

Interview: Hot TV Role for Teri Reeves on New Series ‘Chicago Fire’

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CHICAGO – The Windy City has a new television show set here, and all last summer the cast of “Chicago Fire” have been busy shooting the series for the fall season. One of the main characters, Hallie Thomas, is a major TV role breakout for actress Teri Reeves. “Chicago Fire” makes it’s premiere on Wednesday, October 10th, 2012, on NBC at 10pm ET/9pm Central.

Teri Reeves was born in Castro Valley, California, and has been a working actress for over five years. She was inspired to go into acting by watching Katharine Hepburn in “The Philadelphia Story,” and pursued her education all the way up to a Masters degree in Fine Arts. After several smaller roles in television, she was featured in an original political series made for the Hulu TV website called “Battleground.” She auditioned for “Chicago Fire” from that series base, and will play Hallie Thomas – a hospital resident who is romantically linked to Lieutenant Matthew Casey (Jesse Spencer).



Teri Reeves as Hallie Thomas in ‘Chicago Fire’
Photo credit: NBC

In anticipation of the premiere of “Chicago Fire,” Teri Reeves sat down with HollywoodChicago.com to talk about her new role in the “hot” series.

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you want to bring to the character of Hallie Thomas that isn’t necessarily written in the script or described to you by directors or show runners?

Teri Reeves The depth of her humanity. When a character is written for television, you only see shades, and we as actors get to fill-in-the-blanks and give them complexity. I just hope I’ve given her the nuance of a real person.

HollywoodChicago.com: Your character is described as ‘in the midst of a separation’ from your fiancée on the show, portrayed by Jesse

Spencer. How does that conflict play out for you so far as an actor, and how does it add to conflict on the show?

Reeves: Any character you play as an actor will have a conflict, that is what you sink your teeth into. She doesn't want the relationship to go away, so I have something to fight for, and that's what makes it exciting as an actor. For the show, it's basically that fire fighters lead stressful lives, for many of them their home life is solace. With Jesse's character coming home to me, it gives him a lot more to deal with, which in turn makes him more interesting.

HollywoodChicago.com: In your observation so far, how does setting the series in Chicago give it a characteristic that is unique to any other setting?

Reeves: Chicago is a character unto itself, at least that's what I get having spent some time here. The fire fighters here have a great reputation, so telling their story is different than telling the story of fire fighters elsewhere. Shooting on location, among all the culture here, also adds a realism and an extra flavor.

HollywoodChicago.com: Comparisons to the the 1995 set-in-Chicago film 'Backdraft' are inevitable. What do you think sets this firehouse drama apart from that firehouse drama, beyond the sharing of the city as a setting?

Reeves: 'Backdraft' was a film about the family heritage of fire fighter brothers, and a story that is about the family at the firehouse. For us, the firehouse setting is for the engine company, squad cars and the ambulance EMT squad. It looks more at the conflict between those three services interacting in one fire house, and all the various stories you can get from those three environments.

HollywoodChicago.com: This is your second foray into a series, after doing the online Hulu original TV series, 'Battleground.' What differences are you finding on 'Chicago Fire' and the TV network approach, as compared to how a series was done on Hulu?

Reeves: For Hulu, it was a bit of an experiment. There was an excitement of 'finding your feet' while putting it together, part of something really new for them. There were bumps, but a sense of ownership. Working with NBC and Dick Wolf ["Law & Order" executive producer], I felt less bumpy and more taken care of, part of something working for TV veterans who knew what they were doing. One isn't better or worse, they're just different.

HollywoodChicago.com: In series television today, there is much less time to establish characters and get a hook going to keep a show on the air. How rapidly paced did you find the narrative energy on 'Chicago Fire' to be, and what do you think the hook will be for the audience?

Reeves: The show hits the ground running, even in the pilot. You learn a back story on all eight of the main cast right away, even extended to the 14 total featured cast. The writers are very good at that, they are quick about giving one sentence to help figure out a character. I feel like the hook can be different for different people – there is the action and drama of fighting fires, and there is humor with the fire house guys sitting around, playing cards and telling dirty jokes. There is also the romance, with me and the lieutenant, and other relationships. But what will draw people universally is the authenticity of the show, and the push to represent the stories we're telling about the characters.

HollywoodChicago.com: Who in particular in the cast did you really want to meet once you signed up for the show?

Reeves: David Eigenberg. He was on 'Sex and the City' during a part of my life that was very formative. I was very nervous about meeting him, but also I was glad that I pretty much didn't know everyone before I met them, because I might have been terrified, just walking into that room with all that talent.



The Cast of 'Chicago Fire'
Photo credit: NBC

HollywoodChicago.com: You have Bachelors and Masters degrees in Fine Arts under your belt. How does education in the arts at those levels help to make you a better actor, and how did it best prepare you to get into the arena of working actor?

Reeves: School exposes you to different methods of approaching a characters, and exposes you to different material. It opened me up as an artist, to approach scenarios from many angles, because you have to explore different parts of yourself, that you might not do if you go straight into the business. It helps prevent typecasting as well, such as starting out as the girl next door and doing that over and over. They give you tools to handle any situation that is thrown at you, and to create characters with depth and background.

HollywoodChicago.com: In the world of auditioning in Los Angeles, what trait do you think you have that stands out in a cattle call, and distinguishes your success so far?

Reeves: [Laughs] I'm terrible at auditions, horrible. It was terrifying for a good five years when I walked into an audition room. The thing that helps me now is to go through it moment-by-moment. So instead of thinking about what is terrifying, I'm thinking about every moment that I've prepared for the character. By filling myself up with detail, there is no room for nerves.

HollywoodChicago.com: In making a living as an actor, the type of roles that are offered are often of the lowest common denominator – horror films, teenage series and television parts. How do you enrich your energy towards these types of beginning parts versus doing Twelfth Night and Three Sisters at the Chalk Repertory, where you are in residence?

Reeves: That is why I do the Chalk Repertory stuff, because I don't get to do those types of parts right away. But I was the type of actress if you just gave me a half a line on set, that made my year. [laughs] All of it is fun, even the lowest denominator.

HollywoodChicago.com: What part have you done in theater that has challenged you the most?



Teri Reeves in Chicago, Sept. 19th, 2012
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Reeves: Olivia in 'Twelfth Night.' because so many people have played her, have opinions about her and have opinions about Shakespeare. I had to turn that all off and approach her as if she was my own. That was a big challenge, plus she is a character in a dark place, but is in a comedy. That is a delicate balance to strike. But she's also falling in love, so I got to experience that whole journey.

HollywoodChicago.com: We live in an era where progress for women's equality in culture and society has switched almost 180 degrees from 50 years ago. Do you think the show business industry has kept up with this change, or because so much of acting depends on a certain look, that sexism is still rampant, in your observation?

Reeves: Well, the thing that is encouraging as a woman actor in the industry for me, is that I see more women behind-the-scenes as well. I've seen women producers, writers and directors – and those are decision making positions – it's good to see women have that influence.

As an actress, I've had pressure to lose weight, fix my skin, change my hair because I'm not 'pretty' enough. It's the part of the business that makes me ill. I want to get to a position where I can be my own self in my own skin, however that is, which would be a message to other women to own who they are. I'm not there yet.

HollywoodChicago.com: In your bio, it states you were inspired to go into acting by watching Katharine Hepburn in 'The Philadelphia Story.' What characteristics of her style made such an impression on you, and what type of performance attributes did you pick up from her, that you use in your own approach?

Reeves: The thing I love about Katharine Hepburn is that she cares, but she also is great at pretending she doesn’t care at the same time. [laughs] She is her own person, take it or leave it, which I aspire to. She also had this strength of character in an era where women had even less power. She could laugh and cry at the same time, and gave complex performances while having fun. I’m still developing all that.

“Chicago Fire” premieres Wednesday, October 10th, on NBC at 10pm ET/9pm CT. See local listings for channel locations. Featuring Teri Reeves, Jesse Spencer, David Eigenberg, Monica Raymund and Taylor Kinney. Produced by Dick Wolf.



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