

The lady comes alive
in her leading role

She sees dead people

By MICHAEL GILTZ

C**CROSSING Jordan** star Jill Hennessy is in Los Angeles filming a show set in Boston — but she misses New York.

"Nothing against L.A., I'm here to shoot the show," says Hennessy during a break from filming a November sweeps two-parter. "But I just want to get out there so bad — I would kiss the asphalt if I were there right now. New York is my home."

Most viewers know Hennessy from New York's best-known TV export, "Law & Order." She played Assistant DA Claire Kincaid from 1993 to 1996. Now she's gone from a supporting role to playing the title character.

"It's bizarre being the lead," says Hennessy about tackling the role of medical examiner Jordan Cavanaugh on "Crossing Jordan," which airs tonight (10 p.m./Ch. 4).

"It's hard to find a line between taking on the pressure, not getting overwhelmed, dealing with an incredible load of work, and just enjoying it. 'Oh gosh, am I adequate? Am I going to be able to sustain this? Am I worthy?'"

She laughs at the idea of talking about being "worthy" to be on a TV show, and peppers her conversation with "dude" and other slang. This relaxed, 31-year-old actress clearly wants to be one of the guys, just like Jordan.

In the show — a raunchy cross between "C.S.I." and "Profiler" — Jordan returns to Boston after spectacularly burning out elsewhere. Jordan

sniffs her shirts to make sure they're clean (enough), gets under the skin of cops because she second-guesses their work, and looks damn good in leather pants.

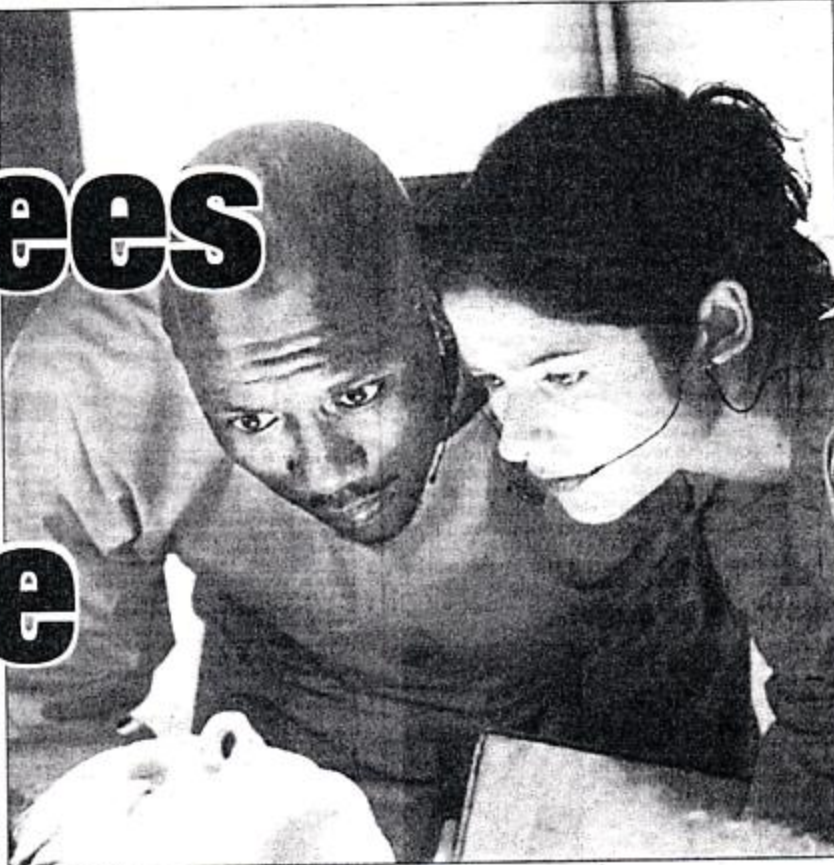
She has a poetry-quoting boss (the excellent Miguel Ferrer), no boyfriend in sight, has issues about her mother (who was murdered when Jordan was young), and has a retired cop for a dad, played by Ken Howard of "The White Shadow."

Hennessy knows Jordan is a handful, but disagrees when it's suggested that she can't help making the cops look stupid.

It's hard to find a line between taking on the pressure and just enjoying it.

"Jordan doesn't try to make anyone look dumb," says Hennessy. "She's just so intent on what she's doing, and she needs everything to be done the right way. She's just trying to do a good job because she empathizes so much with the victims — in a kind of unhealthy way, actually."

And while Jordan doesn't have a steady boyfriend, it isn't because the possibilities are lacking.



"One thing I love about this show is that they keep parading these really attractive men before me," says Hennessy. "They're not really limiting Jordan to just one guy. Which I have no objections to."

Nor does her husband, Paolo Matropietro, with whom she eloped last year to Italy. They married officially at a civil ceremony last January at New York City Hall, which was presided over by Mayor Rudy Giuliani.

Clearly, personally and professionally, everything's come together for Hennessy this year, even though she readily admits that some at NBC thought she wasn't sexy or thin enough to play Jordan. (A rather bizarre worry, given her great looks.)

But thanks to creator Tim Kring — with whom she bonded over guitars and Springsteen — Hennessy got the job and NBC got a hit. "Crossing Jordan" had a spectacular debut, beating its primary competition, CBS's "Family Law," by a wide margin. The gap narrowed in the following weeks, but "Crossing Jordan" always improved on its lead-in and beat "Family Law," so it seems set for a solid run.

"It's taken me awhile to understand the scope of the success," says Hennessy. "I'm thrilled. That's what has meaning."

Jill Hennessy had a supporting part as Assistant DA Claire Kincaid on "Law & Order" from 1993 to 1996. Now that she's starring as medical examiner Jordan Cavanaugh on "Crossing Jordan," she says "it's bizarre being the lead." She's seen here with co-star Mahershala Karim-Ali, who plays Dr. Trey Sanders.