

Meg Tilly is a Bomb Girl

BY CHRIS LACKNER, POSTMEDIA NEWS JANUARY 2, 2012



Meg Tilly, left, as Lorna Corbett, and Jodi Balfour as Gladys in *Bomb Girls*, set in a munitions factory during the Second World War. The six-part TV drama series premieres Jan. 4. Former Victorian Michael MacLennan is the co-creator and head writer.

Photograph by: Handout, .

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 Wednesday.

"I wasn't planning on it," Tilly 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 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 freespirted socialite turned bomb girl, Charlotte Hegele as a preacher's daughter, as well as Ali Liebert and Anastasia Phillips.

The real 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. Un-less 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 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."

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 "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."

The dangers women faced 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 out-side clothing onto 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 and their real-life counterparts - formed a kind of sisterhood, creating cross-provincial and cross-societal bonds unheard of at that time.

"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 wants to be a bomb girl; she doesn't want to watch one. But she's hoping Canadians make the opposite decision.

Bomb Girls premieres Wednesday, Jan. 4 on Global at 8 p.m.