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Can a Meanie Make It in Sitcomland?

Television: ‘The Jackie Thomas Show,’ with Tom Arnold, is trying to beat the odds by having a thoroughly distasteful protagonist.

By JOSEPH TUROW
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

ABC’s new series, “The Jackie Thomas Show,” raises an intriguing question about American TV and its audience: Is it possible to build a successful situation comedy series around a character who is thoroughly distasteful?

The emphasis here is on the word thoroughly. There is a rather strong tradition on U.S. television (and radio and movies before that) of mounting sitcoms with central protagonists who blend an outrageously unlikeable side with a persuasive charm.

Instantly recognizable cases in point are Jackie Gleason’s explosive Ralph Kramden in “The Honeymooners,” Sherman Hemsley’s scheming George Jefferson in “The Jeffersons,” Ted Knight’s Ted Baxter in “Mary Tyler Moore Show,” Ted Danson’s monomaniacally libidinous Sam Malone in “Cheers” and Candice Bergen’s peevishly dismissive Murphy Brown.

These people often act obnoxiously, but they have endearing sides, too. Those more acceptable facets are brought out in their interactions with continuing characters, whose function it often is to eke lovability out of hopelessly disagreeable facades. That is one explanation for Murphy Brown’s baby.

The progenitor for the irredeemably mean TV sitcom star was Carroll O’Connor’s Archie Bunker on “All in the Family.” That twist on the family comedy formula blended Ralph Kramden’s short fuse with the bad-mouth bigotry of a Klansman. When it appeared in 1971, newspapers and other journals of opinion carried loud debates about the advisability, even the morality, of having such an individual appear weekly on the home tube.

Ignored in the passage of time, though, is the fact that the character who inspired that concern died fairly quickly in the life of that decade-running series. Over time, Archie’s character softened tremendously, his racism toned down and humanity brought out through his wife, Edith. By the time the character left prime time (in “Archie Bunker’s Place”), he had become a symbol not of racism but of a reluctantly changing Middle America, a man with a Jewish business partner and an adopted Jewish daughter.

In fact, while somewhat unlikeable central characters are a staple on television, changes in the sitcom formula to make one of the key players an out-and-out misanthrope have been rare and short-lived. The attempts came during the 1980s, when the networks began to entertain previously unacceptable program suggestions to attract that part of their audience fleeing to cable and video.

NBC took the chance with “Buffalo Bill,” with Dabney Coleman perfectly cast as a nasty-mouthed talk-show host. The program drew critical acclaim for its fresh humor in a stale comic landscape but couldn’t sustain acceptable ratings. ABC tried “The ‘Slap’ Maxwell Story,” another Dabney Coleman vehicle, and “Good and Evil,” dark humor involving a wonderful woman and her hurtful sister. They, too, crashed.

The Fox network also got into the obnoxious character hunt. Fox has generally been a bit more adventurous than ABC, CBS and NBC in trying to subvert the traditional sitcom—partly as a way to gain attention, partly as a device for luring young audiences and partly because Fox’s criteria for ratings success are lower than those of the Big Three. Still, of the comedy offerings on Fox, only “Married... With Children” can be said to have been successful presenting thoroughly dislikable central characters on a weekly basis. And unlike Buffalo Bill and Slap Maxwell, “Married’s” Bundy family are so cartoon-like in their outrageousness to one another as to be clearly a takeoff on the sitcom formula, not a true addition to it.

Fox did try its own Dabney Coleman sitcom—about a badmouthing white-collar criminal who is forced to teach schoolchildren—but that series (“Drell’s Class”) flopped as quickly as his other two.

All of which would suggest that the networks, playing the odds, would not likely try to build another situation comedy around a thoroughly dislikable character. What is fascinating about “The Jackie Thomas Show” is that it seems to be tilting against those odds—and doing it quite consciously, even enthusiastically.

The show is the offspring of Roseanne and Tom Arnold, two of the most powerful people in television today (which may explain how it got off the ground in the

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first place and surely explains its plum spot on the schedule—after

the hit "Roseanne").

The title character, Jackie

Thomas, is an actor in his own

situation comedy. As played by

Tom Arnold, he is loud, self-cen-

tered and mean, with a violent

streak. In the first episode, he

jealously tried to fire the boy who

plays his adolescent son in his

series by killing him off in the

show. His reason: The likable

young man has begun to get a lot of

attention from the press and the

public.

The Thomas character is as

hateful as the other characters

whose shows flopped. The differ-

tence here is that the Arnolds

craftily placed their obnoxious star

into the mold of one of the most

beloved of television series, "The

Dick Van Dyke Show" of the 1960s.

From the start of the first episode,

when Van Dyke's photo is shown

on the head writer's desk, the

creators make it clear that they see

"The Jackie Thomas Show" as

"The Dick Van Dyke Show" trans-

planted to the '90s.

Just as that classic '60s sitcom

was about a group of writers craft-
ing a program for a loutish star, so

"The Jackie Thomas Show" has a

group of writers crafting a program

for a loutish star. The roles of Rose

Marie, Morey Amsterdam and

Richard Deacon are taken, rough-

ly, by Maryedith Burrell, Michael

Boatman and Martin Mull. The

sceneries in which the writers talk

snidely about boss Thomas echo

the scenes in which Van Dyke and

company had to write jokes for

their joke of a star, Carl Reiner's

Alan Brady.

This is where the new program

takes its risky turn, though. In the

Van Dyke series, Brady was off-

camera most of the time. During

the first couple of years, in fact, the

character was heard through an

intercom and not even seen. That

move allowed Brady to function

primarily as the butt of intermit-
tent jokes without souring the

essentially homey on-camera ac-
tion. Plots centered generally on

the writers and Van Dyke's idyllic

television family.

Jackie Thomas," by contrast,

moves the Brady character to

center stage. The Van Dyke sur-
gates are craftily positioned to

draw out the viewer's sympathy

and to make the viewer care about

them in ways that previous series

about obnoxious people do not. Yet

the title of the show, along with the

fact that Arnold the creator plays

Thomas, suggests quite clearly

that they will take a back seat to

the star.

The history of such persona on

network television suggests that

the chances of "Jackie Thomas"

surviving are slim. Shows like

"Barney Miller," "Cheers,"

"Taxi"—and "Jackie Thomas"—

remind us that all situation com-
dies are essentially family situation

comedies, since in those programs

the work group takes the role of

the family. Viewers may well find

it jarring to confront every week

the thought that a laugh-tracked,

domestic side of life could support

the kinds of meanness, darkness

and air of violence that they asso-
ciate with urban dramas such as

"L.A. Law," "Law & Order" and

"Civil Wars."

In American Life, the distance

between "Civil Wars" and "The

Dick Van Dyke Show" may be

close, getting closer all the time. In

the American Psyche, represented

by prime-time TV, the separation

of these two worlds has been a

fundamental fact of life. It remains

to be seen if, by wrapping a sub-

versive character in a sitcom

classic, Roseanne and Tom Arnold

can change that.

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