



LEFT: JUSTIN LUBIN/NBC. RIGHT: HOWARD WISE/PISTUDIOS

THERE'S BAD. THERE'S evil. There's utterly contemptible. And then there's Theresa Donovan. The hilarious, pint-size hellcat of NBC's *Days of Our Lives*—played with loads of sex, sass and sarcasm by Jen Lilley—showed up in Salem two years ago with a rap sheet three blocks long. Theresa's move to this sweet Middle America burg was part of her parole agreement, a last-ditch attempt to set the young conniver on the straight and narrow. And the poor townsfolk have been paying for it ever since.

"Theresa is an unapologetic mess," Lilley says with a laugh. "I knew I was in for a wild ride when I heard the list of crimes she had committed even *before* she hit the screen, which included grand theft auto, cocaine possession and two cases of assault and battery. The latter is particularly amazing, seeing as I'm 5'2" and 100 pounds wet."

Despite her horrifying résumé, Theresa landed a job at Salem University Hospital (in the public relations department!) and rarely did a day go by that this angel-faced demon wasn't embezzling, blackmailing or breaking and entering. Then she met her match in wealthy, handsome Brady Black (Eric Martsolf), and the two began the most debauched, coked-up, booze-fueled romance daytime drama has ever seen. Naturally, Theresa made sure they got married in Vegas in a ceremony blotto Brady couldn't remember the next day.

"Jen is fearless," Martsolf says. "She risks being unlikable, especially to that part of our audience that's the most conservative. But in risking it all, she's been embraced in a huge way." Not even Theresa's most inexcusable act—hitting Brady's dad, John (Drake Hogestyn), on the head with a fireplace poker and putting him in a coma, then pinning the crime on Brady—seemed to shake that viewer devotion.

Lilley's secret weapon? "I play everything balls-to-the-wall," she says. "My worry is not pushing the audience too far. I

worry about not being full-on committed in every moment, which is not always easy in the crazy world of soaps. I had a storyline where Theresa got pregnant and had her fetus stolen. All I could say was, 'Bring it on! I know this is goofy, but I'm going down in soap glory!'"

A deeply committed Christian, Lilley has no problem putting all this vice on TV, unlike some religious actors. "I knew exactly what I was getting into when I signed with *Days*, that there would be a lot of intense sex and that

Theresa was a drugging, drinking whore, basically. I really felt called to play this role. I prayed on it and knew I had to accept the part because there are so many girls out there like Theresa, and so many people in general, who are lost and feel irredeemable. My God tells me that no one is irredeemable and that everyone's story is worth telling."

Lilley's own story might have turned out differently if she'd stuck to her first passion, tectonics. "I have a degree in environmental science from the University of Virginia," she says, "which means I could star in one of those Syfy movies about supervolcanoes *and* be the technical consultant." Her first showbiz gig came in 2007 as a bathing-suit model on *Hannah Montana*. Guest roles followed on *Criminal Minds* and *Castle*. Then, for several months, Lilley replaced an ailing Kirsten Storms as dippy heroine Maxie Jones on *General Hospital*. That brought her to the attention of the *Days* execs.

When not riding high in the suds world, Lilley plays it low-key at home. She's been married eight years to truck driver Jason Wayne, who delivers chips for Frito-Lay. "Jason is my blue-collar guy, my rock," she says. "He's the one who keeps me normal, and I really need that. I can't stand it when actors think they're better than others just because we get paid to play dress-up. It's the stupidest thing."

DAYS OF OUR LIVES, Weekdays, NBC

SALEM WITCH

Jen Lilley is raising hell with her wicked work on *Days of Our Lives*

BY MICHAEL LOGAN



"Theresa's not addicted to alcohol or drugs—she's addicted to Brady," Lilley says