

## Laura Innes



Laura Innes is an American actress and television director. She played Kerry Weaver in the medical drama ER (1995–2009), which earned her two Primetime Emmy Award nominations. In 2001, she received her third Primetime Emmy Award nomination for directing the episode "Shibboleth" of the political drama The West Wing. She also appeared in the thriller drama The Event (2010–2011) and How to Get Away with Murder (2018–2020).

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# The Sunday Conversation: Laura Innes

By Irene Lacher, Special to the Los Angeles Times

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Laura Innes became familiar to TV audiences as the accomplished but abrasive Dr. Kerry Weaver in her 14-year run on the hit medical drama “ER,” which also launched her directing career. Last month, she returned to NBC in its new high-profile sci-fi conspiracy drama, “The Event.” She plays Sophia Maguire, the leader of a group detained in a remote Alaskan prison.

**So what can you tell us about your mysterious character?**



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## So what can you tell us about your mysterious character?

This is the problem with the show, isn’t it? It’s very hard to talk about. She is someone who’s very passionate about what she’s doing, and she’s very ethical, but what makes her interesting is, when push comes to shove she’ll do whatever she has to do to protect the people she has to protect and achieve her goals. It’s a character that you don’t know necessarily whether she’s quote unquote

**By the time this runs, the second episode will have aired.**

By then you find out she is an alien, extraterrestrial. And what I like about how the show handles that is they don't make such a big deal about it. It's her definition as the Other — she could just as easily be a terrorist or Middle Eastern. The show is pretty much based on being a conspiracy thriller rather than a sci-fi show, and that helps us stay grounded in the material.

**Do you know what the event is?**

[In her second meeting with the producers] I said, "So what's the real deal with the show?" And they told me all this stuff and I just kept going, "For real?" They told me this stuff, and when each of us was hired, we got a little bible about our character that we weren't supposed to share with each other. We all have different information depending on our character's relationship to what goes on in the show, how much they don't know. That's kind of fun, and I know at that point they went into quite a bit

## **Why are they keeping secrets from you guys?**

I think part of it, way back when we did the pilot, had something to do with keeping the story under wraps. Tell as few people as possible and you diminish the chance it's going to get out. And I will also say I think there's the psychology of having your character secret. "We created this little world just for you, and don't tell anyone — it's just yours." I don't know whether they intended this, but as an actor it makes you feel special or you feel recognized and your own imagination can go off in these different tangents.

**When you were on "ER," did you feel a sense of responsibility or reward playing Dr. Weaver, a disabled gay character that represented two groups that are discriminated against?**

I think I felt both those things, and I do feel like it's complicated, because I played a character that's disabled and I'm not disabled. My initial approach to it as an actor was, this is so interesting. But then there's the other side of it which I became educated about — why aren't there more actors with disabilities making a living as actors, which is almost a separate issue. So it raised my awareness and certainly as a director I'm very cognizant of auditioning and often hiring actors with disabilities. But at the end of the day it's really about who's best for the role, and sometimes it's the person who has that life experience and sometimes it's not.

In terms of the character being lesbian, yeah, I felt a lot of responsibility toward that because at the time, it really was fairly unique for a No. 1 show — very, very mainstream — to have one of the major characters come out as a lesbian. But by the same token, everybody who's

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invested in that choice is overseeing it and making a judgment about are they doing it right or are they doing it wrong? She's very, very closeted. She came out despite herself, not because she was especially heroic initially. To me, the story of someone who's awkwardly, foolishly trying to become herself is more interesting than someone who is heroically becoming herself.

**Very early in your career, you did “A Streetcar Named Desire” with John Malkovich. Can you share any memories of that time?**

I grew up in Michigan and went to Northwestern, and during that time Chicago had such a thriving theater community. It was Steppenwolf with John and Laurie Metcalf and Joan Allen, and the list goes on and on. And then Robert Falls cast us both in "Streetcar." Everybody assumes John played Stanley, but he played Mitch. And Tennessee Williams came to opening night. It was a tiny little theater called Wisdom Bridge, and he was in the audience in a full-length white fur coat. And you could hear him laughing through the whole play. And we went to this little tiny bar next door after the show, and he just opened his arms to me and went, "Stella! Oh, Stella! Stella for star!" I played Stella, and that's a line in the play that Blanche says. So he said this line to me, and it was, well, you can imagine, for a theater geek.

The show got good reviews, but both of us were panned by one critic — “Laura Innes and John Malkovich, who are usually good, are strangely sluggish in the roles of Stella and Mitch.” So of course I was devastated because I was just starting out and I was foolishly listening, but he [Malkovich] didn’t [care]. So he’d call me before he came to give me a ride to work, and he’d say, “Miss Sluggo, are you starting down the stairs now? It will take you at least two hours to get down the stairs.”

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