



The return of Meg Tilly

Actress is just one of the Bomb Girls

BY CHRIS LACKNER, POSTMEDIA NEWS JANUARY 2, 2012

TORONTO - Meg Tilly never expected to be back in front of a camera, let alone playing a Canadian bomb girl.

And yet the 51-year-old Canadian-American actress is front and centre as munitions-factory supervisor Lorna Corbett, in Global's new miniseries, *Bomb Girls*, which premieres Jan. 4.

"I wasn't planning on it," she says of her latest turn on the screen - her first in 17 years. "But after finishing a stage run of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* on Vancouver Island earlier this year, Tilly fell for Lorna's character after reading for the part - largely at her agent's behest.

"I'd never even heard of (bomb girls before). . . . It's such a huge part of Canadian history," Tilly said in a recent interview at a Toronto hotel.

The drama focuses on the lives of five fictional Canadian women working at a munitions factory during the Second World War. Filling in for the ranks of men who were shipped away to battle, these women provided much-needed ammunition for the Allied troops fighting in Europe. Joining Tilly in the ensemble cast are Jodi Balfour as a free-spirited socialite turned bomb girl, Charlotte Hegele as a preacher's daughter, as well as Ali Liebert and Anastasia Phillips.

The real-life women who worked in Canadian factories were brought together from across the country.

"It was a really amazing time for women - everything just kind of shifted," Tilly says. "And these doors just blew open wide, because it was a necessity . . . for our boys, for overseas, and for the world. And then, all of a sudden, after the war, everything slammed shut again. It was an amazing time; a lot of women look back on that time as some of their happiest years . . . even though there were challenges."

Tilly received an Oscar nod for her role as a nun in *Agnes of God* (1985). But she might be best known for her role as Chloe in the iconic '80s film, *The Big Chill* and, in person, the actress still glows with a youthful energy. Dressed in a blue, frilly skirt with pearls, Tilly is so enthusiastic and excited by her latest role, she can barely sit still. Each question has her wide-eyed, buzzing, and offering gushing responses.

Tilly's character suffers through much on the series. Lorna's two boys are off fighting, and she has a crippled husband and a loveless marriage to contend with at home. Plus, her position of authority at the factory puts her in a tough spot.

"I think she was happier being on the line with the girls, and there was someone (else) supervising them - probably a man," Tilly says. "She is proud she has been lifted up to shift matron, but she no

longer has that (same bond). She is straddling the male world, but she is not accepted there and gets slapped down, but she's also not one of the girls in that way."

"There's that part of her that's soft, there's that part of her that cares," she adds. "The girls all think she's a bitch. They don't know that (behind the scenes), she stands up for them, that she looks out for them, that she really does care about these girls and what happens to them - even though she has to be the tough one."

Tilly says Canada's bomb girls cast one of the first stones in the battle for women's rights and workplace equality.

"It was a first paycheque. Unless you were a nurse or a teacher, many women (had never seen one before)," she says, "and doing jobs that we didn't know we could do. And not only could we do them, we could do them well. Jobs that were typically (male) . . . welding and building bombs - hard, hard labour."

"Then the war was over, and women were told, 'You're not welcome here, go home.' They were not allowed to work anymore. Those were the dark ages. . . . They had gotten used to making their own decisions about money, feeling like they had a purpose, and then (it was back) to cleaning the house."

But women had already proved their independence and skill, and it helped paved the way for the cultural changes of the '60s and '70s.

Tilly admits the television shoot in Toronto has been a major shift in lifestyle: For much of her absence from the screen, she worked as an author, and published four novels.

"You think?" she says with a hearty, rolling laugh, "from being alone in a room with my computer and my characters (to back on a set). . . . From going for walks, and exercising, and cooking for my kids when they come over . . . but I like it; it was really fun."

She admits she gets more nervous in rehearsals than during the official shoots.

"Some people throw up on the first day of shooting or get really nervous. I don't," she says. "When I say yes (to a part), I (feel a bit nervous). I'm really going to do this? And then I work on it, memorizing and stuff. . . . Where I get butterflies a little bit is the first read-through, because you work on the character, and you work on the thoughts, but it's the first time you hear it out loud."

The attention to detail on Bomb Girls' main set, a furniture factory converted to look like a Second World War factory, made the cast feel like they were "like walking into the past."

"It was amazing, you felt tingles," Tilly recalls of the first time she saw the finished set. "I was just so impressed with what everyone did. This show is so much more about the superhuman effort (of) the set designer and the art department and the lighting (and the) wardrobe."

Tilly admits that acting in a period piece has its perks: "It's like you're being paid to play. Not only are you playing by yourself . . . but everyone else is building it, the reality of it, so you're all playing. . . . The makeup's different, the hair's different, and all those things are gifts that help you drop in (to the period)."

The dangers women faced in the factories are paramount on the show, she says.

“Static was a challenge, and grit in your shoes. . . . You couldn't wear your street shoes, because if there is a spark, you're working with explosives, the whole thing could go up.” Tilly says, noting women couldn't bring their outside clothing on to the factory floor. “No rings, no jewelry . . . and then, of course, there were the challenges of the (hazardous) products you are using, so there would have to be showers (after each shift).”

Despite the health toll, Tilly says the women were driven by the need for wartime sacrifice. Along the way, Bomb Girls - both the fictional ones in the series and their real-life counterparts - formed a kind of sisterhood, creating cross-provincial and cross-societal bonds unheard of for women at that time in history.

“Many of us would have had brothers, sons, husbands overseas. . . . It wasn't just another job, like stacking cans of tomatoes in a supermarket,” Tilly says. “I was building the bombs and the munitions that my sons were using. If I built a faulty one, it might mean that they might die. There was a real sense of purpose - the sense that we need to do the best job that we possibly can. At least, for my character, it was vitally important. It was almost obsessive: that if she does her best, she will keep her kids safe.”

While Tilly loves Lorna, she won't be watching the show until she leaves the role behind for good. It's one of her rules as a performer. Bomb Girls is currently planned as a miniseries, but if it proves popular, the cast could be brought back for more.

“I don't want to watch Lorna from here,” she says, motioning toward her eyes. “You know, like, if you walk past a mirror when you aren't expecting to . . . and you don't have your, ‘I'm going to look in a mirror expression,’ on and you're like, ‘Oh my god, are my eyes that dead? Am I that slack-jawed? - or whatever else it is . . . (or) you know, when you listen to a tape of yourself . . . and you say, ‘Is my voice that high and tinny?’ Take that and magnify it.”

“Lorna might stand a certain way and I might be like, ‘That's not very attractive,’ or if Lorna is upset, maybe she makes a face and I'm like, ‘Meg, you should avoid that at all costs.’”

For now, Tilly just wants to be a bomb girl; she doesn't want to watch one on TV. But she's hoping Canadians make the exact opposite decision.

Bomb Girls, a six-part miniseries, premieres Wednesday, Jan. 4 on Global at 8 ET/PT.

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