

May 24, 1999

# In Theater

## Michelle Williams

**THE  
DAWSON'S  
GREEK VIXEN  
BARES ALL IN  
KILLER JOE**

**TOBY STEPHENS'  
DOUBLE DUTY**

**RON TAYLOR'S  
BLUES**

**JAMES MITCHELL'S  
MEMORIES**

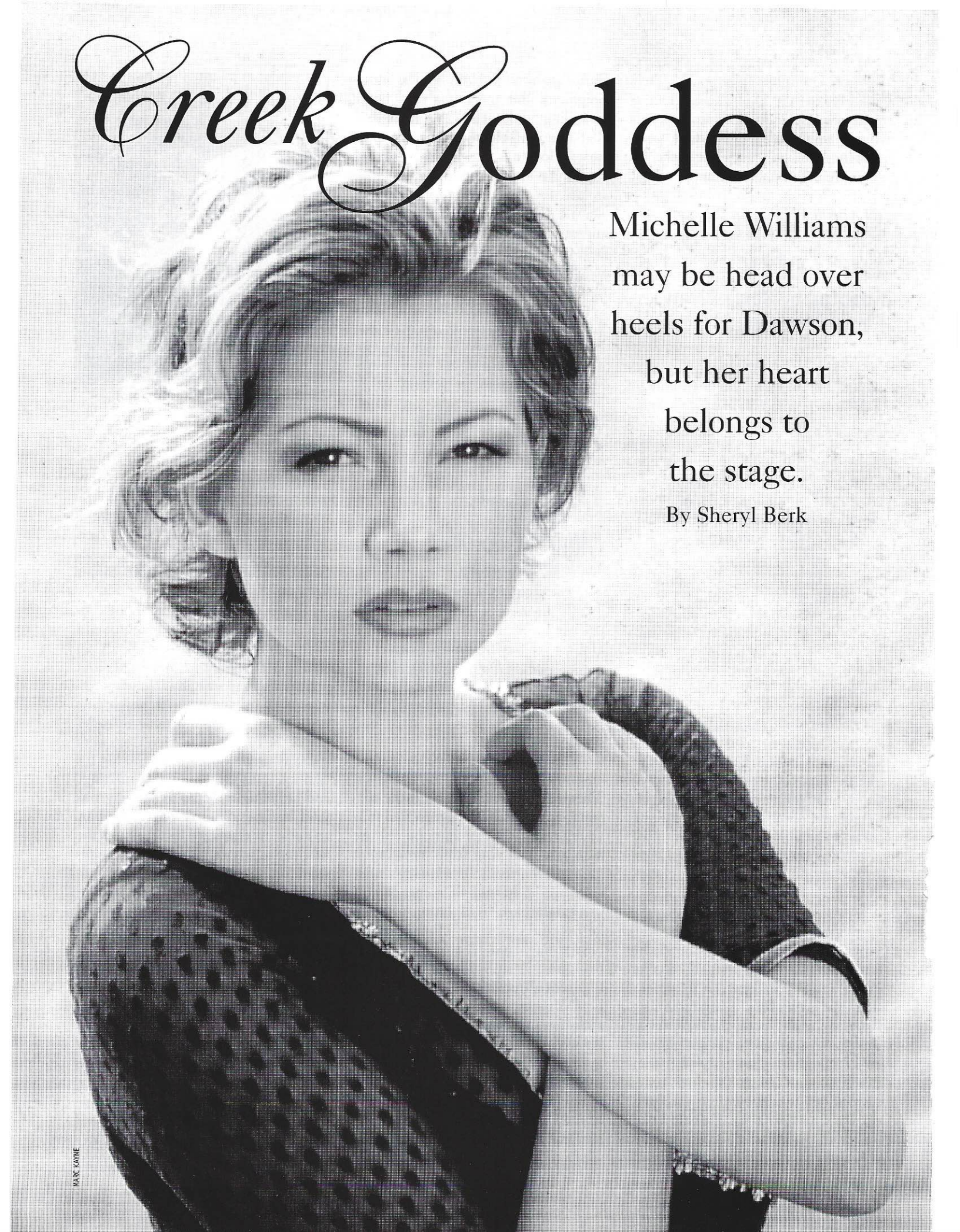
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# Creek Goddess

Michelle Williams  
may be head over  
heels for Dawson,  
but her heart  
belongs to  
the stage.

By Sheryl Berk

**M**ichelle Williams wants to set the record straight: "I am not a bitch, I am not a slut, I am not an alcoholic," she states firmly. She is, of course, referring to her bad girl-next-door character Jen Linley on TV's *Dawson's Creek*, because the 18-year-old seated across the breakfast table from me at the Paramount Hotel is clearly none of the above. Pigtailed, wearing not a drop of makeup, and dressed in a slouchy sweatshirt, Williams is far from a femme fatale. In fact, she's sweet, somewhat shy, and overly apologetic. "I'm sorry I'm late," she says sipping a cup of black coffee. "I fell asleep in the taxi coming over and the driver was like, 'Lady, oh, la-dee. Wake up! We're there!'"

While we all know what most of the current crop of TV's pretty young things are doing this summer — namely, making big-budget movies — Williams has taken a decidedly different route.

"I could do the scream-queen thing," says Williams, who made *Halloween H20* with Jamie Lee Curtis on her last hiatus. "But I so wanted to find something to challenge me, stretch me, just plain terrify me." Slasher flicks don't do it for Williams this year — but live theater does. She's starring in Tracy Letts' *Killer Joe* at the Soho Playhouse through June and battling butterflies every night in the role of Dottie, an innocent young woman who falls under the spell of a hit man hired to kill her mother.

*Dawson* devotees may be shocked (or maybe not) to hear that the role requires Williams to disrobe. "I'm standing there on stage during previews and I hear these guys in the audience whispering, 'Oh, shit! I think Jen is going to get naked!'"

Understandably, it's all a bit unnerving. "I'm thrilled, but I'm also petrified," Williams confides. "This is everything I've ever dreamed of — being on the stage in New York — but

I keep wondering if I really deserve it. Do I deserve to be on the cover of a theater magazine? Shouldn't that be for great actresses like Nicole Kidman or Stockard Channing? Who the hell am I?"

As if on cue, a waitress interrupts. "I watch you every week on TV and I think you're amazing," she gushes at Williams. "Thank you for your work." The young actress blushes and dives into a bowl of corn flakes. "Well, I

exhaust me and scare me. I told my agents that when the season was over, I wanted to do theater.

**Did they think you were crazy?**

Uh...maybe. A lot of people on the show — who will remain nameless — were freaked out that I was doing this. They said, "Are you sure it's the best thing for you now in your career? Are you sure you don't want to make *I Know What You Did Last Summer III*?" Mary Beth Peil, who plays my Gram on the show, was one of the few who told me to follow my heart and not worry about whether this was a good career move. [See sidebar on page 19 for more on Peil.]

**Did you do it because you were looking for a more adult role? Or to be taken seriously as an actress?**

People think that TV and movie actors do theater because they're looking for credibility. That's not necessarily what it is, and that's not what I'm doing this for. I don't feel the need to prove myself to anybody. I'm doing this for me. When you do a TV show, and you do the same thing day after day after day, theater is so appealing. It's nice not to sell out anymore, just to get back to basics.

**So, how did you come to do *Killer Joe*?**

I left for New York the day after *Dawson's Creek* wrapped, crashed at a friend's apartment, and my first audition was *Killer Joe*. I got it.

**How do you deal with**

**the nudity in the play?**

It's been one of the strangest experiences in my life, and also one of the best. I know I'll be a better person and a better actor for it. I took my clothes off once in rehearsal — before, I'd just been getting down to my underwear — and it made me uncomfortable, but I could handle it. But the night we started previews and there was an audience, everything changed. You have to come to terms with your body

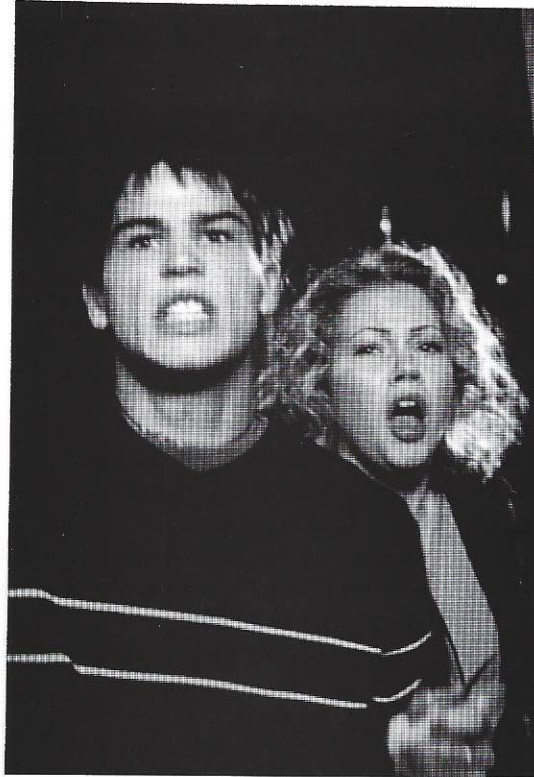


With Seth Ullian in *Killer Joe*.

guess that answers my question," she says, smiling. Then, without any hesitation, she answers all of mine.

**With all the movie scripts that I'm sure have been pouring in, what made you decide to do theater in New York?**

A lot of things — one of them not being money! After doing *Dawson's Creek* for a year, I just wanted something that would excite me and



**With Josh Hartnett in last fall's screamfest *Halloween H2O*.**

and baring it in front of all these strangers. My body isn't perfect. I'm not comfortable with it on a day-to-day basis. Nicole Kidman got naked on stage, but if I had her body...

**She didn't really get all that naked in *The Blue Room*. You just saw her from the back.**

Get out of here! Nicole, if I can do it, you can!

**Do you get fans of *Dawson's Creek* coming to the show?**

Yeah, we do, but not young kids. They don't sell tickets to anyone under 17. I usually know they're there when I take my clothes off. It's a really intense scene, it's very intimate and quiet, and I can always hear the fans making comments like "Jen's got a good body!" It's so hard to block that stuff out and concentrate on what you're doing.

**Yet the media hasn't made a big deal out of it — not like with Nicole Kidman.**

Yeah, and I hope they don't, because you don't want it to detract from the play. It's also a very vulnerable place for me to be, and I don't know if I could deal with it.

**How do you see Dottie, your character in *Killer Joe*?**

She's sort of been abused all of her life. She's grown up with violence, bad relationships, no family stability, and as a result she's shut down. She's built



**With Kirsten Dunst in the forthcoming comedy *Dick*.**

so many walls around herself to keep herself safe and protected; it's not until Joe comes around that things start to change. She also has this very strange sixth sense. People think she's slow or retarded, but it's not that. She has a heightened sensitivity, a strange, innate way of knowing. She's really three steps ahead, although she appears to be behind.

**Is she difficult for you to play?**

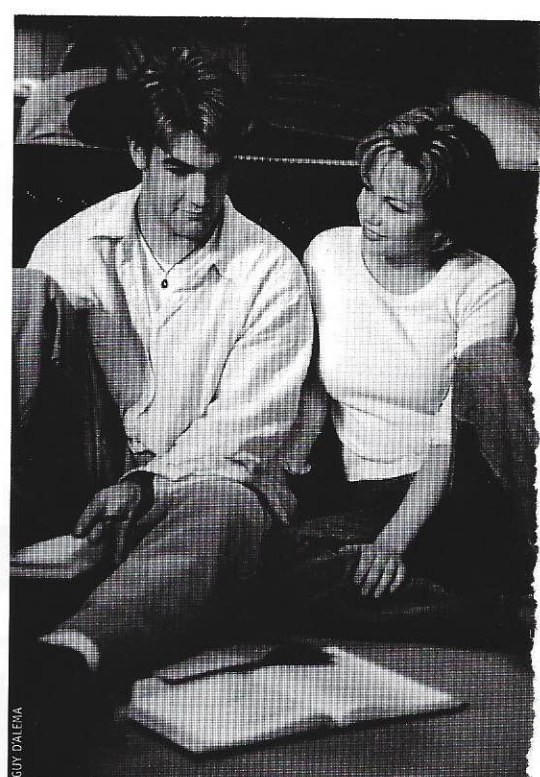
She's a tough one to get a grip on. She's not black and white at all. I've had to figure her out as I've gone along, and I think she keeps evolving.

**Did you ever expect that you would be this famous this young? That people would want to see a play just because you're in it?**

Lori Petty and I were down in the dressing room talking about just that. It's so bizarre — and I could not be happier. I started doing plays when I was eight years old, and this is always what I fantasized about. But I didn't expect it this young, no.

**What made you decide to become an actress?**

When I was five years old, my parents took me to see a play, *Tom Sawyer*, and that was it. Also, I grew up in Montana, and we spent the summer at my grandparents' house in Choteau. It was such a small town and such a trusting time, we took in this family



**With James Van Der Beek in the hit teen drama *Dawson's Creek*.**

for the summer. They had a daughter my age, and I can remember being down in our basement and rehearsing plays with her. We put on *Sleeping Beauty* for our families, and I just lived for the applause.

**You began acting professionally and emancipated yourself from your family when you were only 15. You moved out and went to L.A.**

What can I say? I have this vicious independent streak.

**Didn't it scare you to be alone?**

I think in retrospect it does, but it didn't back then. When you're young, you think you're invincible. Right now, I'm amazed I'm still alive. I should either be a hooker or a crime statistic.

**You spend nine months a year filming *Dawson's Creek* in Wilmington, North Carolina. What is that like?**

Well, it's not New York! It's very small town. It's beautiful, but it's a hard place to find a life for yourself outside of work — to find friends, to find activities, to find things to keep you happy and busy.

**Tell us about your upcoming summer movie, *Dick*.**

It's not a porno flick, although it sounds like one. Kirsten Dunst and I play a pair of teenagers who get involved with the White House and the

Watergate scandal during the Nixon administration. It's a parody. I originally said no to it because I didn't think I could do comedy, but I'm glad I did it.

**Is doing theater very different from TV and film?**

It's such an entirely different medium, and it exercises such different muscles. It's like being a runner: I'm used to sprinting, and now I've got to train for a marathon. It's excited me in a way I haven't been excited for 10 years. I feel that original joy of why I got into acting.

**Do you want to keep doing theater after your five-year contract with *Dawson's Creek* is up?**

I would like to. Look, maybe I'll fall flat on my face; maybe I'll suck. But I want to keep taking risks.

**Having played the ultimate teen vixen, do you worry about being typecast?**

Yeah, I do, which is why I have to make sure I do other things to challenge what people think of me. It's also hard, because people have such a strong reaction to Jen. Here in New

York, girls seem to like her. But I've had fans of the show come up to me on the street in other cities and call me a bitch and say they hate me. They don't even know me! And I hate that. Sometimes, I sign onto the Web and I read these things that people say about me — not just my character — and I get so mad.

**What is it about Jen that sparks such a reaction?**

She's hard to classify. She's not really a slut, she's not a bitch, but she's not as sweet as you would like her to be. She's not Mother Theresa. She does fuck up. She does say the wrong things and do the wrong things, but she's straightforward about it. I like her. It's fun being the bad girl, because you get a lot of interesting storylines thrown at you. I like being the one who gets drunk and who pukes and who screws around.

**Do you think it's a realistic portrayal of teenage life? You're not that far from the age of the characters.**

I couldn't say. I don't really remember being in high school. I think it's a heightened reality, a

heightened pattern of speech, a heightened drama. But it's based on reality, which is why it's so translatable and appealing to kids.

**Are you happy that you signed on to *Dawson's Creek*?**

I am happy; it's been a great opportunity for me. But fame is fleeting — it's a really shaky business, and this is not going to last forever. We're not all going to be this hot forever, so you enjoy it while you can. What I really am most grateful for is that it's afforded me the ability to come to New York and do a play for the sheer love of it. I couldn't afford it if I didn't have a TV series to come back to. Who can afford New York? I can't even afford an apartment during the run — I'll be sleeping at the theater tonight.

**Which is okay by you.**

Which is great by me. What could be better than to eat, sleep, and breathe theater? ■

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**SHERYL BERK most recently interviewed Gillian Lynne for *InTheater*.**

## Totally Ap-peil-ing

Theater audiences know Mary Beth Peil as a versatile singing actress whose credits include everything from the A.R. Gurney comedies *Sylvia* and *Later Life* to the satirical revue *As Thousands Cheer*. On *Dawson's Creek*, the elegant Peil is virtually unrecognizable as Michelle Williams' Bible-thumping grandmother. *InTheater* proposed a joint interview between Peil and Williams, but the veteran actress was tied up in technical rehearsals for Yale Rep's current production of *Hay Fever*. Peil's affection for her young co-star is obvious, however, as she speaks by telephone of the *Dawson's Creek* phenomenon.

"I love Michelle," Peil says. "She's a very mature and very classy girl. All the kids on the show are quite extraordinary — they're centered and grounded and smart." High praise, considering the instant fame thrust upon Williams, James Van Der Beek, Katie Holmes, and Joshua Jackson. "Shooting in Wilmington [NC] has been very helpful," Peil believes. "It makes it easy for them to stay as sweet as they are for as long as they can." Oddly enough, Peil played heartthrob Van Der Beek's mother on stage four years ago: "It was an Edward Albee play called *Finding the Sun*, directed by Albee himself, during his Signature

Theatre season. It was one of James' first professional jobs."

But it is Williams who has expressed the most interest in working on stage during hiatuses. "Through both seasons [of *Dawson's Creek*], Michelle and I have talked about her desire to do theater and spend time in New York," says Peil. "We've talked about getting the cast together on weekends to do informal readings of plays. It's something she has an appetite for, but because she hasn't gone to college, she hasn't been exposed to it. I think Michelle has a strong suspicion that she can't consider herself a real actress until she's proved herself on stage."

The part Williams ended up with in *Killer Joe* — a seemingly simple-minded young woman who takes off her clothes during an erotically charged seduction scene — is not an easy one. "This is a very brave girl," Peil notes. "And, really, what has she got to lose? The producers don't have anything to lose, because they're casting someone who is visible from television and film. I'm just thrilled that she wants to try it. I think it's healthy for her." What advice did Peil offer Williams? "I just said, 'Hold on tight and go for it.'"

— Kathy Henderson



Mary Beth Peil