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Michelle Borth: Kicking butt with the boys

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Tacking gun-slinging goons and jumping off balconies is a tacit job requirement for a Navy lieutenant. Mortal peril aside, Hawaii Five-O star Michelle Borth shares why law enforcement is the best 9to-5.

The CBS TV series is a modern-day offshoot of the 1968 Hawaii Five-O series with the iconic theme song by Leonard Freeman.

So what's the difference? The addition of powerful female characters to the former male-only province of law enforcement.

"I'm grateful for it because I have a job today, but I've never seen it," Borth says of the original series, which came out when she was 10 years old.

Borth's character, a navy intelligence officer, underscores the new series' departure from the original. "She's tough and she's smart, for number one," she said of Lieutenant Catherine Rollins in a phone interview with *The Jakarta Post*.

Although a peripheral character for the first two seasons, Catherine appears in Season 1 as the love interest of Commander Steve McGarrett (waking up, without explanation, in his bed in Episode 5), a navy seal and head of the Five-O, an elite branch of the Hawaii Police Department accountable only to the governor.

The team deals daily with crimes that run the gamut: from a wife murdering her soon-to-be ex-husband for his insurance money and a deluded teen decapitating two of his peers in a pagan sacrifice to a terrorist bombing at the US army's Pacific headquarters.

“There's nothing — there's nothing — as action-packed as Hawaii Five-O,” Borth affirms in response to critics' billing Season 3 as a “soap opera”.

“First and foremost, we're a cop procedural, so there's always gonna be huge scenes — whether they're car chase scenes, explosions or gun fighting or fight scenes — like really intricate fight scenes. You're not gonna find that on another TV show. But what makes it a really good drama is the balance,” Borth explains, emphasizing the importance of back story, “because audiences have to connect to you as a human being.”

Indeed, Borth's “promotion” to full-time cast member in the show's Season 3 as McGarrett's “Rambollette” (“It's kind of an ongoing joke because we both refuse to say that we're boyfriend and girlfriend”) lends the otherwise unflappable McGarrett a human nuance, seeing as modern audiences no longer find insentient, one-dimensional action heroes plausible — nor venerable.

“Just by bringing me on, it's a vehicle to get to know McGarrett better. When he's with Catherine, he smiles in a way you've never seen him smile. He's vulnerable in a way that you've never seen him in action. So it doesn't make it into a soap opera; what it makes is a really good drama.”

Despite Catherine's natural, if unceremonious assimilation into the crime-fighting activities of the Five-O through her relationship with McGarrett as she begins to accompany them on raids and supply classified information through her access to navy intelligence, Borth acknowledges the sanctity of the original cast.

“Obviously, the storyline is always going to focus on the main four, because they are the main four, but [the writers] hopefully will give me a little bit of back story so that you can learn a little more about [Catherine]. As the season develops I think you can understand why [McGarrett] is dating Catherine,” Borth says of their relationship, the falling-in-love — or even, how they met — precedent of which was never elaborated, oddly enough.

“The more you get to know [Catherine] the more you realize that she's ‘him’ in a female body. You never saw that side of her, where she can pull out a gun and shoot you blank in the forehead and then jump over a balcony.”

The series' long-time fans initially protested Catherine being onboard as the supposedly trailing girlfriend, but Borth defends her character as another component of what gives Hawaii Five-O — which airs here on AXN every Monday at 9 p.m. — that “A story and B story” so crucial to “balance”.

She warned though that a certain secret about his mother, a former spy who faked her own death, that Catherine is forced to keep from McGarrett “may or may not fracture the relationship”.

The scenes are shot on famous Hawaii beaches, untamed forestland and, less often — though inevitably — in abandoned warehouses, a typical criminal breeding ground. Featuring more scenic eye candy than inner city-based crime shows the likes of CSI and NCIS, Hawaii Five-O's strong point is its very premise: Hawaii and Hawaiian culture.

“We have a crew of about 150 people that are local Hawaiians,” Borth says. “I think there's a sense of unity that I've never experienced before; a sense of unity and loyalty to the culture that we don't have on the mainland. What's been fascinating to me is moving to an island where I'm a minority,” says Borth, who grew up in New York.

“I’m like ‘Oh, I’m the white girl’ — which is so foreign to me. And the word *ohana* we really use to bond the team together. It’s something that I understand now, whereas before I didn’t really understand [the concept].”

“Now I get it. *Ohana* means ‘we’re family and we look out for each other’.”

As to which cast member Borth is closest to on the set — that would be Daniel Dae Kim (from 2004’s *Lost*), a Korean-born actor who plays Detective Chin Ho Kelly of the Five-O.

“He’s great person who listens and who I can talk to openly about personal stuff. I dearly, dearly love Daniel Dae Kim,” Borth says fondly.

Believing to share Catherine’s trait of being “a guy’s girl”, Borth feels in her element on the predominantly male set.

“I really enjoy working on this set particularly because it’s a really testosterone-filled set and I’m around a lot of men. For me, that’s a really great environment; it’s an environment I thrive in. I like to hang with the boys and I like to prove that I can be one of the boys, if not better,” she says.

After starring in a slew of sci-fi and horror indie films, Borth graduated to roles in ABC’s *The Forgotten* as Candace Butler, a young woman who joins the *Forgotten Network*, which attempts to reconstruct the lives of murder victims whose cases remain unsolved. In a chilling yet effective twist, the narrative is delivered from the perspective of the deceased.

Borth then starred in HBO’s short-lived *Tell Me You Love Me* (2007), a TV series depicting the lives of three couples — one battling infertility, another in a celibate marriage and a third dealing with cold feet before the wedding — without any of the witticism, glamour or beneath-the-sheets sex of dramatic license, for which Borth was named “the nakedest person on television” by *Film.com*.

“Acting in TV as opposed to films is really difficult. What a film gets two months to do, we get eight days to do,” Borth says of the shift in her career.

“And only people in television will know this: we’re the hardest-working people in the industry. We really are, and we work for our money [laughs]. So I have so much respect for television actors and directors. We’re on set doing 16-hour days and that’s just what we do.”

— **Photos courtesy of AXN**