near-death experience the writer had 12 years ago played an even bigger role.

In Vancouver, working temporarily as a bouncer at Graceland, Fraser and another employee got caught up in a fight. Fraser was stabbed in the heart -- twice. Rushed to St. Paul's Hospital, he miraculously survived.

"It was as bad as it gets, and it affects a lot of my writing," says Fraser, who also co-wrote the film *A Girl Is A Girl*, the NBC special *Witnesses and Wiseguys* (for which he won a New York Emmy), and is currently adapting for film Miriam Toews's *A Complicated Kindness*, which took last year's Governor-General's Literary Award.

"It's not what I choose, but abstractedly [an incident like that] is always there with you, right? I'd never get therapy because I never want to figure it out. I'd rather walk around a complete mess than seek help," he says, chuckling. "It can affect you in a wonderful way, too. I love being alive. I know it's a stupid thing to say, but there are moments when I go it's great to be here . . . because I'd gone there."

Bellows, another Vancouver native who now calls Los Angeles home, says he found out about Terminal City through his Canadian agent and asked to be given the role of Katie's husband, Ari. "What Angus does extremely well is he takes moments that I think lesser writers would turn into a joke, and makes them serious. And he takes moments where they'd go serious, and goes for the joke. So you're being hit with these experiences and responses that are surprising," says Bellows, best known for his long running role on Ally McBeal. "I think that's what boundary-pushing subjects do, they surprise you."

Bellows is also the first to admit that a controversial series like this -- which besides cancer delves into the perverseness of reality TV and the ongoing anger over the Holocaust (Soles's acerbic character is an Auschwitz survivor) -- could never be on a conventional network.

"When you deal with a major network, you're dealing with an agenda that's so corporatized," says Bellows. "Advertisers don't want to sidle up to taboo topics. They don't want to play with this kind of dramatic fire."

On the surface, Del Mar also knows a drama about cancer might not be up everyone's alley. But she insists it's a sure sell for viewers with critical minds.

"When Six Feet Under first came out people said, 'Who's going to watch a show about a funeral home? And with The Sopranos they said, 'Who would watch a series about a bunch of mafiosos?'

"Discerning viewers will watch Terminal City precisely because it's not your typical movie of the week. You don't have the Kleenex box right beside you, where you know you're in for exactly 42 minutes of tear-jerky, predictable, earnest, trite material. Terminal City has dark humour. It has a great sense of humour. And it's unflinchingly real."