

TELEVISION

Brooke Elliot, Josh Berman on 'Diva' coming back from the 'Dead'

BY JERRY NUNN

Drop Dead Diva was literally dead after four seasons when it was cancelled only to be brought back to life for a new fifth season on the Lifetime Channel.

The series revolves around a blonde model who is brought back to life in the body of a lawyer. Actress Brooke Elliot plays this part with gusto, as Jane Bingum has changed over the years in her quest for love and peaceful eternity.

Elliot had an impressive list of Broadway roles before landing the show, with shows such as as Taboo and The Pirate Queen.

Executive Producer Josh Berman created the series and is known for producing CSI: Crime Scene Investigation and Bones.

Windy City Times spoke with them both on the phone recently about the new season of Diva.

Windy City Times: Hi, Brooke. I spoke to you last season about the show. It was a great interview.

Brooke Elliott: Oh, good.

WCT: What is there in store for our LGBT television watchers?

Josh Berman: You know, we're so proud of the gay storylines we've done already on Drop Dead Diva. We've been nominated for GLAAD Awards three years in a row, and we won one of those years. The themes of the show are always about feeling like you don't belong, and as a gay man it's something that I certainly felt growing up. And so we absolutely will be tapping into those teams, both through gay story lines and just general fish out of water stories. This season we do have an important episode that will tackle a very cutting-edge issue within the gay community. I don't want to give out more about it right now, but it's a story that we absolutely feel confident we will be nominated for a GLAAD Award again this year, and I think that the gay and lesbian fans are going to love this episode.

WCT: You have had some great musical numbers in the past. What do you have on this season?

BE: We are not singing this season so it is a song-free season.

WCT: There might be some backlash, Josh!

JB: Well, Brooke is probably not singing this season, but there are certainly some musical elements coming up that we want to keep as a surprise.

WCT: How do you portray these different people while in the same body, Brooke?

BE: When I'm Deb, Deb in Jane's body—which is the Jane everyone knows, and hopefully loves—it's really fun. I get to be Deb, but I get to figure out when Jane's qualities are influencing here, which is a lot of fun. I always come from Deb's perspective because it's Deb's soul in Jane's body, but a lot of times Jane's brain kind of affects her and makes her decisions possibly different than what she would normally have decided.

Playing old Jane was very challenging to figure out who this person is and how she's different. And because I'm the body of both, that's an even bigger challenge because when you just figure out just exactly how old Jane stands and behaves, and how does she gesture and where is her emotional life living, as opposed to Deb, which we're so familiar with. You know the hair flipping and how Deb walks and all those things. So, it's one of my most favorite parts of doing this character.

WCT: How has it been getting a second chance with the show?

JB: The story of Drop Dead Diva is coincidentally about someone who gets a second chance. When you literally come back from the dead, whether we're talking about Deb who comes



Brooke Elliot. Photo from Lifetime

back as Jane, or our show coming back for season five, you really kind of make the most of it, and I think that's what we're doing. We don't take it for granted. I think everyone is working 110 percent this season. It feels good.

There is a new joy coming to work that I haven't felt since season one where we want to make every moment count, because you don't know when it's your last, so to speak.

I've seen the first three episodes and so far so good. When the editors call me out of my office to come have me look at a scene that Brooke is acting in so beautifully and makes you cry or makes you laugh, it's such a great feeling. And I think the fans are going to go crazy when they see our season premier and what comes next.

WCT: How do you feel about it, Brooke?

BE: I'm really, really excited about it, and I'm eager to see the shows. I haven't seen them or seen dailies or anything like that, so I hear really great things about it. I'm very eager to see because you know shooting it is such a different feeling than how the product actually comes out. I always love to see what we get. I'm really excited that we were brought back.

WCT: Josh, are you writing season five with the possibility that season six will not be picked up again?

JB: I really now believe in my gut—and Brooke and I are close and have talked about this—[that] the show will continue beyond season five. We haven't written the season finale yet for season five but we have a model in place and a fan base that's still growing. Last season we grew between season three and four, and we're

hopeful that we'll grow again with season five. I don't think it's been announced but Lifetime is actually, starting today, running all of season four for free on their website, on MyLifetime.com. It's a reward to the fans and it's for our fans to spread the word.

WCT: What do you want, Brooke, in terms of growth for your character for the future?

BE: It's incredibly important that we just focus on the love part of her life and leave career and everything else out of it for the moment, it's incredibly important to me that she finds, whether it's Grayson or Owen or somebody else, that she finds someone that loves her for every part of her being. In terms of an emotional love life existence, I've always wanted that for her. I've always wanted that complete story for her.

WCT: There have been some great guest stars. Who is coming up this season?

JB: Reiko Aylesworth, we can mention. She was a regular on 24, and was Brigid Brannagh on Army Wives. There are a couple of names that

are either shooting, or we're discussing right now that we haven't announced yet.

BE: And John Ratzenberger comes back, right?

JB: Yeah. He comes back as Kim's dad; Barbara Corcoran and Sandra Bernhard, too.

WCT: Do you have a favorite?

BE: This question is always a hard question, because I've been so lucky and starstruck every single time I've met know our big huge guest stars, and our lesser-known guest stars I just adore. They're all such good people.

I really love it was Rosie O'Donnell is on. She's one of the easiest actresses to work with. She's phenomenal. I love when Faith Prince is on, who plays Jane's mom. I love Faith. She's such a good being. It was amazing to have Liza Minnelli and Delta Burke, and my mind just gets filled with everyone of their names. I'm just starstruck and lucky to have met all of them.

Season four is currently available on DVD and season five has just begun on Lifetime.



Black LGBTQs to host Black Alphabet Film Festival July 2-3

In the inaugural launch of the Chicago-based Black Alphabet's debut event, the community-based group is launching its first annual Black Alphabet Film Festival (BAFF) July 2-3 at the Center on Halsted and Inn of Chicago.

Featuring a combination of nearly 20 shorts and features from around the world, the two-day event marks one of the first exclusively Black LGBTQ and same-gender-loving (SGL) film festivals in the city.

BAFF will have a few screenings receiving their official Chicago premieres, including Friend of Essex, a documentary meditation on the continuing influence of poet activist Es-

sex Hemphill; Glitterboys & Ganglands, a documentary about transgender life on the South African beauty-pageant circuit; and I Didn't Know Mark Carson, a short on the recent New York City gay hate-crime slaying.

Affinity, the Center on Halsted (COH), Chicago Black Gay Men's Caucus (CBGMC) and United Black Pride are co-hosting the event.

The July 2 event begins at 5:30 p.m. at the Center on Halsted, 3656 N. Halsted St. at the Hoover-Leppen Theater; the following night rolls out more adult fare at the Inn of Chicago, 162 E. Ohio St., 6-9:30 p.m. See www.blackalphabet.org or www.facebook.com/blackalphabetChicago.

Bridgforth raising funds for new project

Artist Sharon Bridgforth has just launched a BIG USA Project fundraising campaign for her current work in progress, "River See." Chicago has been home to much of "River See's" development.

The project will return to Chicago for its world premiere at Links Hall in 2014. Meanwhile, full funding from the USA Project Cam-

paign will insure the completion and success of "See."

Set on a juking boat, with blueswomen, queers, deviants and seers, "River See" is the prayer before the Great Migration. Experienced through the heart of See, a young woman-in-training, "River See" explores blues stories as living arrangements of jazz.

This project will only be funded if its goal of \$40,000 is reached by July 15. Visit http://www.usaprojects.org/project/river_see.