

# Beyond scowling



MICHAEL D. REID  
BEHIND  
THE SCREEN

## Victoria film shoot offers Sonja Bennett comic relief

There's one thing Sonja Bennett has learned about television since being cast as Det. Samantha Waters on *Cold Squad*: it's to be ready for anything.

"That was hard for me because I'm very anal. Like to prepare a lot and in TV you have to throw that out the window or you'll always be untrapped," says the Vancouver actress best known for her role on CTV's *Comed Court*-winning series that starts its seventh season on Sept. 4 at 9 p.m.

The cheerful graduate of Langara College's Studio 58 drama program looks anything but unhappy during a break from shooting *Confessions of a Incurable Social Climber*, a multi-hour TV movie filming in Victoria this month.

Bennett, 33, appears to have learned her lesson well in a scorching August afternoon during a playful shoot on the second floor of a downtown heritage building masquerading as San Francisco's hip Liquid advertising agency.

Months earlier, Bennett and the film's star, Jennifer Love Hewitt, were in the throes of a full-blown pugilism — "laughing our way into oblivion," as a crew member quipped — as they worked on a scene for director Dana Loring.

Love, as the film's out-of-control wife called by cast and crew, plays Kayla Livingston, a lively advertising copywriter who writes a tell-all diary about her career and sexual escapades in the film adaptation of Adam Lang's bestseller. It will air on the Oxygen hit work in the U.S., and Movie Central.

Looking the part with her funky silver earrings, matching rock-tee, lacy V-neck blouse and a flowing burgundy skirt, Bennett plays Lisa, the "big-poke-check," frayed and Wood Vixen substance who sees Kayla as her prince.

"I'm always believing there's good in Kayla and I'm trying to draw it out," says Bennett, her hair dyed in strawberry blonde for the part. "She starts to see the error of her ways and turns around."

In the scene prompting hours of convulsive laughter from Love, Bennett and Jenny Clements, who plays the agency's uptight "gatekeeper," Ellen offers Kayla some organic prunes, triggering some amusing unscripted responses.

A few minutes later, during a chat with Bennett in "Kayla's office" — a spiffy corner room with ad mock-ups and Post-It notes pinned on a cluttered wall, Got Milk? posters, design books and a cool, crossy-purple and black leather laptop — Love playfully barges in to heap praise on her co-star.

"She's awesome!" says Love with a 500-megawatt grin. "The best ever!"

Bennett seems genuinely moved, and a tad embarrassed — especially since *Confessions* marks her comedy debut. "I'm usually scowling," laughs the actress who has played angry teens, psychics, bank robbers and a teacher.

"She's a very funny lady," says Bennett later, naming Love's compliment. "Her comedic chops are so smart. Technically, she's unbelievable."

She has been a busy summer for the Vancouver blonde actress — and it's about to get busier when Bennett flies to Toronto next week to start work on Adam Egryson's *When the Truth Lies*. It's part of a swell that followed her acclaimed performance as a misreading teenager who is dangerously possessive of her father, a mock physician, in *Punch*, the dark 2002 Canadian comedy-drama written and directed by her father, Guy Benson.

*Confessions* marks the second time in as many months Bennett has been in Victoria. She also played a teenager who has come to terms with a freaky virus afflicting townfolk in *Murder*, the horror film directed by John Poiré.

"I'm staying on the same floor of the same hotel," she said. "It's starting to feel like home. I had to remind myself not to walk into the lounge in my pajamas to get coffee."



Sonja Bennett plays the title character's surly co-worker in *Confessions of a Incurable Social Climber*.  
Diane Panton/Newscape Vision

Bennett, a huge fan of Egryson's *The Sweet Hereafter* says being cast opposite Karin Basem, Colin Firth and Alison Lohman in the Victoria-based writer's murder-mystery based on the Harper Collins novel was a dream come true — even if it means she'll have to juggle between film projects.

She plays Burtina Tross, a Grade 2 teacher who switches identities with Karen O'Connor (Lohman), a journalist attempting to uncover the truth behind the breakup of a shambly duo similar to Jerry Lewis and Doris Martin.

"It's a nice snaky way to infiltrate their lives," says Bennett, who has almost finished the book. "The screenplay's great, the cast is great, it's so excited."

What really excites her is that — unlike too many Canadian films — Egryson's project will likely play in a large global audience because of his reputation.

"I think the audience really for *Punch* for Canada were about 18," she quips. "And five of them were family."

The actress says she was so convinced she would never be cast in an Egryson film she passed on a chance to audition while in Toronto and a casting director told her Egryson had seen *Punch* and wanted to meet her.

It wasn't the first time Bennett had hesitated to meet with a director with a bad reputation — or that her performance in *Punch* would lead to life-changing opportunities.

When *Punch* was shown at the Toronto International Film Festival two years ago, the actress was bombarded with business cards from various industry players, including Maria Schuman, head of casting for Fox Television.

"I didn't call her," Bennett recalled with a laugh. "I was in theatre school at the time. I had eight lines in a show playing in a dirty little basement theatre."

It didn't materialize, however. She tracked Bennett down, signed her to an eight-month contract and got her up in a fancy hotel in L.A. when she read piles of scripts for potential roles in the hopes she might fit her profile.

It took some persuasion, however. Bennett initially told her agent she couldn't fly to L.A. to meet with network executives because she was rehearsing a *Sixteen and Six* play. The network offered to fly her down and back on her day off, and they signed a contract that would let her finish school.

With a hit series didn't materialize, the agent started what would become a steady stream of work after auditioning for Fox's Vancouver-dialed *John Doe*.

Although she appreciated the opportunity, she says L.A. just wasn't for her.

"To be fair, I never experienced L.A. in any other context besides complete isolation under extremely high pressure," she said. "I was on contract, all by myself, straight out of drama school and I had no car. I spent months walking or mini-mally on Avenue of the Stars and back. Everything revolved around the business and I felt very frustrated."

While Bennett's profile is rising on screens — including a recurring role on *The Dead Zone* as Rachel Caldwell, a woman Anthony Michael Hall's character is suspected of murdering — she says theatre is her first love.

The party actress can also soon be seen in *Goldfish*, a new Canadian TV series about a group of funky restaurant employees written by playwright and screenwriter Michael MacLennan (*Queer as Folk*).

"She considers it another part of a 'huge gift' from her father.

"I was lucky. With *Punch*, he essentially handed me this beautiful opportunity on a silver platter," she said. [mreid@tmfmail.com](mailto:mreid@tmfmail.com)