

### FEATURES



### **COTE DE PABLO The “NCIS” Special Agent Sings, Spars, Shoots, and Sleuths**

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It's an early morning on the sound stage where the CBS procedural drama, “NCIS” (one of the world's most watched television shows), is taped, and Special Agent/Badass Ziva David is interviewing a witness with the take-no-crap style for which she is known. As soon as the scene wraps, Ziva David morphs back into actor Cote de Pablo, and after spending a minute in her presence, it becomes evident that being around murder, firearms, and military maneuvers was the last thing she had in mind back when she was a hardworking student absorbed in the disciplines of music and theater. “When I graduated from school, I always saw myself doing period pieces, something with kings and queens,” de Pablo says. “Never in a million years did I think I would be playing a former Mossad agent who runs around kicking butt. Even when I was going through the casting process for

this part, I never thought I'd get it.”

De Pablo was born in Santiago, Chile, raised in Miami, and studied music and theater at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. After appearing in several college stage productions, she graduated in 2000 and whisked herself off to New York City, where she spent the next five years waiting tables and racking up theater and television credits, including a variety of stage roles in the New York City Public Theater, a stint on ABC's long-running soap “All My Children,” a turn acting alongside Academy Award winner Richard Dreyfuss on “The Education of Max Bickford” (2001) on CBS, and a starring role on the Fox legal drama “The Jury” (2004).

In 2005, a big disappointment was followed by an even bigger success. Just as de Pablo was set to make her Broadway debut starring in “The Mambo Kings,” the show closed after a short trial run and never made it to the Broadway stage. A few days later, she was called in to audition for the already wildly popular CBS Navy crime series, “NCIS,” and won the role of Ziva, a no-nonsense, Israeli Intelligence and Special Operations officer, turned NCIS special agent.

In person, Cote (pronounced “Coty”) is disarmingly open, smart, warm, grounded, and refreshingly natural. Spirituality is important to her. She enjoys her position and place in Hollywood, but is also very much aware of Hollywood's place in the overall universe. She knows that television is big, but understands that life is bigger. When she mentions the house that she recently purchased, she cites its “vibe and energy” as the elements that influenced her to buy, and this soulful approach to life is clearly working out well for her, as the “NCIS” audience (made up of 22 million viewers) continues to grow and spread into almost every country in the world. With her scenes wrapped for the day, de Pablo settles in with Venice in the quietest available spot on the teeming “NCIS” set (which happens to be the Multiple Threat Alert Center) to discuss the lure of Fellini, how to combat bad auditions, and why average dancers make great fighters.

**Venice: Do you remember when you first became interested in the performing arts?**

**Cote de Pablo:** I lived in Chile when I was very young and I remember driving with my parents in the car and listening to a cassette tape of the musical, "Nine" (1982), written by Arthur Kopit. It had Raul Julia and all of these amazing singers. I used to listen to it all the time and I remember thinking, "There's something about this that really moves me," but I didn't know what it was. At the time I was too young to understand, but something was definitely shifting. I loved the music but I could also hear the story. It was based on Fellini's *8 1/2* (1963), so it was, essentially, Fellini. I felt myself gravitating towards something that was not only artistic, but also different.

**Were you pulled more towards the music or more towards the idea of acting out the story?**

I loved music and I loved theater. I wanted to get training in both and I didn't want to sacrifice one for the other. At one point, I decided that I was only going to go into music and not do any acting. For a while, I even planned on going into opera because that was what I was feeling most passionate about. I really wanted to explore the depth of my voice. Singing was my niche. It was where I felt most comfortable. But I'm so glad that I pursued acting.

**Did you feel comfortable with acting right away?**

No. I was very uncomfortable with acting when I first started. But then I started getting into theater and it became a really challenging thing for me, something that I really wanted. And then I started fighting for all of the lead roles. And I started getting them. I loved getting into different characters and exploring different things. It kind of became an addiction. I wanted to see what other people feel. It fascinated me.

**Speaking of exploring different characters and different things, you were getting ready to open "The Mambo Kings" on Broadway and, instead, you were called in to audition for "NCIS."**

Yes. I was supposed to open "The Mambo Kings," which was a full-blown musical with dancing and singing on Broadway, but the show folded and I auditioned for "NCIS." I went from playing a very young, bright-eyed girl, who had just fallen in love for the first time, on the stage, to playing a totally confident and cocky girl on TV. A confident girl ready to kick some butt on "NCIS." [laughs]

**Obviously, the "NCIS" audition went well. Did you always audition well?**

Oh, my God! No! I've had many horrible auditions where my confidence and ego and everything have been destroyed. I've had to call my friends afterwards to come and pick up the pieces. The most humbling thing in the world for an actor is to have a bad audition. But I strongly encourage actors to do it. It makes you human. Please go out there and have one. [laughs]

**Because the experience builds you and makes you stronger and gives you mistakes to learn from?**

Yes!

**There are a lot of actors who just don't audition well.**

In school, they don't teach you how to audition. The process of auditioning is its own beast. Nobody teaches you how to do it. It's horrible. You prepare and do all the work and then you go into that room and expose your soul and you end up getting very little feedback. Nobody cares. It's more like, "If you're right for the part, great! If not, go back home. Go walk around Central Park. Get out of here. Next!" [laughs] And I remember getting to a point where I just hated it. There was a period of time in New York where I hadn't acted in a while, hadn't gotten any work in a year. I was only going to auditions, and auditioning isn't acting! So, I got myself into a really good acting class in New York and I remember thinking, "I'm going to do this! And I'm going to show every casting director out there that I have got it. If they can't see it, then I am going to prove them wrong."

**You got some Ziva David attitude.**

Yes. And that kind of attitude has always done wonders for me. It's an attitude where you get a little pissed. Not pissed at the world, but pissed with yourself. Where you say to yourself, "Wait. It's not going the way that I want it to go. Let's change it." And it took having that kind of attitude to get things to change for me. I had to get a little bit mad at myself, because I wasn't

experiencing in auditions what I had experienced in plays or in my scene work. None of that was coming through in my auditions because I wasn't really acting. I was just memorizing the lines without doing the character work. I had forgotten how to do the very thing that I went to school for and had studied for many years.

**So, what happened after you started to live in the character and in the circumstances, as opposed to just learning the lines?**

The first scene I did was fantastic and I thought to myself, "I got it." And I went back to auditioning for about three months and then everything just spun and took off. I did "The Jury" for Fox and got "The Mambo Kings" and then booked "NCIS." I haven't stopped working in 10 years.

**The success of "NCIS" is phenomenal. Did you ever think that you would have a leading role on one of the most popular shows on the globe?**

No.

**What did you think your life was going to look like?**

I never had any visuals, which, I guess, is a little weird, because, nowadays, so many of my friends say, "You need to visualize in order to go there." Back then, all I knew was that I wasn't satisfied with what was going on.

**Are you and your character, Ziva David, alike in any way?**

There are definitely elements of myself that I use for my character. When you work with a character for 10 months out of a year, I think you do bring some of yourself to the character to kind of help you get through it. But, trust me, when I go home, I leave the guns and the knives and the violence behind and the first thing I want to do is put on a little sun dress and little sandals and let my hair down and go back to being the little hippie that I am. Very different from the cargo pants and the combat boots and all of that combat attire.

**Do you do your own stunts?**

Yes.

**Have you ever been injured?**

Many times. [laughs] One of our fight coordinators once said, "The stupid, little things are the things that are going to hurt you." And it's so true! For the most part, it's not the big, complicated fight sequences with punching and kicking and tumbling where you'll get hurt, because before you do them you've already warmed up and by the time you do them, you're so warm that your body is going to give. The injuries happen when you do the small, little things that you don't think are a big deal. You're not warmed up, you think you can do it and you end up hurting yourself.

**Coming from stage plays like "The Mambo Kings" and Shakespeare's "Measure for Measure," was it difficult for you to transition into such a physically demanding role?**

I've always been a very physical person, and I've had a lot of dance training. I was never a very good dancer. I know what good dancers can do and I can't do a quarter of what they can do, but I always knew how to get a movement and follow it. I just could never technically and perfectly perform it. With dancing, you need to know the moves and be able to perform them gracefully, but a fight can be dirty. You are not really supposed to be kicking beautifully up in the air and striking beautiful poses. Fights are choreographies of uglier movements that are supposed to disintegrate the opponent, and that's what I'm good at. [laughs]

**You sang a cover of Tom Waits' "Temptation" on an episode of "NCIS." Did you pick that song?**

No. I was actually planning on doing a big, show-stopper ballad. A Judy Garland or Nina Simone song. Or a big, bringdown-the-house, Eva Cassidy kind of thing. And then I thought, "Wait a minute. This is supposed to be Ziva David, not Cote de Pablo." [laughs] The objective was supposed to be that Ziva was undercover at a cabaret doing an investigation. A mission.

She was not there to show off. I mean, how was I supposed to be spying on someone and at the same time singing my heart out? [laughs] The song was actually picked by (“NCIS” executive producer) Shane Brennan, and I thought it was a great choice.

**What inspires you? Any particular films or works of art?**

This may sound super, super, super cheesy, but nothing baffles me as much as nature does. When I travel to beautiful places, I always veer away from doing the touristy things. I try to experience a country from a cultural standpoint. So I take a car or I take the train so that I can see things that move me, like beautiful mountains or the power of the ocean. These things move me, not in an artistic way, but in a spiritual way. These things remind me of what real happiness is. And this inspires me. To see what life is really all about. That it’s really much bigger than the little bubble you are in.

**Do you ever think about what other kinds of projects you’d like to be involved with someday?**

Something completely different. Something like “The Borgias” on Showtime. I’d love to do a magical realism, “Lord of the Rings” kind of thing. I love period pieces. I’d love to do something softer. I’d also love to go to Argentina and do films there. Some of my favorite films are foreign films, so I’d love to be able to open that window. My first language is Spanish, so it would be a lot of fun to do something in South America. Explore different characters and different things. I’m always fascinated by the way that movies can move people.

**What does your life look like when you are not working?**

I sing at home, I do yoga, I like to spend time with my family. That’s a huge priority for me. My mom lives in Chile, my sister lives in New York, my dad and my brother live in Miami. We’re very scattered. So I feel like there’s a lot of chasing my family around that happens when I get some vacation time. Hopefully, I will have a house ready in a couple of months and I’ll be able to say, “I’m not chasing you anymore. You come to me!” [laughs] ▼

*“NCIS” airs Tuesdays at 8PM on CBS.*