



Exclusive Interview: Kathryn Cressida (ESPN's NFL Draft Announcer)

By Ian Spelling



You may not have heard of Kathryn Cressida, but you've probably heard her. Cressida, you see, is a voice-over artist. Though she used to act on camera, on such shows as General Hospital and Babylon 5, these days she makes her living talking into a microphone. She's the official voice of ESPN's program Pardon the Interruption, provided the voice of Dee Dee on the animated series Dexter's Laboratory, and speaks Na'vi in Avatar: The Game. That's also her as the "Black Widow Bride" beckoning in the Haunted Mansion attractions at Disney's theme parks. The list goes on and on. And her current gig starts today, as she'll be the voice/house announcer of ESPN's blanket coverage of the NFL Draft, a three-day affair airing live, and with much of it in primetime. PopStar recently caught up with Cressida to talk about her unique profession and to preview her NFL Draft stint.

When people ask what you do for a living, how do you explain it?

I think thanks to the fab Disney and Pixar features over the past 15-20 years, with so many celebs raising the visibility on the voice side of things -- it's usually pretty

easy to say, "Seen any good Pixar flicks lately?" -- people tend to know immediately then what voiceover at its most fun is. As far as the rest -- promo, commercial, movie trailers, etc. -- then they usually get that myself and my peers provide the voices they hear throughout their day, helping to bring attention to various things and help entertain and sell, etc.

To your thinking, what's the hallmark of a good voice talent?

Hmm. Probably there are a few key things that all good VO talent needs to have. Ability to read quickly off the page, ability to speak as you read as if they're your own words and not "copy." Good pipes. But the different fields of voiceover require some very different skill sets. For example, being a quick wit with versatility and improvisational skills; much more important to the animation side of VO. Doesn't so much matter what your "real" voice is as long as you can change it up and bring different characters, impersonations, dialects to life. I'm generalizing, but... And for the promo/announcing side of voiceover -- this includes the trailer voices you hear on movie previews, and on your TV telling you, "Up next on NBC..." -- well, that requires a great natural speaking voice and the ability to tell a story, drive home the selling points of that movie/TV show, and also be able to voice to picture, recording live to the final edit of the trailer, with correct timing on every phrase! So you can see, that's an entirely different set of skills, although a lot of talent can overlap, especially these days as the promo/announcing world has begun to get more creative and change up the stereotypical idea of "The Voice of God" trailer voice I always heard growing up. And then there are sub-specialities, like voicematching, dialects, live announcing. There's actually quite a bit that falls under "voiceover."

What's some of the work that A) you're proudest of and B) that mainstream America is most likely to have heard?

You know, I never know how to answer the second question because, honestly, it all depends what someone tends to tune in for and what any one person actually cares about and enjoys. For example, if someone watches current television, maybe they'd have heard me on Archer, F/X's new hit prime-time animated series. But maybe someone else isn't interested in TV or animation, but can be a huge videogame aficionado and know exactly what big titles I'm referring to. Prince of Persia is coming out this summer, and I'm a lead on that as The Genie. Over the last few years a number of games came out that I was fortunate to be a part of, (such as) Ratchet & Klank, Secret Service 3, Dragon Age, Littlest Pet Shop. But someone else who's a sports fan wouldn't necessarily know nor care about any of that and (might) know me as the ongoing voice on ESPN's Pardon The Interruption. Other folk, Disney Parks experts, know me as the voice of "The Bride," the first new character to get added to Disney Parks' Haunted Mansion since its creation in 1969. And then there's folks that were huge fans of Dexter's Laboratory, and are shocked to learn I was the voice of Dee Dee. As far as what I'm proudest of, I think honestly I'm just grateful to get to

experience so many different facets of the entertainment world, and every script brings a new/different challenge. It's definitely never boring!

You must have been at the store and heard your own voice, or been at Disney and heard your voice. Or been watching TV and... you get the idea. How strange/cool is that? And give us a few anecdotes about where/when/how you heard yourself.

Let's see, well, the one at the Disney Parks is always a strange experience. It's such a complete, 3-D illusion, the ghost. Often I'm more involved in enjoying the special effects and sort of curling up in my little "Doombuggy," especially if I'm riding it with a friend or family member. I just feel funny 'cause it's "live" and there I am listening to my own voice. A bit bizarre. One time early on, when I'd just started out in VO, I was driving and I heard a McDonald's commercial I'd just done, like, the day before. Didn't expect it to be on the air that fast, let alone hear it while driving. I hit the brakes unconsciously and for a few seconds -- very dumb, I know! -- and the person who was behind me rolled up next to me to see if I was okay. Lucky it wasn't a typical L.A. driver! I literally blurted out, "That's me!" and pointed at the radio. Completely idiotic, and of course they had no idea what I was talking about. That was... interesting. At Disneyland around Halloween there's a show I recorded for based on the Toy Story films, "Woody's Round-Up." It's strange to see a character up on stage "speaking," but hearing... me. Don't know if "out of body" experience is the right term, but it certainly makes you realize just how many different elements it takes to build some of the amazing entertainment so much of us tend to take for granted.

You've done acting in front of a camera as well. How different are the two forms of acting? Actually, do you consider them two different forms of acting? Which comes more naturally to you?

I was lucky to have had some nice breaks and was, during the '90's, on a lot of hit sitcoms and one-hour dramas, and I always loved the sitcom experience because you were performing "live" in front of an audience. (That's) closest to what I most loved about acting from my theater days, the experience of creating something unique in the moment that was directly speaking to the audience. With film and one-camera dramas, it felt to me often very removed and a lot less, I don't know what the word is -- authentic, maybe. Though of course acting is acting and none of it is really "authentic." It's all pretending. And one of my majors at UC Berkeley was Shakespeare. My mother was thrilled with the practicality of that one! I loved how you could use language to stir up an audience's emotions, and with Shakespeare it's all about the language, the words, and how you use them, lift them, paint them. In many ways, it's not such a far stretch from what you do as a voiceover talent. You get a piece of copy, and it's your job to use the words to tell a story, lift the words off the page, and help it sound spontaneous and creative, so it "speaks" to your audience.

As to which comes more naturally, definitely, the mic. Again, I was luckier than a lot in some of the roles I was privileged to land during my "on-camera" days, but I never felt as at home on the set with all the various camera angle set-ups and the downtime that is such an integral part of that world. I am in awe of those actors; takes a tremendous amount of focus and continuity and skill to create a full, rich character on screen. I seemed to do best with comedy and the physical comedy of sitcoms, probably because it felt most like theater.

You're about to be the voice of ESPN'S NFL Draft coverage. Are you a football fan?

I am not as hardcore as the true fans, I'm sure of that, but I find the sport complex fun and am genuinely enjoying learning more about the draft process. If I'm to be honest, for the record, I'm a huge baseball fan. Go Dodgers!

Give us a feeling for what your responsibilities as "house announcer" will be.

I will be voicing the billboards and sponsorships for the actual live Draft show, in addition to the ins and outs of the Draft between breaks. I will also be voicing the same kind of thing for various pre-Draft specials, also airing on ESPN and ESPN U. Both the technical challenges and creative angle of the show being in primetime, and live, make it very exciting to be a part of. I can't wait to embark on this adventure with the ESPN production team.