

With actors quick on their feet — memorizing tongue-twisting medical jargon mere hours before the cameras roll — and writers who blend heart with hilarity, NBC's St. Denis Medical proves that a dose of gallows humor always helps the medicine go down.

BY HUNTER INGRAM

Best Practices

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If anyone needs proof of how talented the cast of NBC's new comedy *St. Denis Medical* really is, just crack open a script. While the joke-a-minute writing is all on the page, one thing is missing: the medical jargon.

Instead, all that's written for scenes where the cast has to rattle off complicated diagnoses is a placeholder that reads "[MEDICAL]." It's not until a day or even hours before filming that medical consultants feed the actors the real terminology, allowing them very little time not only to memorize it, but also to sell it.

"You want to be able to have that in your muscle memory enough that when you are saying it, it doesn't look like you are saying it for the first time," says Josh Lawson, who plays trauma surgeon Bruce.

It's a testament to the alchemy of the *St. Denis Medical* cast that the series quickly earned a season two pickup.

Early on in the creative process, cocreators Eric Ledgin and Justin Spitzer knew they wanted to focus more on the nursing staff than on the doctors, who often get the glory in television renderings of the medical field. But they also had to find the right balance of story to present the extremes — from gallows humor to the

adrenaline of the emergency room — that can grip a hospital on any given day.

Spitzer, who also created *Superstore*, says they want audiences to laugh at *and with* the characters, but never to worry they aren't dealing with professionals. "These are not bad doctors — you would be perfectly safe going into St. Denis," he says. "We are not making fun of the staff for being dumb. We are making fun of them for being cocky or curmudgeonly or insecure, which are character types that everyone has in their offices."

From personal experience, Ledgin says he would much rather find himself at St. Denis than the more traumatizing fictional hospitals of TV's past and present. "If you were in a hospital that was giving you St. Denis vibes, you would be excited," he says. "A nurse that makes me laugh is always appreciated. A bit of humor always helps the medicine go down a little easier."

St. Denis Medical is executive-produced and written by showrunner Eric Ledgin and Justin Spitzer. Simon Heuer, Ruben Fleischer, Bridget Kyle and Vicky Luu also executive-produce. The series is a production of Universal Television, a division of Universal Studio Group, and Spitzer Holding Company.

Wendi McLendon-Covey



Only four hours separate the two series that define the last decade of McLendon-Covey's career. On the same afternoon she got the script for *St. Denis Medical*, she also learned *The Goldbergs*, the ABC comedy she starred in for 10 seasons, had been canceled. She wasn't eager to jump back into something, nor did she want to play another mom after nailing it for a decade.

Luckily, *St. Denis* executive director Joyce, a former oncologist, is one of a kind. "As I read it, I kind of fell in love with Joyce," she says. "She's not a cuddler; she's everything that I wasn't playing before." McLendon-Covey didn't waste time showing she was the right woman for Joyce's job. In the pilot, Joyce tries to rally the staff with a cheer, and the creators asked her to improv a "Wendi take." Instinctively, McLendon-Covey, an Emmy nominee as an executive producer of the TV movie *Reno 911!: The Hunt for Qanon*, did a cartwheel and left everyone in awe.

While Joyce had initially been written as more blubbery, casting McLendon-Covey allowed the creators to refine her with strength, gusto and some contradictions. Just look at Joyce's office, littered with stuffed woodland-creature toys. "Joyce wants to be cuddly, but she can't keep anything alive. She likes cute things, but she can't have a pet because she's never home. She wants these things, but she has that wall up, and it's not coming down anytime soon, because she's in her 50s."

If you were a real doctor, what would your specialty be? Reconstructive plastic surgery. "I am not talking about plastic surgery to give you that big, weird face that everybody in L.A. has. I am talking about removing scars or helping burn victims and domestic-violence victims. Things that will change someone's life. That's got to feel amazing."



Grier didn't know it, but he started preparing to play Ron, St. Denis's disillusioned ER doctor, when he was a kid. His father was a psychiatrist who entered retirement less than thrilled about the state of his profession. Grier remembers peppering his dad with questions and getting little in return. "A lot of Ron's responses are his," he says. "He would just roll his eyes and suck his teeth and tell me to leave him alone. That's Ron in a lot of ways."

A veteran of St. Denis, Ron has been beaten down by decades of paperwork and red tape, whittling away the resolve of a man who was once ready to change medicine. "He has lost the vision. I am sure he was a revolutionary when he started back in the '80s, but now he is just there." But his

apathy doesn't negate his skill as a capable doctor, and Grier never pushed Ron to be something he wasn't, even if Ron is still revealing who that is. "He's not the punchline guy. He is a mystery. He may be a Pokémon enthusiast for all we know."

Letting Ron be whatever he has adapted to being in the world of modern medicine is an apt description of how Grier approaches acting these days. "At this point in my career, my goal is to cut away the fat. Let the truth of the character come out and not get in the way of the process."

If you were a real doctor, what would your specialty be? Psychiatry. "To honor my father, my departed dad, I would be a psychiatrist."



As supervising nurse Alex, Tolman has the unenviable task of keeping things running smoothly at St. Denis. “She is this fulcrum point for everyone else to swing around, and for the audience to touch base with,” she says. But for Tolman specifically, Alex fulfills something she has always dreamed of doing, and something else she didn’t know she needed.

First, playing the straight woman in a mockumentary comes with one very important job: “A lot of times, she is written as the one who is looking directly at the camera and rolling her eyes, which is my honor and my delight.” Staring down the barrel of the insanity that goes on in the hospital is a full-time job, but it’s not the one Tolman saw for herself. After her Emmy-nominated

turn in the first season of FX’s *Fargo*, she’s been chasing prestige dramas and lead roles. A broadcast sitcom wasn’t what she had in mind. But *St. Denis Medical* arrived after she helped care for her father during a health scare, and it hit the right nerve. “When I got this script, it felt like kismet. It felt like a chance to sort of pay credence to this world that I was more familiar with than I ever had been before.”

If you were a real doctor, what would your specialty be? Audiology or speech therapy. “I like the idea of building something with a patient, and working with them toward a goal, instead of just diagnosing and moving on. I just think it is cool science.”

Playing cocky trauma surgeon Bruce could have been a little one-note for Lawson, but the creators made sure to give even the most conceited character walking the halls of St. Denis some depth. Bruce got into medicine after the death of his father, and he's excelled at it ever since.

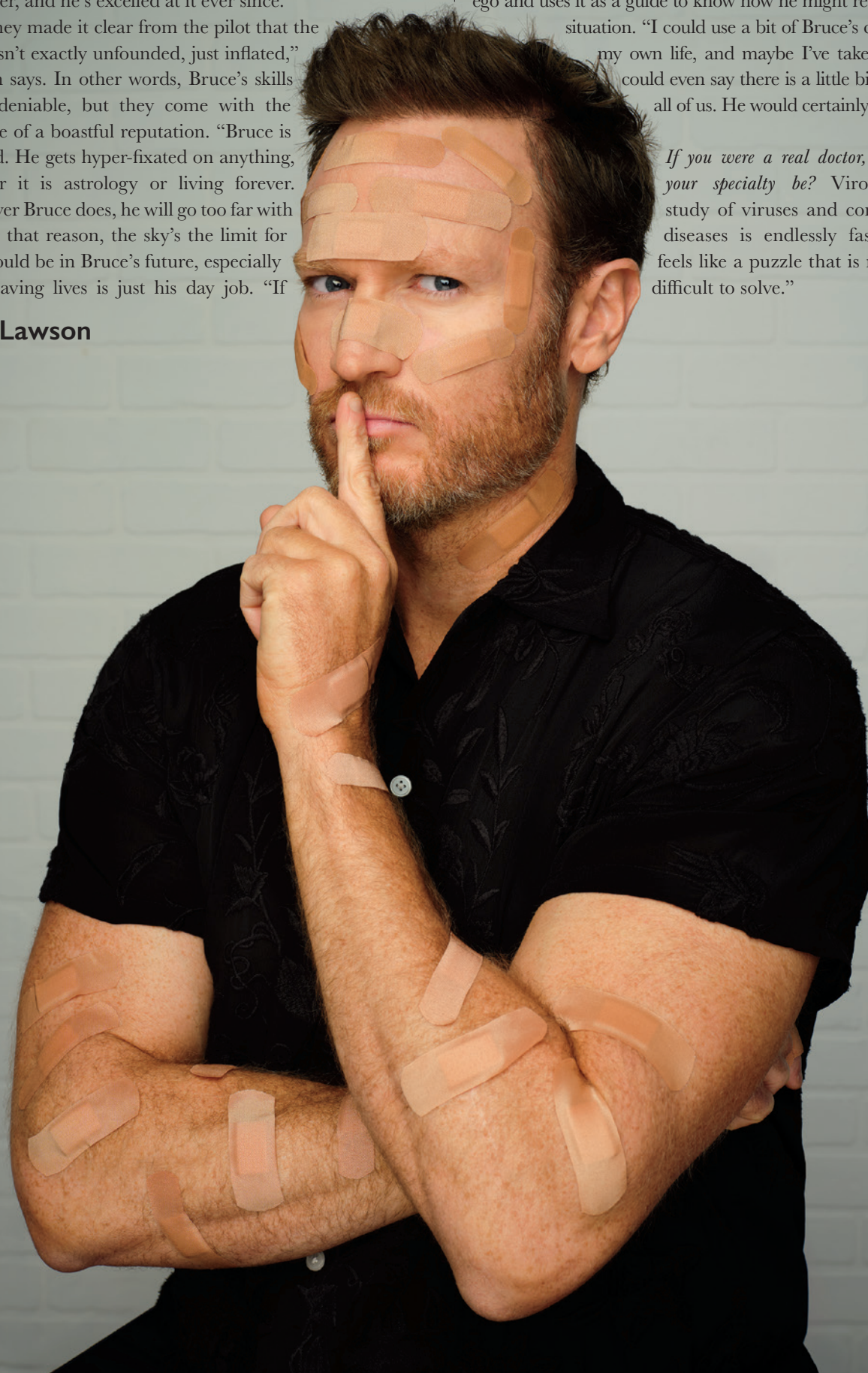
"They made it clear from the pilot that the ego wasn't exactly unfounded, just inflated," Lawson says. In other words, Bruce's skills are undeniable, but they come with the baggage of a boastful reputation. "Bruce is a brand. He gets hyper-fixated on anything, whether it is astrology or living forever. Whatever Bruce does, he will go too far with it." For that reason, the sky's the limit for what could be in Bruce's future, especially when saving lives is just his day job. "If

there is one thing that Bruce wants more than saving a life, it is to save the world — the universe, even!"

For Lawson, though, after just one season, Bruce is his favorite character he's ever played. He relishes the consistency of Bruce's ego and uses it as a guide to know how he might respond to any situation. "I could use a bit of Bruce's confidence in my own life, and maybe I've taken a bit. You could even say there is a little bit of Bruce in all of us. He would certainly say that."

If you were a real doctor, what would your specialty be? Virology. "The study of viruses and communicable diseases is endlessly fascinating. It feels like a puzzle that is really, really difficult to solve."

Josh Lawson



Kim didn't have to read any further than social media-savvy nurse Serena's introduction in the pilot to know she wanted the role. "The second I read that she humps a desk, I thought, 'Well, this is written for me. Dream job. Gotta take it.'" A knack for apps isn't the only thing audiences learn about her. Across the first season, it is revealed that Serena arrived at St. Denis as a traveling nurse five years ago and never left.

Despite seeing the insanity of the staff firsthand and being a part of her fair share of it, Serena has come to care for her coworkers — even if she can't always hide her reaction to the madness unfolding around her. "I love it, because she wears her feelings on her face, which is very similar to how I function," Kim says.

"This is what you get; this is how I feel. And I love it for a mockumentary setting, because the audience is basically the other character, when you have a moment to look at the camera. You can play to them." Kim is curious about certain aspects of Serena's life outside the hospital, and she has some ideas of how she might spend her time outside of her scrubs — no pun intended. "I want to know if she has ever had an OnlyFans account," she says, laughing. "That is something I have been pushing."

If you were a real doctor, what would your specialty be? Botox. "I have gotten Botox, and I have done so many skin treatments.

I'm proud of it. I know so much about it, so it's kind of my specialty."

Kahyun Kim





From the first time Leeper read for the role of newbie nurse Matt, to the first time he put on the scrubs, a major character change occurred. “I think the main thing that stuck out was that he was much more country in the original script,” Leeper says. “They told me, ‘You don’t have to do an accent, but if you can, that would be great.’ I simply don’t have the range, though, so they have been very generous to write him increasingly in my direction.”

One privilege of playing the youngest and most impressionable member of the St. Denis staff is that Matt is constantly checking new experiences off his bucket list. “I love how naïve he is. I love how so much of his career and his personal life is a blank slate. So almost anything Matt does is

an exciting thing he is doing for the first time.” Leeper, who was Emmy-nominated as a writer on Amazon Freevee’s semi-improvised series *Jury Duty*, says *St. Denis Medical* also offers him a new experience. “I just feel it is a privilege to have multiple takes! Anytime they call ‘Cut,’ I’m just like, ‘Wow, you don’t get those on every show.’ I feel spoiled to have another shot at a scene, because we didn’t get that on *Jury Duty*.”

If you were a real doctor, what would your specialty be? “Out of respect for the world’s medical professionals, I do not think I could handle any of their jobs for even one second. Does it count if I just work at a desk? Though even being in the building, I would be scared.”



Fans of workplace comedies will immediately recognize Kauahi as the quietly diabolical Sandra from *Superstore*, which Spitzer also created. But as Val, *St. Denis*'s no-nonsense nurse administrator, Kauahi is turning a new leaf. "I would have played Sandra for 10 more years if they let me, but what a delight to play someone so vastly different," she says. "I think both of those characters and elements are within me. They just let me play the other side of it with Val."

It's not easy playing the serious character in a madcap comedy, even though Kauahi enjoys watching her costars tear through the hilarious scripts. When she can't be the funniest person in the scene, Kauahi takes solace in knowing Val is the person a patient would actually want to meet in a

real hospital. "Honestly, that was my hope. I know she can come across with her coworkers as very stern, but I think you need her there to keep that ship running smoothly and to make sure people get taken care of." As she looks back on *Superstore* and forward to more *St. Denis Medical*, does Kauahi think Sandra and Val would get along? "I think Sandra would like to befriend Val, and I think Val wouldn't have even 30 seconds for Sandra."

If you were a real doctor, what would your specialty be? Internal medicine. "You know, listen. I'm getting older, and every day, things hurt, but I also feel okay, and I just need to know what's going on in there." ●