



THE FORCE OF NATURE THAT IS PAM GRIER

WORDS BY ALLISON KUGEL • PHOTO CREDIT: ABC/JOHN FLEENOR

If you were to ask any of the directors who have worked with Pam Grier to comment on this legend, they would likely tell you that having Pam on their set is a gamechanger. She knows what she wants and what she brings to the table. Just stand back and watch the force that is Pam.



Throughout our conversation, she made it clear that clinging to her perfectly-proportioned black Barbie superhero past doesn't interest her. It's a lovely time capsule that will be well documented in a biopic about her life based on her autobiography *Foxy* (Grand Central Publishing), that is currently in pre-production.

These days, Pam is focused on roles that represent mature, well-rounded

women living their authentic lives and not hiding behind a veneer of glam. Even stripped down to the studs, Pam still exudes sensuality that leads men of all ages to her like the Pied Piper. In *Bless This Mess*, Pam plays Constance, the local fix-it-all / know-it-all in small town Nebraska. She is the brilliant and funny foil to Dax Shepard and Lake Bell's transplanted Manhattanite characters, Mike and Rio. We witness Dax and Lake's characters stumble

and bumble through middle-American culture and country life through the eyes of Pam's amusement, as Ed Begley Jr.'s character, Rudy, tirelessly pursues her.

Pam will also appear on the big screen alongside Diane Keaton and Rhea Periman in *Poms*, a comedy about a group of women in a retirement community who reclaim their vigor and spice by starting a cheerleading squad.

Let's talk about your new show, *Bless This Mess*. Is this your first time doing a network sitcom?

Pam Grier: Let's see... yes, I do believe so. There was one with Michael J. Fox that was short lived, but I think this was the first one where it allows me to work with creatives like Elizabeth Meriwether [the show's creator] and Lake Bell [actress and co-creator]. I said to them, "Out here as country women, we take our Spanx off." I took my Spanx off and I did some chores before I came in to see them [for the role]. I was a little dusty and I smelled of barn and John Deere fuel. I smelled the part, so that helped [laughs].

People don't know that about you. You're a country western girl. That's how you live when you're not working.

PG: My upbringing had been military, rural, and urban. It was the best of all worlds. I've learned from each aspect of my culture and I see the world through women who were offered the opportunity to be equals. My grandfather was the first feminist in my life. He was from Wyoming. He was my mom's dad, and his mom had a sugar beet farm. She was a single mom and they had a hotel for African Americans, Native Americans and other people of color to stay in. He was accustomed to seeing independent women learn how to do things. He taught all his granddaughters how to be self-sufficient.

What are some of the most notable things your grandfather taught you?

PG: He taught all of us to hunt, fish, shoot, drive the tractor, bring the boat in, change tires, and spark plugs... you name it. That way you could always survive without waiting for someone to take care of you. Since I've been in film, since the seventies, this is something that's prepared me. When you're working in film, and then you're not working and you are home, how can you maximize taking care of your home and taking care of yourself, your family, your animals? I've had that and I bring that energy and information to my character, Constance, on this show. And my character wears a lot of hats.

You're not known for comedy. Did they think you could be funny?

PG: Yes, but Lake was talking about how she was afraid of cows. I said, "Cows won't hurt you, but if you come at a cow with a knife and a fork, you might have a problem [laughs]. I would tell stories about things I would do if there's a mountain lion outside attacking my chicken coop and stuff like that. I would tell people not to go for long country walks in the night if there is no light. This is Jurassic Park for real. But what they really wanted to know about was the concept of inclusion, which is what this show is really about. My character is a sheriff, she owns the vehicle lumber yard, the hardware store; she's the theatre director, she sings. She knows everyone's business. She's the referee. Sometimes she has to pull people out of a ditch with her truck.

How do you feel *Bless This Mess* handles inclusion, as far as steering clear of urban stereotypes of middle America?

PG: I mentioned to Lake, when they didn't have a script and they had no idea what they might do or write, I said to her, "There is one thing I must implore you, and that is not to make fun of the heartland." People go to the heartland to *find their hearts*. I believe that the farmer is the hero or heroine of the day. They should be in every magazine, all the time. I'm a member of the Farmland Trust, and we try to keep people aware that farming should be organic, across the board. In Canada, they know how to successfully do that. Here in the U.S., they have kept the subsidies and the information for the farmers away from them.

Ed Begley Jr. plays your love interest. How's the chemistry between you two when you are working together?

PG: He can sing, he can dance... he's got a bag of tricks! He and his wife Rachelle had me over to their home the first week for dinner. Ed did a lot of the cooking, and he is exceptional. They are just two peas in a pod. The nicest people; they finish each other's sentences. He is so informative. You want to sit at his feet like he is Yoda. Ed is sustainable, he's a mad scientist, and he can teach you. We were talking about farming and growing and dirt and moisture and oxidation and nutrients in the soil to create a great bed for plants. We really enjoy that aspect of our relationship.

Your career has done a 180. You're playing this quirky country role in *Bless This Mess*, and this month you are also in the film *Poms* with Diane Keaton and Rhea Perlman where you are poking fun at getting older. As someone who was an icon of sex appeal and glamour, how did that play a role, not just in your earlier career, but in your life? And how are you now processing going through the different stages of life?

PG: I've always controlled my image for political, religious, and spiritual purposes, and I've embraced aging. When I met Robert De Niro with his first wife, Diahnne Abbott, he was gaining weight in order to play Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull*. We were in his kitchen talking and I said to him, "I would like to gain weight for my roles." Because as a woman, society responds differently to your weight and to your appearance, and your sex appeal. I guess in certain cultures if you are not a standard size 4 or 6 you're not considered attractive. There are psychological aspects towards that. The younger, slimmer and more youthful looking you are, the better for child bearing and maybe you're thought to be more sexual or whatever. I love the fact that people *do* respond differently when I am a size 12 than when I am a size 4; completely different dynamic and really interesting to me.

People perceive that the more attractive you are considered by society, the easier that opportunities and good things will come your way. Why would you want to forfeit that?

PG: When I did the play *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* and I gained weight to play that role, I wanted to do that role and the producer said you should see Kathy Bates play this role. When I went to see her and I saw that she had this beautiful weight on her, which is very normal in certain cultures, while in other cultures not as acceptable, I just thought she was so stunningly beautiful. It brought a certain element and richness to her character. I don't know what it was, but I just felt this couple in love [in the show]. It was amazing. I thought, "If I can just reach half the energy she portrayed, I would be grateful. At the time I thought, "I'm really skinny. I run seven miles a day. How do I do this?"



You were known and celebrated for being beautiful, fit, and strong.

PG: Well, Robert De Niro had said it would be different for me as a woman. He said to me, "You'll lose your attractiveness in society." I said, "You know what? I'm controlling it. This is my work. This is my dream." I put on forty pounds. My body changed, and people reacted to me differently than when you're young and skinny. But you know what? When you have a little more weight on, yet you are still attractive, your skin is clear and your hair is well groomed, you're still going to get some doors opened for you.

Are you comfortable in your skin at any weight?

PG: At any weight. I can gain weight and lose weight, if I have to, for whatever reason. I remember when I was meeting with Spike Lee for a role while I was still doing *Frankie and Johnny*. When he saw me with weight on, he said, "Wow! You're a little bit heavier than I thought. Are you okay? Are you sick?" He didn't know I was doing a play. I told him it was appropriate for the character, and that it's working. I didn't want people to come and see someone skinny and exotic looking and have them not see and hear [my] work.

I am truly surprised by your point of view. It makes me wonder if people really knew you at the height of your fame.

PG: I don't know if it's psychological or just human nature, but people are used to seeing certain imagery in advertising continuously, so that's their filter. If I didn't gain the weight, I wouldn't have gotten that job. And women in this business won't gain weight because they're afraid of not working. They want to be attractive and have that value. I'm a person that doesn't look at weight and judge what's beautiful and what's not. I do know that these heavier actors and actresses are always working. Their work is fantastic, and you see this wisdom, you see this value. I know there is a designation within society about who is going to be wise and who isn't; who is going to be stupid. But let me tell you, maybe because I've had a sexuality and I still do now, it's kind of interesting that these young men in their forties are attempting to court me.

This morning, someone said to me, "Tell her I love her. Tell her I think she is amazing." I said, "Take a number!"

PG: [Laughs] Way back when women had weight on them, they were zaftig and Rubenesque, and very appealing to a lot of men. A lot of rugged, handsome men would have a woman that would be very zaftig, and not thin. They didn't believe thin women could do anything, and they would be hungry all the time. If a woman can do something, a man will have more respect for her. Maybe when I was younger, men

assumed that I just went shopping and sat around by the pool and didn't do much. Then they'd be shocked to see me changing my tire, fixing screens, putting the fence up, pushing manure and rock. Sometimes I would say to men, "What do you need? Don't have me have to fix this for you."

Is that how you are in relationships? Are you the kind of woman who likes to do everything for herself?

PG: Oh, no. I'm a partner. Whoever can do it for me, I'm game and I'm a listener. I love to listen. I am a researcher, but if you know more, then by all means share it. I don't have to do everything. But if it is life and death, I'm the person. At home, in all my fields, I have fire extinguishers because people flick their cigarettes out, and in a time of global warming, fires are starting on the side of the road and burning up entire communities.

They could have used you in California.

PG: People have sprinklers on the inside of their homes. They should have them on the outside of their homes. Turn them on, wet down your property and leave. At least it will be so wet that the embers won't land on your house or around your house and burn it down. At the very least, it's a retardant. It will slow it down, if it won't completely stop it. I live in a forest and I am responsible for six animals. I'm responsible for not starting a fire and burning down everyone else's home and killing people. Aside from the comedy, that's also what our show is about. Having fun, enjoying and *respecting* our naturally occurring resources.

And having a sense of responsibility for the earth, our ecosystem, our land and other people.

PG: People are fear-based because they have given up a lot of their own confidence and strength to other people. "Here, handle my politics, do my taxes, you take care of me." And then when other people mess up, they feel victimized by the person they gave their power over to. People don't even realize how much power they have. They have acquiesced; they've given it away. I'm around people here in Colorado [where she lives most of the year] who've never flown before. They've only seen black people on television. When they meet me, they go, "Oh, she's just like us." It's astonishing. I

can't criticize them, but they are so glad to meet me and to know that everything's going to be alright, that I'm not gonna open up a meth lab down the road. When they get to know me, it shifts for them in an instant. They realize that whoever told them, or whatever perception they had that was negative about other cultures, is now gone.

You've been in show business now for about 50 years?

PG: Fifty years, plus. My career is older than *you*!

[Laughs] How do you want your body of work to be studied? Because it will be studied in years to come?

PG: It already is studied, and they always tell me I'm a master class or thesis, and I'm going, "Whoa. Oh boy!" I'll tell you this, when I started doing stunts, that I'm feeling the pain from now, I didn't have a sports bra and it was a lot harder to be very physical and authentic. I don't want to be remembered as being perfect. I want to be remembered as being real.

You are thought to be the first African American female to headline action films. Where are your successors? Where is the next Pam Grier?

PG: They're probably out there limping, as I did. They got hurt and said, "Don't wanna do that again!" I was a gymnast and I skied; I ran track. Anything to keep from doing the dishes, I loved. You have to have a little bit of that in your nature to be that physical. Not everyone is, or can be. You might be able to act the part, but if they didn't have that in their upbringing, they may not be following in my footsteps. Right now, I see some white actresses like Charlize Theron and Rachel Weisz, who I never thought would do martial arts and stunts and action movies, who really enjoy them. But they did say they got a couple of "ow-ies," and they don't know if they will do it again. Not everybody is rushing into doing that kind of physical work.

Is there any type of role you wouldn't take on, because it's not in your wheelhouse?

PG: I was sexually attacked and raped at the age of 6, and then again at 18 in college, and then there was a third attack that I fought off. I couldn't believe what was happening. I didn't understand it. But I know that I cannot portray that in a movie, because I don't want to revisit those moments and emotions. A lot of actresses who will be up for the casting to play me in the film of my life, many of them may have had those same experiences and won't be able to relive them, okay? Not everyone can



do that; not everyone wants to revisit that. If they can, it will be fantastic, but I know that I have had to turn down roles that have those kinds of attacks, because I couldn't do it. I had to pass. There were major directors and producers through the years, where they didn't know why I was passing, but I just passed. I knew I might snap. I don't know if I can go there. Not every actor can play every role, and there is a reason, and it may be private.

But you are enjoying having audiences get to know the part of you that shines as Constance on *Bless This Mess*.

PG: I'm sharing my rural side, my military side, my pragmatic side *and* my sexy side in this wonderful role that has been bestowed upon me by actress and co-creator Lake Bell and Elizabeth Meriwether; and ABC and Fox and Disney. They support me greatly, they listen to me, and they laugh at some of the funny things I do. Even the way I came into my initial meeting with them, all stinky from doing chores. Who does that?

That's not so much method acting as it is the real Pam Grier! You're a roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty kind of woman.

PG: That's right. For fifty years of my career, I would commute. I would come off the plane ready to work, in character, and I was very serious about my work. I couldn't do all the roles because I'm tall. For example, I couldn't play Tina Turner, because I was 5'9" and she's 5'1". I'm not going to get roles where the characters are diminutive. I was always asked why I didn't play Tina Turner. I'm actually, like, a foot taller than Tina. I'd be the tallest Tina Turner in the world. Like Geena Davis and a lot of my peers who are tall, we don't get a lot of the roles with husbands and love stories, because of our height and the perception that the husband should be taller than the woman.

This interview reminds me of how film directors will say that sometimes they'll have an actor on set, and they know the best thing they can do is get out of their way and just let them do their thing. With this interview, I couldn't direct you. You directed the interview, but I learned a whole lot and I thank you!

PG: Well, I love to share and I love to teach. I've got a PhD from the University of Maryland in the Humanities, and an honorary degree in Science from Langston University in Agriculture. It's who I am. **ML**

Watch *Bless This Mess* on ABC,
Tuesdays at 9:30/8:30 c.
Follow Pam on Twitter: @PamGrier