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# 'Bomb Girls' not your typical WWII story

BY ANDREW PARKER – JANUARY 2, 2012

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While much has been made of the male experiences during World War II, few films and television shows aim to take as direct a look at the female workers that kept the troops going as Global's new six part series *Bomb Girls* (debuting Wednesday, January 4 at 8 p.m. ET). Focusing specifically on the manufacturing of munitions back home for use "over there," the series predominantly follows a group of women from vastly different backgrounds and social upbringings (including *The Big Chill*'s Meg Tilley as a production supervisor) as they fight for respect and understanding in their new, vital jobs.



## BOMB GIRLS

Series creator and director Adrienne Mitchell (*Durham County, Bliss*) and producer Janice Lundman talked to **Criticize This!** about the Toronto filmed series and the challenges of creating a period piece that few people have seen before.

**Andrew Parker:** Let's start off by talking about how this concept came to you, because it's really an interesting idea for a series that hasn't really been done before. It's something that's remarkably under explored in films and television.

**Adrienne Mitchell:** What happened was that the wonderful Debbie Drennan and Maureen Jennings brought this idea to us. Deb Drennan's grandmother worked in a munitions factory and she and Maureen, who has a real passion for historical fiction especially from the perspective of the home front during World War II, came together with an idea that would explore that world. They liked *Durham County* a lot and they approached us to see if we could take it to the next step.

We were just so taken by this idea because, you know, you never really realize the huge extent to which women played a role in World War II and how the transition from somewhat literally baking apple pies to making bombs happened. Very little is made about just how much this meant to them and their new sense of freedom combined with how many of these women were earning paycheques for the first time. Their worlds were turned upside down, but these women also experienced a new form of camaraderie that they never knew before.

I mean, when Hitler and the Germans were bombing out all of the factories in the UK and Churchill had to call upon the allies, especially Canada, to get the munitions factories going, we really served a huge role in helping Britain at the time. So all of that really served as all of the things we drew on for inspiration.

**AP:** When you guys were setting up the series, how much research did you guys have to put in to get the feel of the show just right?

**Janice Lundman:** Well, after Debbie and Maureen came to us and we optioned the concept from them, they had already done quite a bit of research on their own already. Then we went around trying to interview various people who could write for the show and we brought on the very talented Michael MacLennan. Together with him and Maureen and Debbie, and all of our own researchers, we spent months doing historical research on the war, historical timelines, logistics, recipes, even how to build an actual bomb factory, which was itself very very difficult.

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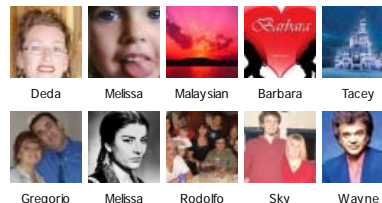
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There were black and white photographs, but no one was alive and still around that built these factories and knew how they worked and how one would go through the factory step by step to actually build a bomb. We were talking months and months and pages and pages of research before we finally brought in more writers to the writing room. We had a 300 page document that we gave them so they could immerse themselves into the feel of the time.

And of course, there was also the music of the time, which we loved.

**AP: The music is excellent and really a great fit for the show. It has a wonderful big band period soundtrack. That seems like it was a fun part of the researching process.**

**AM:** We have two great composers, Rob Carli and Peter Chapman, and one of the big inspirations for that dancy soundtrack was Gene Krupa and this piece called "Drum Boogie" where he just goes into this almost meta level of swing (laughs). It's got a gritty, jumpy energy and vibe that's just energizing. I wanted to bring that to the music so we used that as an inspiration for that swing piece. There was that really kinetic feeling that I got from the Krupa music that was what I wanted.

**JL:** And that was something that was just generally there in the music of the 40s.

**AM:** Yeah, it's that big band and swing energy that just makes you want to dance and makes you want to party because it might just be the last day that you could do that.

**AP: It really was the cusp in music between more formalized brass and string driven music and the birth of rock and roll.**

**AM:** Yeah, and I mean, swing actually came out of the Charleston, which was kind of a down and dirty form of dancing at the time. People at the time just needed to let go and go through a total release from all that was going on. Back at the home front, and we don't realize this much now, but even those living in Canada thought that those could be their last days. The German army could have been coming on our shores any day and we could've been occupied. There were sightings of German U-Boats along the St. Lawrence River and there was always fighting going on overseas, so the music was a definite counterbalance to all that.

**AP: Now that the research was done and you finally moved on to casting, was there anyone you particularly had in mind for the roles, or were these more traditional casting decisions?**

**JL:** When we started the casting process we didn't realize just how many characters we had to cast for. (laughs) We had probably forgotten that we had written so many parts. There's about thirty-something recurring roles!

We didn't have anyone specifically in mind, but we did have very strong visions of who these characters were. We went through, and Adrienne was very much involved in this with our casting directors here and in LA, and we did a lot of auditions and a lot of readings. Thankfully they had this process they went through to weed out some of the people and we came up with all these short lists and Adrienne went in and worked with a lot of them as the director. We would all try to agree on who we wanted and then we would go back to the network to see what they would say. But once we got through a lot of that we found exactly who we needed and who we wanted for these parts and we couldn't have been happier to have found them.

**AM:** With Meg Tilley it's a really interesting story because she really hasn't done anything since... she took quite a bit of time off to be with her family and she hasn't really come back to acting on a full time basis or back to the television world in any sort of substantial basis. This was a kind of something that just sort of came up in the casting process and I thought it was just a really interesting and intriguing idea. It was really interesting to think about where this actress was at this point in time.

What was great about this was that I was in Vancouver at the time and she just came in and we just had this instant connection in the room and I just felt that there were some parallels going on in her life. The character of Lorna that she plays is somebody who is going through a big transition because she is dealing with younger women that are pushing moral and social boundaries that women of her generation didn't, and she's being exposed to something new and exciting. With Meg, who had a beautiful time raising her children, she's now sort of re-entering the world of acting with a role that's new and fresh and kind of exciting for her. Both the character and the actress are coming from this comfort zone and moving away from that and experiencing all the thrill and awkward chaos that comes from that. When she came in there was this instant magic and I phoned Janice and Michael up and said that this was Lorna and we had found her.

**JL:** And with Jodie Balfour, who plays Gladys, our other lead playing a young girl who comes from a wealthy and disapproving family, we were looking and looking and we couldn't quite find the person who was best for that. Then Jodie came in the last week, almost the last day, and did an audition that just blew us away. What's funny about her is that she's South African, so when she's not playing Gladys and you're talking to her, she has this very distinct South African accent. (laughs)

**AP: You guys are creating something very ambitious by creating a period piece for Canadian television, and that's something that seems like a pretty huge feat to pull off these days with regards to cost and what's actually still available for you guys to use in terms of location and costuming. Where did you guys finally find the factory to build the show around and what was the process of putting the show together once the principals were all in place?**

**AM:** Yes, because looking for the factory really was an exhausting process. Looking through ideas, we first went to a building that used to be a munitions factory that had all of the old architecture, which excited us quite a bit. The only problem was that it was loaded with asbestos and we couldn't ever afford the clean up cost on it or the time that it would take.

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Then we found this factory after a whole lot of fruitless searches because we really needed a place on a budget with all this 1940s architecture inside. The high ceilings and wooden beams that separated the spaces and particular kinds of windows. We found this factory here out in Etobicoke that was built back then. I think it was a furniture factory...

**JL:** Yeah, it was a furniture factory. It had been empty for a few years when our locations person drove by it and thought of it as a possibility. Then a few hours later our producer and property master drove by it and thought it could be the place.

**AM:** And it was great because after we had done all this research there was this one particular book that had chronicled the DIL plant, which was out in Ajax, that had a very similar architecture to the way that this building had been laid out. We had a wonderful production designer, Aidan Leroux, who was able to work with the bones of this location and bring in the conveyor belts and the bombs.

Then on top of that we had our extremely talented costume designer, Joanne Hansen, who filled the rest of the setting with the uniforms and then you have the mise en scene all set. Then we turn it all over to our Director of Photography, Eric Cayla, who we worked with to explore the kind of colour they were working with back in the 1940s. We worked a lot with the Kodachrome stock which was saturated with reds and blues and the whites were kind of bleached looking, so once we had the location it was a matter of working just as hard to create that feel within the set itself.

**JL:** And with regards to the costumes that the bomb girls are wearing – these uniforms with the turbans to cover their hair, which is exactly what they were wearing – some of the others were vintage costumes that we rented from various houses in Toronto or Montreal.

**AM:** And that's a testament to Joanne's impeccable taste.

**JL:** I think it adds another degree of authenticity to things. They had some really great clothes like that back then. (laughs) Why don't they make clothes like that for women anymore?

**AM:** Even the hair, as well. That was something else that was necessary to buy into the period. Lots of research in lots of magazines and looking at old stock footage, and trying to get just right how these women would wear these hairstyles with the turbans. Some girls would want to have a little bit of hair sticking out because they wanted to emulate Veronica Lake. They were still hanging on to their desire to still be seen as somewhat feminine.

And another way that women found ways to assert their own individuality was to wear different colour shirts underneath and tying their bandanas in different ways. It was all researched so intensely to keep an eye on that very uniqueness.

**JL:** And that extends to the entirety of the art department, as well. Finding telephones, magazines, and wallpaper, right down to clothespins that people would use in a rooming house. A lot of people spent a lot of time working on this.

*Bomb Girls* airs Wednesdays at 8 p.m. ET on [Global TV](#).

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#### About Andrew Parker

Andrew Parker writes for numerous blogs and publications, including Notes From the Toronto Underground and his more personal pop-culture blog, I Can't Get Laid in This Town. He is also the curator of the Defending the Indefensible series of films at the Toronto Underground Cinema.

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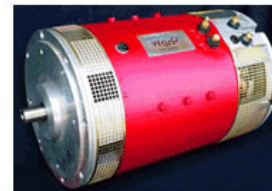
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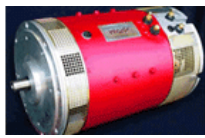
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