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No More Plain Jane

Josie Bissett returns to her old *Melrose Place* digs—but she's a changed woman, on screen and off

by WILLIAM KECK

There's one less doormat to be found at Melrose Place. When Josie Bissett revisits her former address on the September 29 episode of the CW revival, don't expect the same old Jane. After a decade away, Bissett's long-suffering character, who appeared on the show from 1992–1999, will finally be the one *causing* the drama. “She comes back as a strong and determined woman who knows what she wants—and is going to get it,” says Bissett, 38, hanging with TV GUIDE MAGAZINE between takes at the familiar-looking set. Adds exec producer Todd Slavkin, “Jane’s been victimized for so much of her life that we wanted to evolve her. Now she’s the manipulator.”

So what brings Jane to the hood? The mysterious murder of her sinister sis, Sydney (Laura Leighton), whom Jane’s son of a bitch ex-hubby, Michael Mancini (Thomas Calabro), hooked up with long ago. As Syd’s next of kin, Jane, still a fashion designer, inherits the apartment complex and pops in to wreak havoc. Exploring the new-and-improved building “has been surreal,” says Bissett. “I’ve been trying to get my bearings. The first thing I did was look for Jane’s apartment”—the pad her character first shared with Michael and later with Kyle McBride, played by Bissett’s then-real-life husband, Rob Estes. “Tons of memories have been floating back,” she says.

MELROSE PLACE Tuesdays, 9/8c, The CW; cwtv.com

As Bissett glances over at the staircase, she struggles to recall if Jane ever took a tumble down the steps. “I think I remember Jane losing a child—because in real life, I miscarried,” she says. Clearly, memories from the *Melrose* era are a mixed bag. Following that real-life loss, Bissett took a leave of absence during Season 6, with the blessing of producer Aaron Spelling. “Part of [leaving] was the miscarriage, but I was also tired. My character and I had both been through a lot, so I needed to take a break,” she remembers.

When she came back for the final season, art imitated life: Jane was pregnant, while Bissett herself was expecting a son with Estes (Mason, now 10; their second child, Maya, is 7). The timing was right for the show to sign off. “So much had happened between the beginning and the end. It had completely changed from being based in reality to essentially turning into a dramedy,” she says.

After the swan song, Bissett focused on family—but in 2006 she split from Estes, who’s currently a regular on the CW’s *90210* resurrection. (Bissett has been dating a software developer named Jeff for the past two years.) “Rob and I have both really worked on the kids’ expressing how they feel, which is important when you go

through a divorce,” she says.

As Jane, she’ll be considerably less gentle with the next generation of *Melrose* residents. During her story line, she torments new resident bad girl Ella (Katie Cassidy), using damning information about her that Sydney e-mailed just before she died. In exchange, Michael’s son, David (Shaun Sipos), will make use of some dirt of his own regarding Jane’s shady business dealings. “David knows Jane is a pretty dangerous animal,” says Sipos. “We’re like two lions going head-to-head trying to conquer each other.”

That won’t be the final tussle for Bissett: There’s another still-unscheduled appearance in the works, and for Round 2, expect her to share some screen time—and maybe more—with Calabro. “We know that’s what the audience wants,” says Slavkin. Bissett admits that she, too, would love to see a Jane-Michael reunion. “As freaky as that sounds, I kinda would. I believe Jane and Michael were each other’s true first loves,” she says. “Things have a funny way of coming around again.”

Flashback!



The way they were: Leighton and Bissett kicked off Season 5 of the original *Melrose* on September 9, 1996. To prep for her return gig, the once-pixie-haired actress refreshed her memory by watching old scenes from the show on YouTube.



She can play naughty and nice: Bissett also has a recurring role as a Christian mom on *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* and is the author of the hit children's book *Tickle Monster*