



Melissa Leo

07/01/2010 by [Sue Strachan \(https://www.myneworleans.com/author/sue-strachan/\)](https://www.myneworleans.com/author/sue-strachan/)





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As a longtime movie fan, it's hard for me not to put actors into categories. There is what I call the "Celebrity Actor" who, despite the role, essentially gives the same performance each time. (I'm looking at you, Tom Cruise.)

Sometimes, "character" actors fall into this habit as well, but it seems sort of endearing. (Don't ask me why.) Then there's the "Theatrical Actor," the one who originally found fame on the Broadway or West End (London) stages and in some way reminds audiences on screen that he or she is an "A-C-T-O-R." (I'm not saying that's a bad thing, but some of us don't need to be reminded that they can emote to the back row of the balcony.) Then there's the "Actor." Those whose faces you recognize, but whose performances entrance you so much that you forget their personas. This is what good acting is supposed to achieve.

Luckily for *Treme* fans, the HBO show is cast with such talented actors as Melissa Leo, who portrays attorney Toni Bernette. "She's been a delight. Smart, brave and subtle. She's the best. We love Melissa Leo," says Eric Overmyer, an executive producer of the show.

Leo's career has spanned more than 20 years and encompassed diverse roles from the soap opera *All My Children* and TV series *Miami Vice* and *Homicide: Life on the Streets* to movies *21 Grams* and *Frozen River* – for which she received a Best Actress Oscar nomination. I became a fan when she was on *Homicide*, as Det. Sgt. Kay Howard. Often the only woman in the scene, she held her ground with an intensity that never overpowered her character or her fellow actors.

A New York City girl, Leo has embraced New Orleans while filming *Treme*. While familiar with the city because of a previous project that had been filmed here, she's now discovering the city's charms, allowing her to get into the city's rhythm, no doubt enhancing her portrayal of Toni Bernette.

Age: 49 Profession: Actor. Currently on HBO's *Treme* and filming *Mildred Pierce*. Other films include: *The Dry Land*, *The Fighter*, *The Space Between*, *Betty Anne Waters*, *Welcome to the Rileys* and *Frozen River*. Born: New York, N.Y. Education: Eighth grade, then GED. Two years at the State University of New York Purchase, Theater Department Family: Son, John Matthew Heard. Countless "fake" husbands (John Goodman, James Gandolfini, Benicio Del Toro and many more), children (India Ennenga, Charlie McDermott, Eugene Byrd, Mark Wahlberg, Christian Bale and seven other daughters and many more), parents (Ellen Burstyn, Eve Sigall and many more). And chosen family all around the world. Resides: Ulster County,

N.Y., and down in the Muses streets in New Orleans. Favorite book/movie/food: I have no favorites in books, movies, etc. Favorite restaurant: Ask anyone about restaurants in New Orleans, and they'll give two or three. They're all great! But in New York: Northern Spy in High Falls. Favorite music/musician: Jake La Botz, Leon Cooper and Jason Downs Hobby: Helping friends with projects. Favorite vacation spot: My own home in New York.

I heard that you had never costumed before. I've been costuming all my life – but for parades where I grew up, like the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, you go see the oversized balloons being blown up, then stand and watch the parade go by. It isn't like a parade in New Orleans, where it's a participatory event. I had never seen anything like that in person before.

When I was given the pages that said I had to dress like a sperm, I thought to myself, "We'll see about this." Then, I thought that Toni couldn't be happier doing it. I also saw some of the small parades, so after that I could wrap my head around it. I then happily donned my sperm costume. [Leo dressed as a sperm for the *Treme* episode "All On a Mardi Gras Day," featuring satirical Krewe du Vieux parade.]

Does anything about New Orleans surprise you? No surprises. I travel a lot for my job, and I find again and again in the U.S. and somewhat in Europe that, in comparison, New Orleans is truly a unique American city. I was lucky enough to go to Marrakesh, Morocco, which was a territory of France, and the French retained the ancient culture – keeping a thread connected between the two cultures. New Orleans is like that.

And now you live here during the show's filming. When I was filming *Welcome to the Rileys*, I portrayed a wife [who] had no interest in New Orleans and didn't want to be there. So they put me up in a lovely room in the Windsor Court Hotel for a month and a half, and I pretty much went from there to the set, and back. Now, I'm getting to know New Orleans for the first time.

Are both your and John Goodman's characters from New Orleans? Toni is from New Orleans, and Creighton is from somewhere else. [He] came down here for something like Jazz Fest, fell in love with the city and never left.

Do you have any input into your character? I play her. Period. I am guided wholly by David Simon and Eric Overmyer. If I have questions, I have them help me understand why Toni is doing what she does. I wouldn't try to change their writing.

Any difference between working for *Treme* executive producers David Simon and Eric Overmyer now versus 10 years ago on *Homicide*? No, not really. And that's the best thing about grounded people who know who they are. I work with an incredible group of people on

the show.

I checked out your IMDb profile and I see that you work a lot during the year (anywhere between 6 to 11 projects a year). I love working – it’s my life! I will work on projects large and small – I’m driven by the roles, material and the people making them. [For example,] Courtney Hart was an untried director and she had a project that was beyond my wildest dreams. [Ed. Note: Leo is referring to the movie *Frozen River*.] I also have a 23 year old, who’s graduating from college, so I need to work, too.

Tell me about *Mildred Pierce* because the first version (1945), starring Joan Crawford, is such a classic film [Ed. Note: Crawford won the Academy Award for Best Actress] This film will be more faithful to the book. The character Eve Arden played [Ida Corwin] in the 1945 movie was a composite of characters from the book. That character is still in this version of the movie. I play a character that was in the book, not in the 1945 movie.

I have not seen the movie or read the book. For my role, I am totally led by the director, Todd Haynes, who’s delightful.

Is the movie set during the time period that the book came out (1941) or will it be contemporary? It is like a completely different world – the sets, and the costumes are by Ann Roth, with the historical accuracy down to every extra in the movie. The movie is faithful to the era of the book, and it’s one of the great pleasures of working on it.

True confession: I am single and hoping the right one will come along and “tap me on the shoulder” or at least take me out to a nice dinner.

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