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DEANNA RUSSO

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Deanna Russo

One of television's most alluring and ardently working actors in recent history, appearing in a slew of popular commercials, guest starring on a variety of television shows and cable movies, and now taking the lead on the reimaged classic of the eighties, "Knight Rider". From her early days on spots like "Charmed", "CSI", "How I Met Your Mother", and "CSI:NY", to her love affair with performing on daytime television, it has obviously been nothing but an upward progression for the young sensation, who is just as intelligent as she is visually intriguing.

BY JOHN KIKRILIS PHOTOGRAPHER PAUL SCHEFZ STYLIST RUDY ROCHA HAIR MICHAEL KANYON/CELESTINE MAKE UP ALFRED MERCADO USING SHU UEMURA COSMETICS



L*Space baby blue fringed
one piece bathing suit
Coomi gold ring
Ippolita gold necklace



Camilla & Marc leopard print bikini
Rebecca gold ring
Rebecca gold necklace
Coomi gold bracelet

Nurturing pride towards one's home-state is very much a function of being all-American. For example, ask any New Yorker where they are from, and they will proudly boast with glee and gratification: "I'm from the city. Queens, actually. Ditmars Boulevard—right by the Neptune Diner. Best feta omelets around. You?" Similarly, ask any resident of California what they think of the Golden State, and they'll happily enter into a discourse as to how they have the best of both worlds—the cities and the mountains, the hurly-burly of Hollywood and the bohemian bliss of wine country. Even Bostonians, who traditionally are a stuffy and somewhat conservative breed of tenants, have absolutely no qualm in gladly sharing that they are from one of the most progressive, liberal commonwealths in the country.

Which presents an odd case for New Jersey. Why is it that the Garden State carries such a horrible reputation—almost as if it is the ugly and unpleasant stepchild of the United States? Where is the inherent, intrinsic pride of those who have grown up on that gorgeous plot of land that gently graces the Atlantic Ocean? Is there anyone that will stand up in the room and conjure up the gumption to brag that they are from—dare I say it, New Jersey?

All eyes on Deanna Russo. The scandalously beautiful and shockingly talented star of television's "Knight Rider" is a Jersey girl who promotes her home turf with no apprehension or misgivings whatsoever. "I have a copious amount of pride for Jersey," begins a stunning Russo. "Jersey has a bad reputation, and it breaks my heart. I mean, where else can you grow up on a farm in arm's reach from Manhattan? I was fortunate enough to have access to the best of both worlds; rural sleeping quarters and city culture. My dad once said, the reason why Jersey has such a bad reputation is because we let them think it's a garbage dump. If everyone knew how great it is, we'd have to share. Let the hater's hate, while we get to keep all the great stuff for ourselves. Our little Garden State secret."

Well put. Deanna Russo has been one of television's most alluring and ardently working actors in recent history, appearing in a slew of popular commercials, guest starring on a variety of television shows and cable movies, and now taking the lead on the reimaged classic of the eighties, "Knight Rider". From her early days on spots like "Charmed", "CSI", "How I Met Your Mother", and "CSI:NY", to her love affair with performing on daytime television, it has obviously been nothing but an upward progression for the young sensation, who is just as intelligent as she is visually intriguing.

"Every time there's a pop culture reference to anything that has to do with Knight Rider, my heart beams," shares Russo with a bounty of authenticity in her voice. "I get so happy because it's my show! Whenever I hear the theme song from somebody's ring tone, I get the biggest grin. You could argue that Knight Rider was the pioneer for GPS. Look, everyone has a talking car now. That's what I love about science fiction, I really do. I bet science fiction is responsible for many of the inventions that we use today. I mean, who thought that we would really have a camera phone? That's the kind of thing that we would talk about when we were all kids. What I wanna know is, where's my jet pack?"

Like most child actors, Russo's journey from the obscure to the obvious was an arduous one, littered with several refusals early on in her career from various auditions in New York City. However, Russo was different from her peers in that she never compromised her dream of rubbing elbows with the Hollywood elite by giving in to the all-too-familiar experience of every actor—being rejected.

"I've loved acting ever since I was a kid—wow, ever since I could talk," recalls Russo with a laugh and a smile. "I was a pretty precocious child. Whenever my elementary school would have a play, without even auditioning or trying, I would get the lead. Yep. I was that kid. I was the ham. After landing a few lead roles in simple, small plays, I got the bug early. My parents never pushed me. I pushed my parents; to get me an agent, to get me into the city and take me to auditions. I couldn't have done any of it without them. They had no ulterior ambition to make money on this passion of mine, that wasn't their intention at all. Instead, they were one hundred percent supportive. I can't tell you how many times my mom or dad waited in the worst traffic, through one of the tunnels, or the GWB just so I could follow my dream. The best part was, I wasn't a successful child actress, at all. I knew nothing about the business or acting on camera, but I still tried I think because the job never mattered to me. It was the journey into the city with my parents that I loved. Which taught me the most important and hardest lesson of being a working actor: rejection. I'm so lucky that I learned that at an early age, because if you can't handle rejection, then the entertainment industry is not for you. You're considered successful if you book one job out of one-hundred auditions."

Russo graduated high school and then moved to Florida, where she attended Rollins College and pursued her degree in Psychology. Still

keeping true to her artistic nature, she directed several plays, all the while volunteering at mental hospitals and conducted independent studies in the realm of clinical psychology. A self-proclaimed "nerd" (though probably the most attractive nerd one would ever come across), she believes that if she weren't acting, she would perhaps launch a career in family counseling. "As enjoyable as it was to study psychology, I don't know if I'm built for that kind of work. I thrive on immediate results. Psychology requires a great deal of patience. Family counseling, on the other hand, would be the one branch I feel I could make a difference." Russo then moved to Los Angeles, where she began auditioning readily and frantically. Remembering the rejection of her early years was not an option for the steadfast actor—indeed, she would not allow the past to cast a shadow on the star she had committed to becoming. It was at this juncture that she was cast on the still-madly successful soap opera, "The Young and the Restless".

"I got started with The Young and the Restless when I was a kid watching it, every weekday with my mom during the summer!" shares a contagiously-funny Russo with her signature laugh. "I grew up with the Newman Family, watching their dramas and tribulations. I was such a huge fan. Fast forward to me going to just, you know, another audition—I've auditioned for so many things! So many, so many jobs, and after a while you don't really think about it. If anything, in order to survive the constant rejection, you have to give yourself a healthy dose of amnesia. In the past, I've auditioned for One Life to Live, All My Children, and General Hospital, all for contract roles. Some of those would have required a move to Manhattan. When you go on these auditions, you can't really think about that part. You have to focus on the character. Anyway, one of the auditions that I just happened to book, the one out of one-hundred, was to play Dr. Logan Armstrong on the Young and the Restless. Luckily that show shoots in Los Angeles, so I didn't have to relocate. I did over twenty episodes in a short amount of time. I loved it. Soap operas are an entirely different animal from any other genre. They are a well-oiled machine is the only way to put it. Soap actors have my undying respect."

Most recently, the gorgeous girl from New Jersey has taken the world of television by storm by starring in NBC's "Knight Rider." Russo plays Sarah Gaiman, the daughter of creator of KITT

(everyone's favorite talking automobile), alongside America's latest heartthrob, Justin Bruening. The show picks up, 25 years later, from where the original series left off, with all of the same action sequences, fight scenes, and, of course, theme music.

However, aside from being in front of the camera, Russo has also taken a proactive role as filmmaker herself. "I've produced and directed a web series called 'Real Life with Married People,'" shares an enthusiastic Russo. "They're going to be quick, less than a minute, episodes on the web that poke fun at the monotony of married life. Relatable topics from grooming to what constitutes a fair word in Scrabble to who's gonna do the dishes, that sort of thing. The two main actors and creators of the series are a real married couple, friends of mine from college. They were just going to shoot it themselves with a tripod in their apartment, but when I got wind of how clever the scripts were, I begged them to let me shoot it. The site should be active by the time this issue runs. You can check it out at RealLifeWithMarriedPeople.com [she also invites us all to follow her on [Twitter.com/deannarusso](https://twitter.com/deannarusso)]."

"I've been deeply involved with several other online comedic projects, writing, directing, and yes, acting in. It's too easy these days not to. Technology has made it possible for anyone to be a filmmaker. Like a short film made ten year ago, where did it go? What did it do? Maybe you were lucky enough to find a copy of it on a reel. Or maybe it went to some festivals. That used to be the extent of doing a short film. Now, you make short film, and you can stream it online. Not only is it easy to share, it's easy to capture. With the camera we've been shooting on, there's no conversion time. It all goes straight to digital. We shoot the footage



Parah teal green one piece
bathing suit
Rebecca silver/black earrings
Rebecca silver/black ring
Rebecca silver/black bracelet

and immediately transfer the data onto an external hard drive. The editor then gets the hard drive and is able to jump right in. The digital age has made the process of creating stories inexpensive, time efficient, and within reach for anyone. Now, instead of talking about making movies, we can all do it. It doesn't hurt to have someone around that knows how to light and another guy to record decent sound, but details."

Russo has taken on many roles in her acting career; soap opera doctor, B-movie horror queen, even the designer of a car that converses. However, whereas many actors of Hollywood, as well as the small screen, have met their experience with a sense of quiet contempt and lackluster monotony, Russo refuses to become jaded. In fact, the actress admits to still getting star-struck from time to time.

"My friends and I were backstage at a Fleet Foxes concert, and I look over to my left, and there's Jake Gyllenhaal and Reese Witherspoon," reveals Russo with the excitement of a fifteen year old girl at a Beatles concert. "And I'm like, right on! Jake and Reese just kicking it to great music! Oh wait, I am, too. Be cool, Dee, be cool. Standing with them also was Busy Phillips, my hero from 'Freaks and Geeks', which was one of my favorite shows."

Russo continues, "Oh my, my. Ok, so this one time, I geeked out over Tina Fey. I walked right up to her at this NBC event just to tell her how rad she is. The whole thing started out well enough. I said 'Hey! I just want you to know that my name is Deanna, I'm on TV too. I think you're great. Love what you do. I'm a huge fan.' That's all I had rehearsed in my head before mustering up the courage to talk to her. She was so sweet. She thanked me, and then we started joking about how we were the only two people not wearing black at this event, and then she did something I was not expecting at all. She asked me where I was from. Like, any other normal dude would have said, 'So, where you from?' I knew this answer. That wasn't the problem. 'I'm from Jersey', I said. 'Oh cool, I'm from Philly' and I'm like 'Cool.' And that was it. I wasn't anticipating having actual small talk with this comedic genius. After what felt like an eternity of awkward silence I said, 'Alright! Gonna go! Now. Yeah,' as I cautiously walked backwards away from her as if she were a wild animal about to maul me. She was totally chill, and I bugged. Ha! Not at all expecting her to be a person. That's the problem with being a fan. We idolize these people for the characters they play, not for who they are as a human being. Liz Lemon on 30 Rock is a friend of mine that visits me once a week in my living room, but Tina Fey? Complete stranger. I guess I gotta get better at the whole star-struck thing."

Deanna Russo has managed to keep her cool in a land where most people compromise not only their integrity, but in essence, who they are completely. After all, this is the nature of acting and of Hollywood—to change yourself at a moment's notice, and to convince those around you that you are something that you're not. The trick is to remember who you really are in the process, and to be able to return to that just as easily as you left it.

And perhaps, maybe, this is the true virtue of a Jersey girl, and of Jersey folk altogether. Despite what they do or where they come from (in this case, especially where they come from), they manage to always know who they are, no matter what anybody else around them has to say or regardless of any preconceived notion has been formed about them. Jersey folk stay cool when everyone else is looking out for the next, grandiose thing. Testament to that, Russo shares a memory.

"I love acting, but I have to say that my favorite job was working in a movie theater. I loved it, but the boss was such a jerk and fired me because he was in a bad mood, whatever. Not the most sane work environment, but like I said, loved it. A lot of my friends worked there, too, which kept us from taking it too seriously. Most importantly though, I fell in love with movie theater popcorn. I now have a serious addiction to it. See, when you were in training at this particular theater, they locked you up in this crawlspace where the popcorn popper is. The building was really old so we had to pop the popcorn in this other tiny room. So I'd be up in essentially this crawlspace, happily, popping popcorn for hours, doing my homework and putting graffiti on the wall, listening to music. Oh, it was great. All the popcorn I could eat! The truth is, that's the whole reason why I'm acting—just to get closer to movie theater popcorn. Mmm, and that butter." And for that, movie theater popcorn, we commend and graciously thank you.



Nicole Miller multi-colored gown
Jimmy Choo red suede boots
Ippolita turquoise bracelet
Ippolita gold hoop earrings