

Los Angeles Times

Friday, May 9, 2008



STEFANO PALTERA For The Times

GOING DEEP: "I know I have a higher purpose," Thoms said of the complex roles she prefers.

Seeing the stage as a cut above

'Cold Case's' Tracie Thoms stokes her passion for large-as-life drama in 'And Her Hair Went With Her.'

By GREG BRAXTON
Times Staff Writer

Something seemed to be eating at Tracie Thoms. The actress was trying to relax after an intense rehearsal at the Fountain Theatre, but she couldn't keep still. Finally, she leaned forward to deal with the source of her discomfort.

Pulling up one leg of her jeans, Thoms pointed to a half-dollar-sized welt. "It's a mosquito

bite," she said with a mock frown as she rubbed the redness.

The bump on her leg isn't the only itch Thoms, 32, is scratching these days. The last few years have been hectic for the petite actress bouncing between her regular stint as no-nonsense detective Kat Miller in the CBS procedural "Cold Case" to more showy roles in "The Devil Wears Prada," the film version of the Broadway musical "Rent" and "Grindhouse," Quentin Tarantino's *homage* to exploitation films.

Though the Juilliard-trained Thoms is appreciative of the steady screen work, it's all but cut off her ability to pursue her real love — theater

[See Thoms, Page E21]

Weaving complex tale with 'Hair'

[Thoms, from Page E1]

Since graduating from the New York school in 2001, she has appeared in off-Broadway plays ("Up Against the Wind" at the New York Theater Workshop and "The Exonerated" for the Culture Project) and made her Broadway debut in 2004 in "Drowning Crow." But her busy TV and film schedule has allowed her only scant opportunities to participate in readings or workshops for projects, such as Broadway's "Passing Strange."

Her unceasing appetite for the footlights has Thoms particularly charged about her role in Zina Camblin's "And Her Hair Went With Her," a dramatic and comic exploration of the joys and pain of African American women. The two-person play, which opens to-

day, revolves around two friends — played by Thoms and Tony Award-winner Tonya Pinkins ("Caroline, or Change") — who run a beauty salon.

"I'm just trying now to get over my terror and nerves in doing this play because I'm stretching muscles that I haven't been able to stretch for so long," Thoms said. "I haven't been able to do a full theatrical production in about three years. I'm trusting that I still have those chops because of all the workshops and readings I've done. But it's definitely scary."

The play represents more than just Thoms' passion for being onstage and receiving immediate feedback from a live audience. Appearing in the production parallels her mission to play prominent, complex, multidimensional African American women. She maintains that Hollywood too often doesn't give black actresses enough chances to shine in leading roles that have depth.

"When I go on auditions and get breakdowns for black female characters, the descriptions I see mostly are 'sexy and sassy' or 'fierce and broke,'" Thoms said. "There's nothing in between. I'm in the middle of that. And every black woman I know is funny, smart and witty, so I see mostly are 'sexy and

sassy' or 'fierce and broke,'" Thoms said. "There's nothing in between. I'm in the middle of that. And every black woman I know is funny, smart and witty, and it's a shame we don't get more opportunities to show that."

Too often, she says, options for black actresses are extremely limited; they often wind up playing the BBF — Black Best Friend — of the white heroine, having no personality or goal in life other than to lend support to the leading white character. She speaks from experience: She played the BBF of Anne Hathaway's character in "The Devil Wears Prada." She and other black actresses have even teased one another about forming a support group for BBFs who have to assist their "woefully helpless white girls."

"I know I have a higher purpose," she said. "I have a larger desire to play characters that are not only African Americans but human beings. We have so many beautiful stories to tell and they're just being neglected."

In "And Her Hair Went With Her," Thoms and Pinkins flip their wigs — literally, and figuratively — playing not only the beauticians, but their customers and others. Thoms' gallery includes an overzealous

actress and a woman with an obsessive-compulsive disorder.

For Thoms, there's comfort in working with Pinkins, whom she has admired since she was a young actress. It's not their first collaboration — Pinkins has played Thoms' mother on "Cold Case."

"Tonya is so skilled at what she does," Thoms said. "I just try to glean every bit of inspiration I can from her. Playing with her just makes this job a lot easier."

Thoms has been attached to "And Her Hair Went With Her" from its earliest development. While at Juilliard, she did a reading of the play, which Camblin wrote as part of a Juilliard playwright fellowship. The two kept in touch and when the Fountain production was set, Thoms was Camblin's first choice for the role.

"Tracie gets my quirky comedy," said Camblin. "I was thrilled when she was able to work it out to come on board."

Director Diane Rodriguez added that Thoms and Pinkins have a palpable chemistry: "They obviously like and respect each other. They speak the same language, they understand what makes a scene work. There is comedy here, but this is not about cartoonish characters. Tracie is a real good observer of people, and she brings a truth that finds the humor in these characters."



STEFANO PALTERA For The Times

GOING LIVE: *Thoms, between myriad roles in TV and film, stars in Zina Camblin's two-woman play set in a beauty shop.*

'And Her Hair Went With Her'

Where: Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Ave., L.A.

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays

Ends: June 15

Price: \$25 to \$28

Contact: (323) 663-1525

It's a side that Thoms doesn't get to show too often in her regular role on "Cold Case," where she mostly interrogates suspects. "I'm truly blessed to be on that series, and it's a great show that is so meaningful to people," she said. "But the material is not geared for my character's journey. It's all about the guest star. There is a formula, and my job is an exercise in how to get the best scene out of the guest stars."

"Cold Case" co-executive producer Greg Plageman said Thoms possessed "such an embarrassment of talent. Given my preference, every other episode I would work in a song for her to sing."

The film "Rent" offered an opportunity for Thoms to show off her singing voice. She was one of only two performers to join members of the original Broadway cast for the highly anticipated film (her good friend Rosario Dawson was the

other). "I tried out for 'Rent' a total of nine times between the stage version and the film," she said with a chuckle.

She was disappointed when the film bombed. However, consolation came when she nabbed a juicy part in "Death Proof," Tarantino's portion of "Grindhouse," which was expected to be one of last spring's biggest hits. Thoms played a foul-mouthed stuntwoman who was terrorized, along with another stuntwoman and an actress, by a psychopathic stunt driver. The three women eventually turned the tables on the driver, celebrating as they exacted their bloody revenge.

But "Grindhouse" too was almost an instant flop. Even more troubling to Thoms was negative feedback she received from reciting some of Tarantino's more earthy dialogue, including the N-word. "I got a lot of flak from people calling me a sellout," she said quietly. "They didn't understand what the character was supposed to be. It was an *homage* to Pam Grier and those blaxploitation movies that Quentin loves. That girl was supposed to be over the top."

She's hoping for a more positive response with "And Her Hair Went With Her." "It's just a fine play, and you don't have to be black to get it. It just proves what I've always known — theater is my favorite thing to do."

greg.braxton@latimes.com