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## Emmy Watch: The rise of TV's 'Anti-Mom'

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By *Todd Longwell*

The anti-mom is in.

Contrasting starkly with such '80s sitcoms as "Family Ties" and "The Cosby Show," in which the moms were accomplished career women as well as expert nurturers, a host of TV mothers are now yelling, smothering or just plain neglectful.

"There are a bunch of nut-job mothers out there," says Julia Louis-Dreyfus (CBS' "The New Adventures of Old Christine"). Although her own character may sometimes be "just shy of heinous, at the very heart of it, she does mean to do well. But there are so many other issues for her that get in the way. She's definitely driven by a feeling of anxiousness and desperation."

Anxiety and desperation may be a sign of our times -- and not just for Christine, whose show was recently canceled. Television, which has always been much quicker to respond to social trends than film (where movies can spend years in development before they reach the big screen), could simply be reflecting the stresses of an era in which women have had to handle jobs, families and a recession.

"Television tends to lag a little bit behind what's going on in the real world, but these portrayals do reflect the changing reality of motherhood," says Martha Lauzen, executive director of the Center for the Study of Women in TV and Film at San Diego State University. "Part of this also could be attributed to the presence of women working behind the scenes, where perhaps female writers and producers are more willing to tell a more honest story of what motherhood is like."

Certainly, in committing to "Christine," Louis-Dreyfus was conscious of that dynamic. The actress spent a year trying to develop a show with a mother role for herself, before she hooked up with "Christine" creator Kari Lizer.

"I've learned that because television is so fast-paced -- which I love -- you have to rely on

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instincts and things you know without even knowing that you know (them)," says the actress, who has two sons, ages 12 and 17. "So I thought, "The world of motherhood is a world that feels very, very familiar to me, and this is where I should go."

"As a mom, there's all this pressure not only to raise your children correctly, but to make a living and to make a lot of money," she continues. "It's not possible to do everything well all the time, and I think that is portrayed on television very effectively."

Effective it may be, but it is certainly a marked departure from past TV moms -- whether in the "The Donna Reed Show" in the 1950s or the "The Brady Bunch" in the 1970s.

"My girlfriends and I talk about the previous generation or the generation before, how that's what they had to look like and think, (and how they) were supposed to do all these things and be perfect," says Marcia Cross, a mother of 3-year-old twin daughters, who plays uber-anal homemaker Bree Van de Kamp on ABC's "Desperate Housewives." "Those Donna Reeds and the others set up an atmosphere for women that was just impossible to actually stand by."

Flawed moms have appeared on television before, of course, though not to this extent.

"The turning point with the truly flawed mom was 'Roseanne,' " says Tina Pieraccini, author of "Pink Television: Sixty Years of Women on Prime Time," "and it was reflecting society at that point, too, because the TV was expanding with cable and you could only have so many perfect situations. Between 1979 and 1989, there was really an increase in the working moms on TV. Also, they were starting to show some of the flaws, with characters like Carla (Rhea Perlman) on 'Cheers,' the single working mom."

The flaws have increased, even when today's TV moms are trying to emulate the perfect ones they watched on television.

For Cross' character, Bree, the irony is that her maniacal drive to be the perfect wife with the perfect home is the very thing that keeps tearing her family apart. But other TV moms, like her "Desperate" neighbor Lynette Scavo (Felicity Huffman), are also forever buckling under the strain of juggling family and work.

A prime example is Sarah (Rachel Griffiths) on ABC's "Brothers and Sisters," an accomplished career woman with an Ivy League education trapped in a Sisyphean cycle of personal and professional frustration. For Griffiths, this reflects the thinking of our era.

"In the '80s or '90s, we had the 'Top Gun' version (of life) where, if we try and we have enough will and enough courage and enough faith, we will succeed," she observes. "Maybe that part of ourselves has been bruised a little bit, and if we hold ourselves up to that example, we come up really short. Recent events, both in terrorism and in the global financial crisis, have humbled us all (and bred) resilience. And part of that resilience is saying, 'Sometimes we do our very best and it's not enough.' "



Is there a risk that, in conveying the notion that the best is not enough, these actresses

might push their characters over the edge and make them seem too harsh? Griffiths' character, for one, has been described in very critical terms.

"I'm like, 'Really? Am I playing a bitch?' " she says. "God, if I'm playing a bitch, I guess we're all a bunch of bitches because our lives are pretty loaded and it's a struggle and there's certainly often not the time and grace to plaster the smile back on our faces and straighten out the apron."

Just how far to go is a question actresses and producers think about. Certainly, that was the case with the "Mother's Day" episode on "The Middle."

"Was the network ever worried? There was some question as to whether it was appropriate to have Frankie from the beginning saying, 'Mother's Day can be a real drag.' They felt that maybe she should come to that realization," executive producer Eileen Heisler says. "But

former rivals work together to get the glee club to take on "Saturday Night Fever." | [WATCH VIDEO](#)



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the response that we got from moms was huge."

Adds fellow executive producer DeAnn Heline: "If we've ever danced on the borders of that, you like and relate to (Patricia Heaton) so much, we never hear anyone saying, 'That was too unlikable.'"

Others are more wary about causing audiences to lose sympathy for these characters.

In a scene where Lauren Graham was filming an argument with her TV daughter (Mae Whitman) for the season finale of NBC's "Parenthood," in which she loses her cool, "I said at the time, 'Is this too much?'" Graham recalls. "And there are so many parents on that set that said, 'No, it's not too much. We've all lost it.'"

While playing these moms poses risks like these, there are other risks too -- like being seen in any "mom" role at all. Many actresses refused to audition for the role as Claire on ABC's "Modern Family," "because they didn't want to play the mother of teenagers," says Julie Bowen, who eventually won the part. "I said, 'Bring it on!' It was a brilliant pilot. I didn't care if I was the mother of Godzilla."

Scarier than transitioning into anti-mom roles, she says, is "the non-rite of passage where audiences don't buy you as anything but boobs on a beach. I would much rather gently be eased into my dotage on a fantastic show than have them say, 'Oh, she was cute back in the day.'"

"The perfect mom isn't that funny or exciting or that interesting," she continues. "I was most worried, taking this job, that they would inevitably default to regular TV moms who stand there with a laundry basket going, 'Now, kids!' while the kids all screw up. I'm so excited whenever they make my character be the screw-up."

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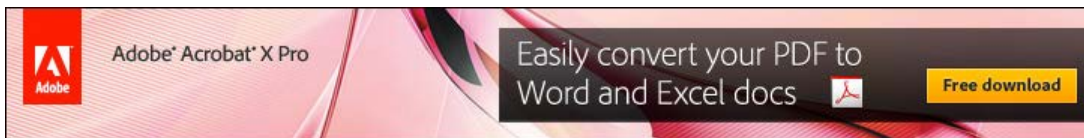


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