

FEATURES



From England with Love and Bullets Marsha Thomason Has Her Finger on the Trigger of Hollywood

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Talking with British dynamo Marsha Thomason is a little like turning a corner and being hit with a gale of confidence. It takes you by surprise, but you kind of like the way it blows your hair back. And it is this very quality that won her the role of Junior FBI agent Diana Lancing on the hit USA Network series, "White Collar," which follows the assignments given to a former forger and master thief (Matt Bomer) by the FBI now that they have (a la *Catch Me If You Can*) recruited him to help bring white collar criminals to justice. But Marsha Thomason did not start out carrying a badge and a gun.

A native of Manchester, Ms. Thomason's acting aspirations began to take shape and gain momentum at age twelve. Two years later, she entered the entertainment business professionally, acting in a

parade of popular British television shows. Thomason's success in these shows catapulted her overseas, where she landed in Hollywood and hit the ground running, chalking up an impressive string of film and television work beginning with 2001's *Black Knight*, starring Martin Lawrence. She next played a heroin-addicted prostitute in director Gilles MacKinnon's independent feature, *Pure* (2002) with Keira Knightley, and followed that with turns opposite Eddie Murphy in Disney's *The Haunted Mansion* (2003) and Eddie Griffin in the Miramax comedy, *My Baby's Daddy* (2004). She landed alongside James Caan on NBC's hit series "Las Vegas" (2003-2005), portraying a ruthless and sexy pit boss, and then turned up as a hard-edged member of an island rescue team on ABC's smash hit "Lost" (2007- 2009). She also managed to squeeze in a four-episode stint playing opposite Golden Globe winner James Franco on "General Hospital" in 2009. And now Thomason is heating things up on season two of "White Collar," adding her own brand of zest to USA Network's already smokin' hot show.

We catch up with Marsha Thomason in New York's Central Park, on a day off from shooting "White Collar." She's just trying to take a leisurely stroll with her visiting mom but the horse-drawn carriage drivers won't stop harrasing them. Ultimately, their efforts to bully her mom into taking a ride are brushed off by what Marsha Thomason is known for, her badass attitude. Dismissing the distraction with a good-natured chuckle, Thomason (who is actually very nice when she doesn't have to be tough) spoke with Venice about the powerful effects of Jodie Foster, a global view of show business, and what it takes to make a tough girl laugh.

Venice:

You've been working in the entertainment industry since you were 14. How did you become interested in being an actor?

Marsha Thomason:

I was always just drawn to it, always performing for the family. The usual story. Then, when I was twelve, my mother took me to the Oldham Theatre Workshop in the North of England. It was a theater where kids could perform and a lot of people from places like the BBC would come to scout for talented children. When I was fourteen, I auditioned for the BBC for a Saturday morning kids' show called "The 8:15 from Manchester" and got the job. It was a show where the kids who watched it would be given three choices for the way the show should end. The audience would choose the ending they wanted and that's the way we'd end it. Fun show! Also, I used to watch *Grease* over and over and act out the scenes. Years later, at an event, Vince Vaughn asked me to perform one of the scenes from *Grease* for John Travolta. I was much too embarrassed at first, but he persisted. A couple of vodkas later, I'm kneeling at John Travolta's feet performing his scene from *Grease*. [laughs]

Are there any other influential films that shaped your artistic journey when you were growing up?

I used to watch (1976 mobster musical starring then-child actors Scott Baio and Jodie Foster) *Bugsy Malone* incessantly! It was my favorite movie growing up and still is a favorite of mine. [laughs] To this day, I remain frustrated that I'll never get to play Tallulah (Foster's character). I really do. [laughs] I mean, what female actor isn't inspired by Jodie Foster? She is such a huge influence. She is absolutely the kind of actress I aspire to be.

What's the best show business lesson you've learned along the way?

Well, again, back to the Oldham Theatre. The workshop director was very strict about punctuality and learning your lines. He'd always say, "Nobody is indispensable!" And it's so true. I think there are a few actors working today who should realize this. There is always somebody who can replace you.

You've worked a lot, both in England and in Hollywood. What are the differences in the way the entertainment industry operates in each country?

Well, the most obvious is in size and scope. There are so many more opportunities to work in Hollywood and there are also opportunities to earn so much more money. I'd have to say the main difference, really, is the money involved. In Hollywood, they spend much, much, more on a production. On the craft services alone! In England, they put out a tin of biscuits and, at 4PM, they bring out the sandwiches. But, that's America, isn't it? Bigger. Better. Faster. More.

You are thought of as a very confident woman. Do you think that you got where you are because of your confidence or is your level of confidence something that increased as your success in film and television increased?

I started off very confident. Came out of the womb confident. It was just innate. Of course, some of that builds as you gain some success in your career. But I do still have to work on my confidence. Still, when I go into an audition I have to find ways of settling an upset stomach. And I do worry about paying the mortgage. I mean, so much of this is really all just based on luck and, really, what makes me so special? We are all just on this planet, trying to make a go of it.

So, you are familiar with self-doubt?

Oh, yes. [laughs] Anybody who says they are 100% confident is a liar. Or they're just insane. Deluded. You know, people think that as you gain success in the industry, things become easier, but that's not the case. It's not an industry where you

necessarily get a promotion just because you put in many years. Even now, when I finish a job, it feels like I have to start everything from scratch all over again. You are constantly wondering, “Will I ever work again?” And auditioning doesn’t get any easier as you get older. You’re still standing in a room with ten other girls who all look a little bit like you and everybody is thinking, “Pick me!” That never goes away.

You’ve played a lot of tough ladies and dramatic roles, but you’ve also done comedies with very funny actors like Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence, and Eddie Griffin. Which kind of role do you prefer?

Well, I have played a lot of feisty, tough chicks and I guess people do think of me that way in that I definitely speak my mind. I’d say that my favorite role was a very dramatic one and that was in *Pure*, just because it was so otherworldly for me. And in the comedies I’ve done, I’m still always playing the straight woman, not the one actually getting the laughs. I never get cast in the actual funny role, which is a bit disappointing because I’d really like to play that kind of comedic role. I love it when I can do funny things and I’d love to do a sitcom at some point.

What is funny to you?

When you’re working with someone like Eddie Murphy or Eddie Griffin, it’s just so hard to keep a straight face. They are so funny and just improv and scat all over the place! Also, a lot of the stuff on YouTube, like little babies dancing to Beyonce’s “All The Single Ladies.” Self-deprecation is also funny. Observational comedy. Chris Rock. Adam Sandler. All the Judd Apatow movies.

Why is having someone around who can make you laugh important to you?

Just because when the shit hits the fan, as it often does, you need to be able to have a sense of humor about it. It’s a survival mechanism. I have a tattoo that says “Embrace the Chaos.” And getting through difficulties with a sense of humor is a way of doing that. I also sometimes tend to take myself too seriously and it’s good to have someone around, like my husband, to bring laughter into the situation.

You’ve worked with James Franco, Keira Knightley, James Caan, Helen Mirren. Is there anyone you hope to work with in the future?

There are so many! Todd Solondz, for one. I’d love to do one of his movies. I make everyone I know buy his film, *Happiness*. Also, Philip Seymour Hoffman, a true genius. And I love John C. Reilly and Julianne Moore.

So, you’d also like to be in a Paul Thomas Anderson movie?

Pretty much. Yes. [laughs]

On “White Collar,” you play Diana Lancing, an FBI agent who happens to be a lesbian. How did you prepare for the role?

Well, playing a lesbian is no different than playing someone who is straight, so there’s no different technique used in that sense. For me, since I’m obviously British, it’s more about focusing on the American accent. I’ve worked with a dialect coach on developing a nice, generic California accent. And, of course, it helps that I live in California and can just listen to the people around me. My character is kind of a badass. She carries a badge and a gun and she has to use them sometimes. I get to feel like Angelina Jolie in those moments and it’s all very exciting. [laughs] We have an FBI specialist on the set and he gives me directions on how to use the gun. He has to keep reminding me to keep my finger off the trigger. I’m trigger-happy. What can I say? [laughs] ▼

Season 2 of “White Collar” airs Tuesdays at 9PM on The USA Network beginning July 13th.