

## AMERICAN HORROR STORY: ASYLUM INTERVIEW: Naomi Grossman, "Pepper"

Naomi Grossman is a writer, producer, comedienne and actress, who is best known for her incredible role as the awkward, lovable, iconic but disfigured character "Pepper" on FX Network's television series American Horror Story. The lovely actress, who looks so different in person from the character we have all come to know on screen, told me that the casting process for the second season of American Horror Story - AHS: Asylum - involved the "most insane" audition she had ever experienced: "I didn't even know what kind of role it was. All I knew was they wanted an adult, around four to five feet tall, possibly malformed, and childlike. How do I prepare for that? I mean - I know not to wear heels or anything too sexy. They gave me a ball, and asked me to improv - as if I were trying to get them to play with me. Now we understand what that was about: early Pepper. Then, I had to do a monologue of Jessica Lange's from Season One. Of course, that was for the evolved Pepper. They wanted to see I had some acting chops. They probably didn't even have those later scenes written - but they knew what they wanted from this character."

With her amazing repertoire of facial expressions, Naomi has managed to bring Pepper to life in a way that is rarely accomplished these days, and that has endeared this particular character to the hearts of so many fans. Naomi credits her ability to play this very complex role to her background in theater, but also

to the physical requirements of the character Pepper herself: "I think my physicality worked to my benefit. Obviously they needed somebody petite, they weren't going to put an Amazon in this role. But also, my call back was essentially a make-up meeting. They took a bunch of pictures of me, then manipulated them to look like how they envisioned Pepper." She continued: "I'd like to think I did a decent audition, but at the end of the day I might have had the right size nose – or my profile may have protruded just so – I don't know. It's crazy to think that's what it comes down to sometimes! BUT, in a way, it makes you feel better when you don't get cast in something... you're like, 'Meh, I might have had the wrong shape nose.'" I think it's safe to say that nose or not, there could never be another Pepper other than the one played by Naomi Grossman. However, there seems to be no limit to Naomi's range, to her ability to interpret Pepper in so many different ways, and to bring life to such a wildly complex character: "Pepper could very easily translate on a big, broad comedy like SNL, or as she did, in a one-hour drama like AHS - it's just a matter of scale as to how to play her." While Pepper's appearance is markedly different from Naomi's, it's easy to see that Pepper's onscreen personality partly mirrors an extension of Naomi's lovable and quirky nature.

The process that regularly transformed Naomi into Pepper was a vigorous one, and one the makeup artists at Tinsley Studios have managed to get down to a science. While I spoke with her, I couldn't help

but wonder what it must have been like to see herself for the first time in the mirror, as a completely different person. She told me: "It was shocking - I didn't know what they were even going for. They don't tell you necessarily what they're doing - they just pour silicone over your head - ask you to sit still for twenty minutes... it wasn't until they did the first full makeup test that I could see what all those preparations were for." Although a considerable amount of artistry and technical expertise is required to create Pepper, Naomi's bald head in AHS is one hundred percent real. I thought it was a bald cap too, but she told me: "Nope, they shaved the whole thing - except, of course, my very attractive, little pigtail."

By shaving her head, Naomi joined the ranks of the very few actresses in the world who have agreed to undergo substantial physical alteration for a role, most notably Demi Moore in her role as G.I. Jane. Naomi Grossman explained that by agreeing to shave her head, she was making a true leap of faith: "I never saw a whole script - ever. I knew nothing. I just had to trust that this role and show, obviously, were worth it. Initially they did give me a bald cap, stuck my own ponytail out of it - but apparently, it didn't quite look right. From my novice eyes, it looked amazing! But, I get it - the condition is 'microcephalic,' which means small brain/head. So when you stuff a bunch of hair under a bald cap, it obviously looks bigger than smaller. They talked about using CGI to shrink it - but that costs a lot of money - more than they'd have to pay me to shave

it! Also, I think the makeup people pride themselves on not having to rely on such tricks." Laughing, Naomi continued, "I worried, 'What if I'm being Punk'd?' I shave off all my hair and wind up in the deep background somewhere, or worse yet, on the cutting room floor! At the time, shaving my head did seem like a really big deal, but now, it takes me five minutes to get ready in the morning. All that time I wasted!"

Off the set, Naomi likes to have a little fun with her new look, giving expression to the comedic side of her personality: "Fortunately, they supplied me with a wig identical to my hair before, which made going about my life easy. Also, that allowed us to keep Pepper a secret. If I were all of a sudden rocking a shaved head and a little pigtail, people would wonder... because that is so not me! I've had this little 'Dora the Explorer' bob my whole life. Sure, there are certain adjustments to wearing a wig - like dating. I think, 'I should probably tell this person', but sometimes it's more fun not to!"

In the film industry, anyone will tell you that there is no such thing as an overnight success, including Naomi, who told me that she was only noticed after years of hard work: "I am really persistent and 'stick-to-it-ive.' I've been at this forever." She means it, too. Although people are known to discover their talents and passions at all stages in life, Naomi is one of the rare ones who found hers early on: "Actually, I got my SAG card on my fifteenth birthday. As early as 11, I was performing weekly at

the Comedy Works in downtown Denver. I did pretty much anything coming through Colorado, 'Father Dowling Mysteries,' regional commercials... So yeah, it was always assumed I'd eventually move to LA and pursue a career in film and television."

During our conversation, we talked about young actors who are trying to break into the business, and how Naomi is often asked about what they need to know. She says that the answer is not in what actors need to know, but rather, in what they need to possess – which is a thick skin, dedication, and a love for the game: "It's not all glitz and glamour. You have to be okay with making YouTube videos that no one will watch, competing for hits with imbeciles shooting cat vids on their cell phones... and if you don't still love it, you'll go crazy. I obviously love it, or I wouldn't be here. I just did my thing for a long time – nobody was watching, and it didn't matter, because it's what I wanted to be doing. I don't know if it was faith, or maybe stubbornness? But there was really, truly, nothing else I wanted in my life. That goes for even a husband, and kids, and a house with a yard. I would take all those things, but this is first."

She told me that to maintain a thick skin through casting, you have to understand the industry you're in, and the factors that play into casting decisions: "There are so many people making those decisions. Producers certainly are the end-all-be-all, but sometimes, the writer has to hook up his cousin, the first choice looks too much like the director's ex

wife... And for commercials, it's the client – it's Nabisco that gets to decide what they want their Wheat Thin lady to look like." The bottom line for Naomi on acting is: "Love it, or leave it immediately."

Despite her success playing a dramatic role on American Horror Story, Naomi's background is mainly in theater and sketch comedy: "Theater was just always much more accessible to me – nobody at Northwestern majored in television acting. Besides, I'm good at it – being big and theatrical. But I still always saw myself doing TV." Even Naomi seems surprised that horror ended up being her path to success. "You know what you want, but not necessarily how to get there. I'm on my way no doubt, I just didn't know I'd take this route. Though I'm certainly not fighting it!" Although I thought that going from comedy and theater to a dramatic role in a mind-blowing and highly-successful horror television series would have been difficult, Naomi explained that the transition to playing Pepper was a smooth one: "I agree, the genres are totally different, but it is technically a big character, like one you might find in comedy or theater." With a theater background and a plethora of facial expressions at her disposal, big characters are exactly where Naomi Grossman feels most comfortable: "That's just me. I emote a lot. If anything, I feel like it's been a detriment to me in my film and television career... They are always telling me: 'Tone it down, take it down a notch', or, 'Don't push, be natural'. Pepper was a beautiful gift of a role for me for a million

reasons, but especially because it allowed me to be as big as I wanted! Besides, some of my expression was masked by the makeup, so I almost had to go over-the-top to penetrate the prosthetics.”

No one could argue that American Horror Story has been groundbreaking for television. In a truly innovative manner, the cast members change, yet are often brought back, and each season brings with it a new theme, location and storyline which is skillfully written to relate, in a haunting way, to one unifying main plot. (Together with this chaotic yet surprisingly organized storyline, the show features a celebrity cast that includes Oscar-winning actress Jessica Lange and guest star Adam Levine from Maroon 5.) I asked Naomi what it was like to take part in such a profound change in television entertainment: “I never even thought about it like that! Just being included amongst the cast was thrilling. At the time, I was the only ‘non-name’...” Attesting to the innovative nature of casting a relatively unknown actress in the role of Pepper, Naomi expressed the following about the casting decision: “I always wondered - what if they had hired a well-known actor instead? They obviously pay a premium for a name – so it doesn’t make sense to cover up who they are... People want to see [insert famous actor], so you can’t hide [insert famous actor]! In a way, it was actually a really brilliant move for them to pick an unknown like me.”

Currently, Naomi Grossman is touring horror conventions around the world, greeting Pepper and American Horror Story fans everywhere. Our interview, which took place at the Rosen Centre in Orlando, after Spooky Empire's Mayhem Convention at the end of May, was a highlight of my time there. Naomi is easily one of the kindest people I've had the pleasure of meeting, not to mention that she's a lot of fun to be around. She has a welcoming vibe about her on and off the set, and is always ready to share a laugh: "Comedy is my thing – it's an energy." When I asked Naomi for a little fan shocker about herself, she was stumped: "I do autobiographical one-woman-shows. I'm an open book, so something that nobody knows about me is hard to come by."

As American Horror Story changes its theme with each season, rotating some characters in and out, it is unconfirmed yet as to whether Naomi Grossman will be returning in Season 3. Commenting on her appearance at Paley Fest in March, the actress said: "They had all returning cast, and me. Which - who knows what that means? But, it's a good sign. It means I'm at least in the family." One thing is for sure – fans are not letting Naomi Grossman's character go without a fight. (As I understand it, people from around the world have joined together for one of the only times I can recall in television, asking for Pepper.) When discussing with Naomi what she thought about returning to American Horror Story next season, she said: "They're not going to have to twist my arm to get me back, let's



just say that.” Wrapping up, Naomi Grossman had nothing but fond words about the American Horror Story cast and crew: “I have a lot of pride working on a show like AHS, that’s so well done in every way. Everyone, from the guy that pulls the cable, to the gal that puts in the contact lenses is at the top of their profession.” The decision to shave her head and to enter the horror realm? “So worth it in every way. I feel like it was the best thing I ever did.”

\*Naomi Grossman enjoys performing her solo shows at universities. If you are interested in having her visit your college, please ask your school to reach out!

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