

**ABBOTT
ELEMENTARY
STAR AND
LEGEND LISA
ANN WALTER
REFLECTS ON
HER LIFE AND
CAREER AS AN
ACTRESS AND
ACTIVIST**

LISA

**ANN
WALTER**

PHOTOGRAPHER ALEXANDRA ARNOLD
STYLIST ANDREW GELWICKS

Lisa Ann Walter has been a generational mother in more ways than one. From acting to activism, her accolades speak for themselves. With over a decade of stand-up under her belt, Lisa Ann Walter has spent the last three years charming audiences with her brilliant wit as straight-talking Melissa Schemmenti on the hit ABC show Abbott Elementary. Lisa's ability to convey a wide range of emotions with clear and utter precision had already won over an army of millennials with her performance as Chessy in Disney's 1999 remake of The Parent Trap, and now Gen Z with her role in Abbott.



Dress Karen Millen
Earrings Oblik Atelier
Ring Lady Grey Jewelry

A proud multi-hyphenate, Lisa's skills far exceed acting and stand-up, she created and produced shows and had a best-selling book titled 'The Best Thing About My Ass Is That It's Behind Me' however she's taken center stage in the SAG strikes which dominated last year, she was part of the SAG negotiating committee who's negotiations helped end the strike.

Lisa Ann Walter has been in the industry for some time now and shows no sign of slowing down. After a busy summer of negotiations and stand-up, Lisa Ann has returned to Abbott Elementary and talks with 1883 Magazine about the new season, gratifying moments as an actor, her lifelong journey as an activist, and why she's so proud to be called 'Mother.'



Now that Abbott Elementary is back, I think for many people your character Melissa has become that character that everybody wishes they had as a teacher growing up. She's so funny. Something that I love about the show is its ability to create such multi-dimensional, dynamic characters that also have so much heart. As a viewer, you can tell how much gets put into the characters from an acting and writing perspective. I just wondered what the best part of playing a character like Melissa is for you? What a lovely nuanced question. Well, clearly you're British, and when I was growing up, my mother was a big fan of British Sitcoms like Fawlty Towers and the like. I was raised on Glenda Jackson as Elizabeth R. and Keith Mitchell as Henry VIII, I watched a lot of television that wasn't just the American sitcom format where it's like 'here's the laugh track and here's the setup and the punch line' When you train and I'm classically trained as an actress, when you're playing a scene real and it's not just for laughs, I know how to land a punch line, I was a stand-up. But when you're playing a scene and you know what the joke is, but when you're not going for the joke, is when it's funny as the British sitcoms can be, when it's all funny: situationally, the world, what they're doing is real and the circumstance makes it funny, or the line reading makes it funny, but they're not going in for just being funny, that's exactly what our show is.

It's such a joy when I get to tell people to watch it. I brag about this show because I believe it's so true and so funny, and that's in the writing, but the tone of this show intends that there may be no line that gets the biggest laugh in a scene, it may be a look to the camera, it may be a nod of the head... You don't know where the laugh is, the laugh is because we're playing it, all of us, live action and reaction on three cameras that are all going at once. Each take is different so you don't know what the cameras are catching, there isn't any 'Oh I'm off camera now, this is my off camera time' it could be something where it's not your line, but that you're sitting there in the background reacting and the camera caught and then that's what gets a big laugh.

That's where our producers and our editors, and Quinta, the showrunner, are great at making sure they are good at telling us, "This was awesome, this thing you were doing." I'm like, "Oh you guys saw that!" We're acting all the time and that may be the thing that they use. As an actor, it's a joy because you are completely in it, you are in the scene being your character the entire time.

I think that is what Abbott Elementary does so well, is there's always something going on past what we are seeing in the camera frame. Sometimes shows that have people talking to the camera or looking directly into the camera, can pull you out of that world but I think this show does the complete opposite and brings you more into this world, it's been structured and built so well. It's very astute of you to say that. The documentary camera crew are obviously just our camera crew, but to my character Melissa's eyes, this is the documentary crew that she didn't trust at all. She didn't trust anybody. It took maybe two years and even then she's there like 'See, I knew you guys were going to do this to us!' She's always willing and ready to hate on the new people, but after a certain amount of time you develop a different kind of relationship with them. You become used to them. For me, it's like 'Okay so this is the guy that always comes in with the coffee, this is the guy that's got the sick mother' We don't have those lines with them, but in our heads as the characters, we know exactly who they are, so our relationship with these people - that you never see - is growing all the time. The people at home, whether they know it or not, they're seeing that play out each episode.

Dress Hutch
Earrings
Alexis Bittar
Ring
Lady Grey
Jewelry
Shoes
Stylist Own

We can really tell that as a viewer, it seems to hit every mark. Yeah, you're right. There's a reason why we generate a feeling of family with viewers and why we're comforting to them. We get a lot of people who say they watch the show to go to sleep and that we're a comforting show, not just because it's funny, but because they feel like a part of our family. I really think it's because all of us in this cast do feel like family. I know it's a hack thing to say we feel like family, but we do, and we all feel that way with the crew too. Quinta has put together a group of really nice people there and we're just all nice to each other. It's great, I'm very lucky!

As we go into season 3, what can we expect for Melissa? I will say that there's a lot that I don't know because we're only maybe three scripts ahead of where we are. This season has had to go so fast because of the strike. We came back and I was still in New York doing stand-up dates. I had another weekend in Jersey and I had to fly home and skip the weekend because they went straight into table reads on the Friday and then we were going into production the next week. So it was all very quick and they were only about a month ahead because the writer's strike ended the month before ours, they were a little bit ahead, but we're only into around episode three that we're shooting now. What I will say is that there is a double-long episode for the premiere where so much happens. So much big stuff happens. They absolutely needed to have a double-length episode because it's a lot! It's exciting!

Something you touched on there was your stand-up background. You do have quite an extensive background in stand-up. For me personally, I grew up with the Parent Trap, which is such an iconic role that you're known for. Watching your comedy, in stand-up and when acting, you have so finely tuned that it almost feels like second nature to you. There's a classic quality to you that is reminiscent of Thelma Ritter. How is it to play such a comedic side of yourself in a way that has such a mass appeal to everybody? It's a little bit of what we were talking about before where people are connected to things, like Abbott but also other things that I've done, like Chessy in The Parent Trap and it's because they feel they feel me, they feel my heart. They connect because they know it's genuine. With any acting, a little piece of you is coming through because that's what is real. I mean you could be playing, you know, a homicidal maniac and there's still a little piece of you in it. Hopefully not a big piece! But Thelma Ritter is such a lovely person to be compared to. She's absolutely one of my all-time favourites. It's funny because I did a movie with Whoopi Goldberg and we stayed friendly afterwards and she named her kitten, Thelma Ritter. We both talked about how much we loved her performances because it was always so dry, the wisecracking and throwing away, and I don't mind at all having that energy! But being a person in a show or in a movie where people feel like "Oh, that's like my cousin" or "I know that person and I feel warm with them. I feel safe with them."

Dress Black Halo Earrings Oblik Atelier Rings and Bracelets Alexis Bittar



It speaks to who you are as an actress and the roles you pick, too. Audiences still come to me and tell me how much they love Chessy and feel like they want to come out to her or have her make them a snack! And I get it, I really get it. There is nothing better than to feel that you're that connection for people. As a performer, that's very intensely gratifying. The stand-up piece of it is... You know I was an actress before I did stand up for at least 10 years, but I did stand up for 10 years and was really good at it. I love doing it again! I don't do it just to set up a punch line. I'm not a one-liner kind of comic, I do characters, I talk about my family, my kids, and politics - about everything through my eyes and my experience, so I can get very emotionally connected to the material, and that's what connects the audience. When I did that scene in The Parent Trap where she says, "I am Annie" and Chessy is like, "I'm not looking at her in any special way. I'm looking at her like I've looked at her for 11 years since the day she came home from the hospital, 6 pounds, 11 ounces, 21 inches long. This is how I look at her!" I've heard it enough over the years!

But in that scene, mothers, in particular, will always tell me that they cry every single time they see it, and that is because, in my prep for doing that scene, I was emotionally recalling the time when I was doing stand-up on the road when my daughter had just been born. My son was already 18 months old when I started doing stand-up locally, but by the time I had my daughter three/four and a half years later, I was on the road. So I did stand up until three days before I had her and I was back on the road when she was five weeks old and was nursing and pumping and then I would come home and I would grab her and I would just smell her head for like five minutes straight. I couldn't put her down. I missed both my children so much when I was away from them.

When I was getting ready to prepare for that scene, I was going back to that place of leaving her just for a weekend or four days, let alone 11 years! So in that moment when she says, "I am Annie" because, in Chessy's mind, those are her kids, so I would go back to that time and then have that sense of 'Oh my god, I'm seeing you, my baby. for the first time in 11 years,' I'm getting emotional now as you can tell! But that emotion we call on is so strong and so true that mothers sense it and they immediately start crying and quite frankly when I watch it I find myself crying too.

I think when somebody can emotionally connect in that way, as a viewer, it adds an extra layer to what you're watching and it gives it a stronger air of sincerity as well. Yes, that's exactly it! You're playing a compelling truth.

We've talked about your stand up but you've also produced, created and you've written as well. Over the last six months especially, it's become very clear how many people in the industry respect you as a peer, but also as somebody who speaks out. You were involved with Union service and were a part of the SAG negotiating committee, you were a huge voice both publicly and internally for that. You've also done things like hosting teacher panel discussions, your name has become synonymous with standing up and speaking out for people. I just wondered where that spark came from in you? So I grew up in DC, and we were quite politically active. My family and I went to the marches on Washington and marches for the ERA back in the 70s. By the way, I'm still a member of the ERA Coalition. We need help to take the time limits off, it's an arbitrary timeline that they put on because it's been ratified by enough states but they won't take off the time limit to say, 'Okay, we can still count all the states and ratify this, making women equal under the Constitution!' Hello! It first came up in 1923 that's when that bill was first introduced by the way, around the time we were like 'Oh we got the vote! let's be equal under the Constitution!' And in that year, the cheeseburger and Mickey Mouse were all invented, at the same time as the ERA, they all made it and we still haven't. If it were equal rights for women on a burger, we'd have it by now!

I was a feminist and an early feminist, the first magazine subscription I ever got with my allowance money when I was 12 was Mizz Magazine. It was wild, it was me and my sister and our two next-door neighbours, our best friends, two girls, we were just little baby activists together. We would protest against the Vietnam War, we watched Watergate hearings all the way through, it was nuts how involved we were! It's just what I've always done, and it did not make me popular back in those days. In the 70s, you'd say you were a feminist and everyone at school would be like 'Why do you not like boys?' It was crazy, it was wild. It was not an okay thing to call yourself that, but I've spoken at every Woman's March since they started. I am so proud now to be an activist. I used to balk when people would say 'Oh, you're a multi-hyphenate, you're an actress, producer, writer etc' and now I'm like, yes, yes I am! I've done all of those things. I've created three TV shows that made it on air, that's an incredible record! I wrote a book about women and self-esteem that I'm extraordinarily proud of, and that went to I think number 13 on Amazon and New York Times bestseller list.

I'm proud of the things I've done, and I don't feel the need to hide it under a bushel. What motivates that, and has been done ever since I was a little kid is that I have a really strong aversion to injustice and an innate need for people to be respected and treated well at work. People need to be treated equally and protected. So, I find myself drawn to things that you know, when we make these negotiations in the union, it wasn't for the people who make all the money. Most of the people affected are background actors, and people that can't negotiate a contract, so it's for them that we have to make strong contracts. It's for the people that can't fight for themselves.

So I think that's the thing that drove me when I got into union service, in particular, was because they refuse to take the ages off of IMDb which in particular hurts women because, as we say, ageism is sexism. The numbers are so bad for women comparatively over 40, I don't have the exact figures but the statistics are so bad, they really do have a problem with age and women, so we wanted to take the ages off of IMDB, but they refused to do it, and I just thought that it's not fair, so I went and got involved in Union service, that's really what drives me, it's the need to protect.



Dress
Sachin & Babi



I'm trying to talk to everybody and most people that reach out to me on social media will get some kind of response. I mean, I feel bad if I don't but I've heard so many people over the years saying 'I didn't feel accepted at home' and 'I felt like you would accept me' and I mean, I'm a mom, and by the way, my oldest is queer. My nephew is gay, but even if they weren't, I feel the same. Of course, I'm going to accept you and love you, you are an extraordinary person. The people who reach out to me, if they have problems with their family at home, I say maybe they need time, but if they don't accept you, it is their loss, and you're wonderful and beautiful and loved, just as you are. To be able to be in a position to have that effect on people is incredible. I always thought that even if I never do anything again, past Chessy then that's enough for me as a human being. I'm thrilled that I have the opportunity to do more work, but that is such a blessing for me to be able to know that I've affected people in that way. The fact people can reach out to me and tell me all these wonderful things, I'm just so incredibly grateful. But I will tell you that the first time I saw someone call me 'mother' I went to Chris Perfetti when we first started the show, and said I saw I was called mother and I was like, "That's... that's a good thing right?" and he was like, "It's a great thing!" I am so thrilled to be 'mother.' When I was doing stand-up in Atlanta, somebody brought me a t-shirt that said 'Mother of Lesbians' and I was like, "Oh I get it! It's like mother dragons!" I just love it!

Finally, we're at the beginning of a year, are you someone who makes resolutions? You know, one of the things that you brought up was the book and in that, I talked about the pressure women put on themselves, and I did put that pressure on myself! Over the years you know, be perfect and lose 10 pounds! I was always losing the same 10 pounds year after year. It's like 'Lose 10 pounds' and then I'd get eating disorders and I'd starve myself and you know, it never worked and I put the weight back on. My resolution this year is just to love myself as I am. It's all so cyclical, what they want you to look like changes when I was growing up, everybody wanted to look like a 'Charlie's Angel'. Now my big Sicilian booty is what people are paying good money for!

Season 3 of Abbott Elementary is airing now on ABC

Interview **Amelia Walker**
Photographer **Alexandra Arnold**
Stylist **Andrew Gelwicks**
at **The Only Agency**
Hair **Marco Santini**
at **Walter Schupfer Management**
Makeup **Rebecca Restrepo**
at **Walter Schupfer Management**
Photography Assistant **Sarah Gardner**
Stylist Assistant **Kyle Gleason**
Special thanks to **Orchid House Studios**

You mentioned your book and that's something I wanted to just touch upon. Since playing Chessy and especially over the last few years, you've really become a huge icon to the LGBTQ+ community. I cannot scroll my social media feeds without seeing a picture of you with the caption 'Mother!' or there being a huge amount of praise for you. In your book, you talk about negative body image and bad self-esteem, and I was wondering how it feels now, later in your career, to have so many people basically worship you am so incredibly grateful. I mean, that's something I probably alluded to earlier, as a performer there is nothing like knowing that what you have done has affected people in a way that they reach out to you.