

Kirsten Vangsness

# TWICE as NICE

*Criminal Minds'* Kirsten Vangsness works her funky know-how in two simultaneous series

**L**AST MAY, CBS announced a killer lineup for the 2010–11 season—in some ways, literally. One of the most hotly anticipated new shows on the schedule was a spinoff of *Criminal Minds*, subtitled *Suspect Behavior*. And the most visible thread tying the franchise together is the character of Penelope Garcia. When *Suspect Behavior* began production last fall, actress Kirsten Vangsness joined the rarefied ranks of performers playing the same character on more than one show simultaneously.

In *Suspect Behavior* Garcia assists a whole new FBI team, headlined by Oscar-winning actor Forest Whitaker and actress/comedian Janeane Garofalo. As a “red-cell unit,” Garcia’s new *Suspect* co-workers operate more independently, a little more rogue, and as such report solely to the bureau’s director. The spinoff is more urban, gritty and physical than the original series.

As Deborah Spera, one of the show’s executive producers, explains, this second squad provides *Minds* writers “a great way to look at crime from that [new] perspective, with a different kind of team.” And yet, with

**CRIMINAL MINDS** | airs Wednesdays at 9 p.m. ET/PT on CBS.  
**CRIMINAL MINDS: SUSPECT BEHAVIOR** | airs Wednesdays at 10 p.m. ET/PT on CBS.

Vangsness as the two shows’ onscreen link, it will be obvious right away to fans of the *Minds* mothership’s unique brand of murderous mayhem that this *Suspect* is one to watch.

The double duty is doubly ironic, because Vangsness recalls being shocked she landed the role of Garcia at all. For one thing, as the name implies, Garcia was envisioned to be ethnic. And one more small thing: The character was written to be a man.

But in the casting process, “no one who came in had felt right,” says show creator Ed Bernero. With the Behavioral Analysis Unit in need of some feminine vibes anyway, Vangsness—who had previously auditioned for a comedy project for the same casting team—got the call to audition. She “was amazing immediately, and we realized how special she was,” Bernero says.

Later, to the actress’ surprise, *Criminal Minds*’ writers scripted what was meant to be a one-time role into Episode 2, and beyond. Vangsness later learned they had witnessed the instant chemistry when she met co-star Shemar Moore, whom she calls her “separated-at-birth doppelgänger.”

Ultimately, as Bernero remembers, “we made the decision to make her a regular before we even went on the air. I guess you could say we on the show were her first fans.”

## A SECOND FAMILY UNIT

Now in *Minds*’ sixth season, Vangsness refers to her castmates as a true family “who get along like gangbusters. This is just magic that happened,” she adds, as she recounts hanging out with Moore and heading to Disneyland with Thomas Gibson and his brood.

And, with *Suspect Behavior*, Garcia is ready to meet a whole new family—and Vangsness is, pardon the pun, psyched. “It’s already interesting to play the same character for this long. And now, I get to play her more times, and with different people,” she says.

For Bernero, who is also *Suspect Behavior*’s executive producer, Garcia will be one of the keys to the new show’s success. “The fans love her because as ‘far out’ as she seems on first glance, I think she’s actually the most grounded character and the most relatable to the audience,” says Bernero. “Because like them, she’s a little freaked out by the bad guys.” Garcia will, the producers hope, become an ambassador to the new series, our way in to meeting and eventually becoming similarly devoted to a second BAU team.

Vangsness says she remains unfazed by the challenge of being on both shows—and grateful. Even with such a visible primetime presence now twice a week, she says “it still shocks the hell out of me” to be recognized in person. Because before her big break, she confesses, “I was thinking, ‘Well, I’m going to live on cat food and substitute teach to get by.’ And now, they actually pay me for this stuff I love to do.” — *Jim Colucci*