




THE PRIME OF DANA DELANY

HAIR AND MAKEUP: ERIC BARNARD FOR CLOUTIER, USING ALTERNA HAIR PRODUCTS AND ARMANI COSMETICS. STYLIST: HEIDI MEEK FOR CLOUTIERAGENCY.COM.
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THE NEW
FEMME FATALE
ON WISTERIA
LANE IS TRUSTING
HER INSTINCTS
ABOUT WHATEVER
ELSE MIGHT
COME HER WAY.
AT 51, SHE SAYS,
“I LOVE BIG
SURPRISES.”

BY MARGOT
DOUGHERTY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
MICHAEL O'NEILL

“I think you know everything as a child, and then sometimes it’s smooched out of you,” Dana Delany says. “Since I was a kid, I’ve wanted to act.” She gets up from a salmon suede love seat — “I want to show you something” — and climbs the suspended stairs of her modern three-storey house in Santa Monica. Descending, she waves a copy of her application to Phillips Academy Andover, the Massachusetts prep school that she attended, and reads an excerpt from the essay she wrote at 16, predicting where she’d be in 20 years:

“The final curtain falls and another day comes to an end. This is my life — the theater. At age 36, many women have married, settled down and raised a family, but that is not for me. My day does not begin with crying babies and a husband late for work, but with the dimming of lights, the rise of the curtain and the current of magic between actor and audience. This is living to me....”

Delany laughs — a deep laugh that makes you think that under the right circumstances, she could tell a good bawdy joke — and seems both amused and impressed by her teenage self. “Can you believe this?” she asks. “I’m exactly where I said I’d be.”

That would be in the catbird seat. Delany, 51, has four independent movies ready for release, and this season she joined the hit TV show *Desperate Housewives* as Katherine Mayfair, the newest and possibly most deviant femme fatale on the block. “I lived on Wisteria Lane 12 years ago and left under mysterious circumstances with my daughter,” she says of her alpha-mom character. “Now I’m back with my new, younger, handsome gynecologist husband.”

Delany knows a lot about the older woman-younger man dynamic. “I’ve been dating younger men since my twenties,” she says with a smile. “When I was 29, I dated someone 21.” More recently, she went out with a wine connoisseur 11 years younger and, after that, a writer 14 years her junior. “I can’t go any younger than that!” she says. “That’s my limit. But younger men are just more fun. I like their energy. I’ve always been kind of young for my age.”

Desperate Housewives creator Marc Cherry isn’t surprised by this art-imitating-life scenario. “Dana looks so much younger than she is, it’s actually a little freaky,” he says. “She comes onto the set with no makeup and her hair not done and looks like a 35-year-old on her way to the beach. Whatever she’s doing, it’s good for her.”

This is immediately apparent when Delany opens the door to her home. She’s wearing a short cotton skirt with red and brown cross-hatching and a brown camisole just the decent side of sheer. Her hair, still wet from a post-yoga shower, has earned her the nickname Breckie on the *Housewives* set for its shampoo-commercial lushness. Delany bought the house, which a real estate agent would describe as “architectural,” while starring on *China Beach*. Rather

than choose a slick, celebrity-studded enclave, she opted for a quiet street that’s shared by apartment buildings and single-family homes with modest yards. The house’s open-plan main floor combines kitchen, dining and living areas, and a large window overlooks a shaded swimming pool. A cluster of black and white photographs, mostly nudes, hang on one wall, and on another there’s an early John Alexander painting, *The Interview*, depicting a wide-eyed, topless blond in a hot tub with an Uncle Fester type. “Obviously I had a theme,” Delany says. “This was sort of my breast floor. I’m trying to change it up a little.”

A friend helped her with the decor, which is modern and playful: a zebra-patterned cushion on a zany black chair with triangular legs, a striped woven rug, that salmon love seat, and wingback chairs newly reupholstered in a swirl of blue and green circles. “I was brought up with a lot of colour, as you can see,” Delany says, returning from the kitchen after popping some herbs prescribed by her acupuncturist. “I was raised in a contemporary house in Connecticut. It was all glass, all primary colours.... My mother — an interior designer who still works every day — was ahead of her time.”

The same could be said of her daughter. “It’s so funny, isn’t it, that all these movie stars are doing television now,” Delany says. “I knew all along that it was the best place for women.” Her portrayal of sexy, funny, dedicated triage

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nurse Colleen McMurphy on *China Beach* launched her career in 1988 and led to two Emmy Awards. But television was a decidedly less glamorous medium then. “When I won my first Emmy,” she says, “I bought my own dress, a Giorgio Sant’Angelo, I think, and a friend came over to do my hair and makeup. There was no swag, no gifts at all. And no E! party, just the Governors Ball — that was it.” Her first day on *Housewives* crystallized how

times have changed. “I’d never seen such a big hair and makeup trailer in my whole life!” she says. “Everyone was laughing at me because I was like Dorothy walking into Oz.”

That Delany could still be wowed by Hollywood’s backstage machinery is somehow refreshing — and revealing. She’s a disarming synthesis of opposites: a star who is on a first-name basis with the guy who sells bootleg CDs on the block in New York where she rents an apartment, and a yogini of 30 years’ standing who enjoys tossing back shots of tequila. Moving fluidly between film, television and theatre, she uses instinct and intuition as career guides. “It’s always about the writing,” she says. “If I read it and get excited, then I know. I certainly haven’t made decisions based on money.” Whether she’s playing a drily comic, whip-wielding dominatrix in Garry Marshall’s *Exit to Eden*,



DRESS: ESCADA. EARRINGS: SONJA DOTEN. BRACELET: ERICA COURTNEY. RING: SWAROVSKI

a birth-control pioneer in the TV movie *Choices of the Heart: The Margaret Sanger Story*, or Beatrice in a stage production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Delany taps into a current of emotion that makes her characters resonate.

"I think Dana often chooses parts based on people she wants to work with," says Canadian Paul Haggis, the well-known director of the Oscar-winning *Crash* and of this fall's *In the Valley of Elah*; he and Delany have been friends since their days on a 1987 sitcom called *Sweet Surrender*. A recent case in point: the yet-to-be-released drama *Drunkboat*. "I did it because I was dying to work with John Malkovich," Delany says. "He's my favourite actor on earth."

Onscreen, Delany is a master of the slow reveal. In *Pasadena*, a 2001 TV series about a family with long-closeted skeletons, it wasn't until the last episode that she let go, with exquisitely calibrated emotion, of the secret that explained her behaviour throughout the season. She credits her Catholicism with helping her develop that character. "Having to reveal yourself in confession really created a sense of secrecy for me. I remember trying to come up with sins to confess; when you're a kid, you don't have any. All I could think was, I yelled at my sister. My big sin!"

Her strict, well-to-do upbringing may have given Delany an edge in playing the starchy roles that often come her way. "I was too respectful," she says of her childhood self. "I thought adults had all the answers. It took me a long time to get over that." Her father, who died in 1981, inherited a plumbing-supply business from his father, the inventor of a toilet mechanism called the Delany Flush Valve. Her younger sister went into design and her brother became a lawyer, but Delany was captivated by acting from her first performance (as the letter *E*, in Grade 2).

At Andover, "Dana was the drama star," says her long-time friend Holland Sutton. The two were among the first girls admitted to the school. "She starred in *South Pacific*. Everyone knew her, and she was friends with everyone; the footballers loved her."

"Across the board, men love Dana," agrees Diane Keaton, who directed Delany in an episode of *China Beach* and again on *Pasadena*. "She's got a special thing with them." It doesn't hurt, as Keaton observes, that "she's got the world's most perfect body. We used to call her Dana Delicious." Delany is a muse to writer friends including James Ellroy, author of *The Black Dahlia* and *L.A. Confidential*, who put her in a novella called *Rick Loves Donna* ("originally it was *Rick Loves Dana*," Delany says, "but it was about a stalker, so I asked him to change it"), and Bruce Wagner, who wrote the 1993 miniseries *Wild Palms*, co-starring Delany. Wagner refers to her as "television royalty" in his novel *Still Holding*.

Delany, who has never married, has acquired an impressive roster of ex-boyfriends over the years: the Eagles' Don Henley, actor Treat Williams, *China Beach* producer John Sacret Young, and Canadian actor Henry Czerny. "She's

still friends with most of them," Sutton says. Adds Haggis, "It must be hard for an actress, particularly a successful actress, to keep a relationship going. You get very busy, and then.... I've seen it with a lot of my friends. I've known Dana through some pretty dark times, but even then she recovers quickly. She has this theory of life that works well for her: She grabs on to whatever she can at the moment, and she doesn't regret mistakes for very long."

Delany first met with Marc Cherry about *Desperate Housewives* when the series was in its early casting stages in 2004. Cherry thought she'd make a good Bree, the perfectionist Wisterian now preternaturally embodied by Marcia Cross. "Dana did a very intelligent, sly reading," he says. "She said she was doing her mother." As it happens, Cherry

had written the role with his own mother in mind. "We bonded over that," he says.

But the actress turned the part down. "It felt too similar to what I'd just done in *Pasadena*, and I didn't want to go back to a series," she says. "I wasn't ready." When Cherry came back this past spring with a different role, Delany didn't hesitate. "It's so rare you get second chances in life. Marc said, 'Do you want to hear about the character?' And I said, 'Sure, but it's

yes, no matter what.'" She was eager for something light. "And," she adds with typical candour, "I wanted to be on a hit. I never have been. *China Beach* was a critical hit but never really got the numbers."

Delany also wisecracks that she signed up because several of the actresses on the show who were single — Eva Longoria, Marcia Cross, Nicollette Sheridan — have since gotten married or engaged. "Marriage has never been a big deal for me," she says. "But I think I'm ready now. Before, I wanted adventures. I feel like, in some ways, I was smarter than anybody. I got to have all the fun in the world, to experience a lot of people and figure out what I really like. I got to evolve. Now I know what makes me happy."

What, or who, would that be? "I like people who are still actively creating in their life, who aren't set," she says. "I don't feel like I'm set. And I don't have any baggage, for better or worse. I don't have any plants or pets or kids. I can lock the door and go. I need to be with somebody for whom that's okay." That man may also have to be patient. The actress says she's "much more conservative about sex than I used to be. I'm not capable now of having sex unless my heart is involved. Otherwise there's no point."

Delany has the centred calm of someone who has done a bit of exploring and made peace with what she found along the way. "I finally admit that I've been ambivalent about everything in my life," she says. "We live in a culture where that's not okay. But I've been studying a little bit of Buddhism, and the best thing is to say 'I don't know.' I love that now I'm at a point where I'm okay being ambivalent. I think that's the key to life, to be able to say that marriage or commitment scares you. Then you can do it." **M**

"SHE'S GOT THE WORLD'S MOST PERFECT BODY," OBSERVES DIANE KEATON. "WE USED TO CALL HER DANA DELICIOUS."



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