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ON LOCATION
Ugly Betty's
BECKI NEWTON
returns to NYC

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On Location

Ugly Betty's Becki Newton returns to New York

By Rachel Bowie

Becki Newton is thrilled to be home again. Back in New York to shoot the third season of the hit TV series *Ugly Betty*, Newton is in the midst of redecorating her new dressing room at Silvercup Studios in Queens. The personal touches are obvious — freshly painted plum walls, the sleek white leather couch, a framed photo of her with husband Chris Diamantopoulos — she has made the room her own, a well-designed reminder that she is back on the East coast.

On *Ugly Betty*, Newton plays Amanda, the receptionist and resident mean girl at the *Vogue*-esque fashion magazine *Mode*. The celebrated ABC series follows Betty Suarez (played by America Ferrera), a young and idealistic ugly duckling who finds herself a bit out of place in the shark-infested waters of the magazine. Last May, the show's producers announced that the set-in-Manhattan series would relocate from LA to shoot its third season in its natural home — New York. Newton was delighted upon hearing the news. “The show was originally supposed to film here,” she says. “When it got moved to LA, I was so grateful to have the job that I pushed aside the part of me that wanted to stay in New York. When they said the show was moving back, it was just a dream.”

Despite being well into its third season, *Ugly Betty* continues to gain momentum, something Newton says is a major credit to New York. “I think that people are really responding to the new look of the show,” she says. “New York has embraced us and the show has embraced New York. There's this whole other character on the show that didn't exist before.”

For Newton, living and working in New York is just how she imagined life would be. “I remember saying, I'm going to live in New York and I'm going to be an actress,” she reflects, “Everything I ever said was going to happen here has.” And Newton's love of the city runs deep. Besides getting her professional start here, she met her husband of three years while waiting for the subway at Times Square. “We just walked by each other and he tapped me on the shoulder and pretended to be lost,” Newton laughs. “I didn't believe him, but I didn't want him to walk away from me. We just kept talking.” An actor himself, he invited her to catch one of his shows

on Broadway. As Newton says, the rest is history. “Part of the reason why I'm in love with New York is because so many things have happened here,” she says. “I met my husband here, I had my first apartment here and, now, this job — there are just so many great associations with this city.”

Newton, 30, grew up in Connecticut and moved to New York fresh out of college after earning a degree in history from the University of Pennsylvania. Upon arrival, she took a job waiting tables at a restaurant in Times Square, all the while auditioning for small roles, patiently waiting for her big break. When she came across the script for *Ugly Betty* during pilot season, she knew she'd found it. “I read the script and thought, I absolutely have to be on this show,” Newton recalls. “There was something so different about it. It was so funny, but not in ways that I'd read before.” She flew to LA to audition and found herself more than prepared to read for the role. “I'd had a really bad day so when I walked into the audition, I pretty much was Amanda,” she laughs. “My attitude was, ‘get me out of here and I'm starving,’ which is sort of how Amanda operates all the time.”

The producers loved Newton's take on the character and immediately cast her for the part. Although Amanda was initially written as a peripheral role on the show, Newton transformed the character into an integral — and scene-stealing — member of the cast. ▶

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On a break from filming scenes for a future episode of the show, Newton sits in her dressing room at Silvercup. Lunch is an after-thought for the actress who spent the first 20 minutes of her hour-long break recording a podcast for ABC with co-star Michael Urie (he plays Marc on the show) and today's guest star Nikki Blonsky. Still in costume from the morning's shoot, Newton is made up as Amanda, wearing a form-fitting royal blue dress with a red patent leather belt, black tights and heels. Yet it takes only a moment to see that Newton in real life is nothing like the superficial fashionista she plays on TV.

"I think that Amanda is a little misunderstood," she says, trying to explain the intentions of her character. "She really is just trying to help when she tells Betty that her hair is ugly and that she should change her clothes. She's not trying to be mean, she's just trying to offer some honest advice. That's what I like so much about the character — it all comes from a place of wanting to help." For Newton, Amanda's brutal honesty makes her all the more fun to play. As for qualities that she shares with her TV counterpart, Newton can only think of one. "My friendship with Michael Urie, who I'm dying to call in here right now," she laughs. "Can I go get him?"

Newton disappears for a moment and returns with Urie, who plays the scheming and flamboyant assistant to *Mode* co-Editor-in-Chief Wilhelmina Slater (played by Vanessa Williams), and Newton's partner-in-crime on the show. The two are as bubbly in real life as they are on TV, immediately finishing each other's sentences as they plop down on the shag carpeting in Newton's dressing room. "Michael and I have this friendship that's developed, just like the friendship our characters have developed on the show," she says. "It's true," Urie says. "I think that Marc and Amanda's relationship is a lot like Michael and Becki's relationship. But I'm not really like Marc and Becki's not really like Amanda."

"But we bring it out in each other," Newton laughs.

Urie: You're a lot smarter than Amanda. And you don't wear as much makeup.

Newton: That's a good point. No makeup.

Which is interesting because in New York, I'm definitely not as recognizable. Michael's been out with some of his blond friends with full faces of makeup on and people think that he's out with Amanda.

Urie: That really has happened before. I've been out with a girl that has blond hair and someone said, 'I love you two on the show!'

Newton: And I get jealous!

(They both laugh.)

Urie: But you're not mean at all like Amanda. Or snarky.

Newton: Sometimes I think it — and I might even say it to Michael — but I would never say it out loud.

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New York has embraced us and the show has embraced New York.



Becki Newton and Michael Urie on set.

Who's Who on Ugly Betty

The chemistry between Newton and Urie is obvious. The two first met when they were filming the *Ugly Betty* pilot and had a small scene together. "Our parts were very, very small at that point," Newton remembers. "At the end of our scene, we linked arms and looked at each other a little funny and walked off." Newton next ran into Urie at their first wardrobe fitting after the show was picked up for the season. "We were so happy to see each other," Urie says. "You make a pilot, and it's gone, and you think, 'Oh well, I'll never see those people again' because who knows if the show will get picked up. When *Ugly Betty* did and we ran into each other, it was such a thrill."

The duo became increasingly inseparable and the show's writers took note of their clear connection on screen. "We really influence each other's characters," Urie explains. "I remember a moment when we were on set and we were supposed to have one or two exchanges and we turned it into five or six. The writers decided, 'That's good, they should do that.' It was maybe the second or third episode that they really started writing for us." Since then, Newton's and Urie's characters have evolved to be extremely valued players at *Mode*, bringing comedy — and often times poignancy — to every scene they are a part of. Fresh from shooting scenes this morning with Betty, Newton admits that the fun she and Urie have together is only trumped by the fun they have when filming scenes with Ferrera.

Newton: From the beginning, the Marc/Amanda/Betty contingency has been fascinating. Every time we get together, it feels like we're bringing it back to the beginning of the show in a lot of ways because when Betty first walked in, we loved to be mean to her. Michael coined the term 'frenemies' to describe us —

Urie: You coined the term!

Newton: I think it existed before —

Urie: Okay, we came up with it together!

Newton: But there is something about when the three of us get together. The bratty kids on the playground come out. We're sort of the bullies and every time Betty comes into the office, we're right there waiting for her. So we can't possibly dislike her as much as we pretend to. We loooooove to be around her. It gives us a lot to talk about. Mostly in clothing choices. ▶



▲ **Daniel Meade (Eric Mabius)** ▶
The co-Editor-in-Chief of *Mode* with Wilhelmina Slater; he is also Betty's boss.



◀ **Betty Suarez (America Ferrera)** — The idealistic assistant to *Mode*'s co-Editor-in-Chief Daniel Meade.



▲ **Claire Meade (Judith Light)** — The mother of Daniel, she's also the Editor-in-Chief of Meade Publications' *Hot Flash* magazine.



◀ **Alexis Meade (Rebecca Romijn)**
Following a sex change, she is Daniel's brother-turned-sister, and the new President/CEO of Meade Publications.



▲ **Wilhelmina Slater (Vanessa Williams)** — *Mode*'s former creative director; she is now the magazine's co-Editor-in-Chief with Daniel Meade.



▲ **Marc St. James (Michael Urie)** — The scheming and catty assistant to *Mode*'s co-Editor-in-Chief Wilhelmina Slater.

▼ **Christina McKinney (Ashley Jensen)** — Betty's confidante, she is head seamstress in the wardrobe department at *Mode*.



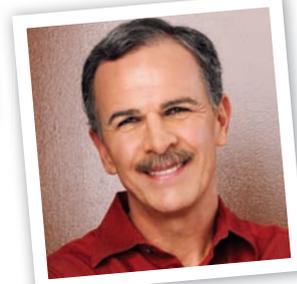
◀ **Amanda Tanen (Becki Newton)** — The fashion-conscious receptionist at *Mode* magazine.



▲ **Justin Suarez (Mark Indelicato)** — Betty's nephew, he has an encyclopedic knowledge of fashion, celebrity gossip and musical theater.



▲ **Hilda Suarez (Ana Ortiz)** ▶
Betty's older sister, she is also the mother of Justin.



▲ **Ignacio Suarez (Tony Plana)** — Betty and Hilda's father, his focus is being there for his daughters.

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Urie: Clothing choices and —

Newton: Life choices.

Urie: Life choices and —

Newton: Orthodontia?

Urie: Body image.

Newton: There's a lot we can really talk about.

But what viewers can't stop talking about is the steady stream of A-list and attention-grabbing celebs that continue to make appearances alongside the rest of *Ugly Betty's* already star-studded cast. From Victoria Beckham last season to the recent (albeit short-lived) appearance by Lindsay Lohan, the show proves with each episode that the goings-on at *Mode* are just like every other real-life fashion magazine. "We've had so many incredible guest stars, especially since we've been in New York," Newton says. "Bernadette Peters appears in an episode coming up and I have loved her for so long! The show is tapped into such a current audience, but a diverse audience too. To have Victoria Beckham and Bernadette Peters on the same show is incredible."

And despite the frequent appearances of notable, often gossip-worthy celebs, both Newton and Urie insist that the dynamic on set doesn't change with their presence. "This show is sort of unbreakable," Urie says. "It all stems from the material because it is so fun and light. Sure, it's sweet and sad and heavy at times, but because it's born out of a place of joy and happiness, that infects the cast and it infects the crew and infects anybody that walks onto our set." Newton adds, "So many of the guest stars that appear are people who have been watching the show and are so excited to be a part of it. That's why Victoria wanted to do the show — she was a fan!"

Speaking of fans, *Ugly Betty* has quite a following when shooting scenes on the streets of New York.

Urie: It really depends on who else is in the scene.

Newton: People watching us shoot tend to speak freely right when you're in the middle of a scene. They'll comment on your outfit, or just say hi, which is always funny. 'Hi Amanda!' 'Hi Marc!' You're never really sure if you're supposed to stop. Sometimes a tour bus will even go by and you turn around and there's a bunch of people taking pictures. It's hard not to be distracted, but I'm getting better.

Urie: There's a lot of elements. They don't close everything down.

Newton: They can't! They can't close down New York City.



Becki Newton with America Ferrera in a scene from an episode this season.

Urie: No. And when we had LaLohan on the show, there were paparazzi everywhere ...

Newton: Which we're definitely not used to.

Urie: With America too, they'll show up ...

Newton: It gets really confusing too because we're a show about fashion, so a lot of time the extras will be holding cameras because we recreate fashion shoots outside. You never really know if it's a paparazzi person or just an extra holding a camera.

As Newton's star status continues to grow, she can't help but notice the impact of *Ugly Betty*. "We were abroad this summer and people from France and Italy were just freaking out," she says. But Newton hasn't let any of the fame go to her head. And despite playing a label-conscious fashionista on TV, Newton describes her style off-screen as low-key. "Amanda's my polar opposite with heels and tight clothes," she says. "With the red carpet thing, I'm definitely influenced by Amanda, but I'm not a slave to fashion the way she is."

Newton credits Patricia Field, costume designer for the show, with helping to encourage more fearlessness with fashion. "She really opened my eyes to different ways to dress and put things together. If you've noticed on the show, people can get

away with anything. Pat's philosophy is, 'Why be safe?'"

It's almost lunchtime and Newton, Urie and Ferrera are trying to shoot a clean take of a scene where Amanda and Marc teach Betty how to network. Every time there is a slip-up of dialog, the three burst into contagious laughter, affecting everyone from the extras to the directors and producers viewing the shots on a monitor off-camera. "It's always like that," Newton explains. "Especially when the three of us are together. It just takes one person to start laughing and it's over. And then I pity the director that has to deal with us. It's not cute when it happens at 2 in the morning." But judging by the reaction of the rest of the cast and crew, no one seems to mind the interruptions. *Ugly Betty* is slated to shoot 25 episodes of the show this season, and Newton appreciates every moment. "I love everything about this show," Newton gushes. "I love the people I get to work with, I love the part I get to play, I love that it's set in New York City. There's absolutely no downside to this job." Urie quickly interjects, "Except that it might end someday." Newton agrees, "Someday it might end and that's terrible." ■