

At 44, Weigert suddenly a leading lady

Pam Grady

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Television audiences know Robin Weigert as the Mormon Mother in HBO's 2003 adaptation of "Angels in America," "Deadwood's" Calamity Jane (for which she received a 2004 Emmy nomination) and lawyer Ally Lowen on "Sons of Anarchy." She is also a stage veteran who received a 2002 Lucille Lortel Outstanding Actress Award nomination for her performance in an off-Broadway production of "Madame Melville," appeared as the Angel in the 2010 New York revival of "Angels in America" and played Josie in a 2005 American Conservatory Theater production of "Moon for the Misbegotten" in what The Chronicle's Steven Winn called "a buoyant, emotionally mobile performance."

On screen, she provided solid support in such films as "The Good German," "Things We Lost in the Fire," "Synecdoche, New York" and "The Sessions." Now, Weigert's career takes a new turn with her first leading movie role, in "Concussion."

"It is different," the 44-year-old Washington, D.C., native says during a trip to San Francisco, where "Concussion" made its local bow at the Frameline Film Festival.

"It's exciting, and it doesn't feel either premature or too late, which is nice. It doesn't feel like it's happening so late in my career that I can't make anything out of it, nor does it feel like it's happening so early that I'm just going to blow up somewhere. I feel like it's happening at a very good moment. I don't feel either too young or too old for this, so I'm really grateful."

In writer-director Stacie Passon's feature debut, Weigert plays Abby, a suburban housewife wed to high-powered attorney Kate (Julie Fain Lawrence) and raising their two young kids. In the grip of a midlife crisis, Abby is increasingly frustrated by a passionless marriage and by being stuck with domestic duties while her partner enjoys a career with purpose and meaning. To fight the ennui, she returns to her old profession of renovating properties, and when that isn't enough, she reaches for a more extreme remedy.

Feeling invisible

"She feels invisible for who she most deeply is," Weigert says. "I think that's often what starts a journey like this, a journey of self. It is when you realize that you don't see your reflection anywhere in your environment. That's a real crisis point for anybody."

"That kind of loneliness can get very extreme," she adds. "There was a generation of women, sort of my mother's mother's generation, who would go off to suburbia and just vanish into the woodwork, into this kind of quiet despair. I think there is something profoundly sad about that life for people who don't reach their own creative potential."

Abby is a sexually charged role with many intimate scenes. Weigert expected that those scenes would be the most challenging for her, but when it came to actually shooting the film, she discovered that acting in those scenes was less intimidating than performing in solo moments.

"The most difficult thing was trusting that the camera would tolerate me in states of sadness, stillness, simplicity and not sort of lose interest in its subject," she says. "You know how a camera develops a relationship with its subject, trusting that I could be naked in that sense was actually more frightening, because there is something dramatically happening any time there is a sexual encounter. It's very dynamic. It's between two people. It's very alive."

Weigert is full of praise for her director, appreciating Passon's empathy and regard. Other directors have made her feel handled, she says. She did not feel as if Passon was trying to soft-pedal or sell her anything. The filmmaker respected her star's choices, and perhaps more important, Weigert senses that Passon saw her for who she is.

Intellectual and hungry

"She registered things about me that I think other people who have cast me in things have not seen, in terms of just - I guess this blend of being an intellectual person, which I am, and a hungry person and not afraid to be a hungry person," Weigert says. "I don't know many people who would see that contradiction as clearly as she did. I'm very, very emotionally available, and I'm also very cerebral, and they don't cancel each other out."

"What's great about this character is that they are both allowed to be an aspect of who she is. She thinks a great deal in the movie. Processes and thinks and worries and other things that thinkers do, as well as completely expressing herself libidinally and emotionally."

It's lovely to have that whole range available."

Weigert also credits Passon with allowing her to participate beyond her acting in the making of "Concussion." She had a say in casting and contributed ideas to the film. The experience was empowering and started her thinking about other things she can do beyond acting. She and a friend are writing a treatment for a series together that they hope to start pitching soon. Directing is another possibility for the future.

"I have a lot of directorial impulses and instincts," she says. "I think that way. Maybe even more than I think as an actor, I think like a director, so it could be good to try that sometime."

For now, Weigert is savoring this first starring cinematic role. She can't be sure where it will lead, but she is enjoying the ride.

"The idea that I could be something other than a colorful side character is really exciting to me," she says. "I hope that more parts like this come along. I think it's great.

No expectations

"I'm excited and without any expectations, but I am excited about it," she continues. "In theater, I have done more of a range. I've carried plays many times. But I could imagine something happening in film that's like what's happened in theater, which is to say it's both.

"It's just back and forth (between supporting and starring roles) and eclectic and interesting. What I love about acting, anyway, is transformation. I like just going completely into something and disappearing.

"Of course, these are all shadow selves. The secret of acting, in a funny kind of way, is that you harbor all these people inside of you and then, in one part or another, you can let them come out and play. We're all much more various than we think we are. We have many more people lurking inside of us than we think we do." {sbox}

Concussion (R) opens Friday at Bay Area theaters.

To watch a trailer, go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CRSDqRCriI.

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