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‘DIETLAND’ ACTRESS JEN PONTON IS BACK WITH A SHOW THAT SPOTLIGHTS WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

MARCY CRUZ × APRIL 5, 2019

It’s an exciting time in Hollywood for plus size women.

On the heels of shows like Dietland, Shrill and This is Us, Hollywood is slowly evolving at a time where body positivity and diversity are in the forefront.

Actress Jen Ponton is one of those women in the forefront, landing roles in Hollywood, defying beauty stereotypes on what an actress should look like to be worthy of being seen on-screen.

The New Jersey native scored the recurring role of Rubi on Dietland and her character, the resident fat activist of Calliope House, was an unforgettable one. How can you forget this selfproclaimed “Jersey tomato” and rebel feminist, who shines on-screen?

Jen Ponton as Rubi in Dietland, Season 1, Episode 2 – Photo Credit: Patrick Harbron/AMC

Her laughter is infectous and her down-to-Earth personality is what makes her a standout. She genuinely cares about pushing the message of body love and acceptance, while using Hollywood as a way to showcase more women in lead roles, focusing more on talent and that beauty comes in many forms.

Case in point, Ponton has partnered with Emmy-winner Louise Shaffer (Ryan’s Hope, Search For Tomorrow) on **Queens of Daytime**, a newly-released short film that serves as showcase for their proposed television series.

The press release offers this synopsis on Queens of Daytime:

Queens of Daytime takes place in 1958, in the shiny-new world of television. While men like Milton Berle and Sid Caesar dominated primetime programming, live soap operas filled the airwaves during the daytime. Soaps were then owned and operated by detergent companies, who hired their own writers, directors and producers. As detergent companies worked to increase their profit margins, they saved money by hiring women to write and produce their shows. This created a little-known professional oasis for women at a time when keeping house was the rule.

We checked out the pilot episode **here** and are so excited for the direction Ponton is taking with this series. We got the opportunity to chat with her about Queens of Daytime, Hollywood and women's empowerment.

PMM: Queens of Daytime delves into the world of soap operas in the late 50s where many women were hired for prominent positions that were not available to them in primetime. Why was it important to you to use this pilot as a way to shed light on this pivotal time in feminism and women's empowerment?

JP: I've always loved the romantic stylism and nostalgia of period pieces, but to be completely honest–they're kind of a bummer, right? I mean, life is *still not great* for marginalized peoples–why would I want to watch it be MORE not great? I just feel more exhausted and disheartened watching most period shows.

When Louise and I teamed up, she brought the history of this incredible pocket of women's empowerment. With the work that these women were doing to move the needle for other marginalized populations and social issues, it seemed like the perfect opportunity to create a refreshing period story. Of course there were men in charge up the chain, but the "little ladies" mostly went unnoticed and unchecked. When the cats are away, the mice will play!

PMM: As I watched the pilot, I noticed subtle things like how your character would wear styles that showed her bosom while at work but yet when she met with Laurel, how she wore a buttoned-up top that covered her bust, or how your employee said you were holding an envelope so close to your bosom. We both know that in this current era of the #MeToo movement, that would certainly not fly. What are your

thoughts on how much the workplace has changed for women? And how were soap operas a big part of that in terms of women's equality in the workplace?

JP: That's so funny! I was working with period pieces out of my own closet, so those dresses were all just the closest things I had to what I felt Addy would wear. It's a tough question, because I haven't been in a conventional workplace in many years–so I can't quite speak to how the 9-5 culture might be unsettled in the wake of #MeToo.

There was definitely a sense, in dressing Addy, that she was showing up to work in an appeasing way–part of her charm is making things go smoothly, and she harnesses that feminine power in order to do so. So she plays into the crinolines and pearls and nail polish and fiddle-dee-dee dresses, because she knows that if she wears pants and uses her power in a more masculine way, it won't go as well for her.

I do feel like femininity is not even on the table in current-day professional environments; to be taken seriously, women have to present as tougher, more masculine. A power suit will win over a swirling dress any way. I want to see a return to the power of femininity, to the respect of it as a valid leadership stance. I want a boss in pink to be listened to as attentively as a boss in navy. So in a way, despite the fact that it's a timepiece, I feel like Queens is a nod to that dynamic.

What I can also say is that being on a predominantly female set–both for this and for Dietland–it felt safer to be feminine. Not just secure, but also that I could be taken seriously, while being soft. That my softness was a strength. That would absolutely have been the mindset of Addy, and of the women who were real trailblazers in soaps.

PMM: **You and Emmy-winner Louise Shaffer have said that the true message of this show is "the mirage of white feminism". Can you tell us more about that?**

JP: Louise and I talk about this a lot, because at first glance, this show could be misconstrued as being about white saviors. Look at the two white ladies creating a platform for a black woman! But there is SO MUCH that we are facing right now–and it goes way, way back–where white women are positioning themselves at the forefront of feminism, at the expense of women of color.

It's often said that the problem with white women and feminism is that they're trying to get on an equal plane with white men… not on an equal plane with everyone. As the season unfolds, Addy and Laurel learn some uncomfortable lessons about passing the baton–there are walls that will not crumble without uplifting more black voices. It's a big lesson on only being able to truly move forward and make a difference if we center the voices and stories of more marginalized women.

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PMM: What do you want viewers to take away from Queens of Daytime?

JP: Joy! A late, but delightful reclaiming of a time period that belonged to neither women nor people of color. There's such a magic in earlier eras, and I want it to feel relatively good to explore and reclaim that time for people who deserved a bigger piece of it. I'm also an eternal optimist, no matter how 2019 tries to get me down. I want to stoke the magical possibilities that say that we can work miracles, no matter how high the stakes.

PMM: How does it feel to be a plus size actress in Hollywood who's creating shows like this at a time where we have shows like "This is Us" and "Shrill" that have plus size female leads? Do you feel Hollywood is more accepting or is it still challenging to be accepted and seen for your talent and not your size?

JP: It really feels great! We're on a bit of a streak this year, so there's something in the air that I feel like we haven't had the pleasure of experiencing before. I've been watching film and TV change slowly over my career, the last 10 years or so. Hollywood is definitely changing. It's taking much more time than any of us would have wanted, but there's a lot of good, baby steps in the right direction.

I'm definitely looking forward to a day where my size is not a consideration. What I'm enjoying for now is going in for characters that are fat and proud, which is totally great by me! But, long-term, I'd love to see the day where being plus-size has nothing to do with a character's plotline at all. That's the Hollywood I'm working to create.

PMM: What's next after Queens of Daytime? What does the rest of 2019 hold for you?

JP: This is just the beginning for Queens of Daytime. A full, hour-long pilot script exists, as well as a full envisioning of several seasons! I've also got several other pilots in development, and my hope is that this year is spent furthering meetings and negotiations on those properties.

What I'd love to be able to tell you by the end of 2019 is what streaming service or studio I'm working with! As an actress, I always enjoy working on other things, but most of my focus has been on writing and producing. It's an incredibly fulfilling road to take when no one is telling the stories that you want to see out there. Most of my role models and mentors are creators and showrunners, and that's a trajectory that feels very right for me.