

Milberger on “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel”

Outlet: Travalanche

The Marvelous Mrs Maisel: A Woman in Redux

Many people would consider the modern Golden Age of Comedy to be the 1950s and 60s, when what we know today as stand-up became all the rage and television was in its infancy. When the comedy from vaudeville finally had its eyes back again (after years of being in the dark with radio) and was able to take its experience to mint legends for the ages. Television turned nightclub raconteurs into instant celebrities, thanks to the likes of Jack Paar, Ed Sullivan and soon – the king of them all – Johnny Carson. But except for Lucille Ball, how many women from this era have seen their strengths and struggles dramatized, their stories told? For all the plays, films and TV based on Neil Simon, Mel Brooks or Carl Reiner’s fond memories of the 1950’s classic sketch show Your Show of Shows (and later Caesar’s Hour), sporting a writing staff that included most of the comedy legends for the latter part of 20th century (Woody Allen, Larry Gelbart, Mel Tolkin, etc.), where are the stories solely about Lucille Kallen or Selma Diamond? Where are the lavish odes to Madelyn Pugh, who wrote most of I Love Lucy’s classic episodes and who was given the moniker of “Girl Writer” because of the oddity of such a thing at the time? Because for every Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, Alan King, Bob Newhart and Richard Pryor, there was a Joan Rivers, a Moms Mabley and an Elaine May. Today, Tina Fey and Amy Poehler are household names, but the female narrative of comedy they came from seems mostly forgotten or glossed over. That was until Gilmore Girls creator Amy Sherman-Palladino gave us the new Amazon pilot The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel.

Written and directed by Sherman-Palladino, The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel tells the story of Miriam ‘Midge’ Maisel (Rachel Brosnahan), whom we first meet at her wedding reception, doing stand-up (unbeknownst to herself) and regaling her family and friends with the cleaned up version of her 1950’s teen life at Bryn Mawr College. Four years later, Midge has two kids and the seemingly perfect New York Upper-West Side Jewish life of 1958, and one would assume to find her spending her nights in Greenwich Village trying her hand at stand-up comedy. However, this is 1958 after all, and Midge is just a “housewife” making brisket, worried about keeping her figure and beauty for her husband – all while having time to prepare the perfect Yom Kippur break -fast for the Rabbi and for her family. It’s only when a family crisis (which I won’t give away) sends Midge’s “happy life” into upheaval that she finally discovers that she is the talented stand-up in the family, not her wannabe husband. A talent that, based on the synopsis, will take Midge all the way to Johnny Carson’s couch – the pinnacle and seminal moment for stand-ups of her generations.

Within the short pilot, Sherman-Palladino is able to establish Midge as a smart, confident and funny female who knows what she wants, even if it took her 26 years to know that she, as a woman, could achieve it. Midge belongs in the company of other Sherman-Palladino heroines: a witty, fast-talking brunette you want to root for. What the pilot also does well is establish the obstacles Midge will be up against in her upward rise to fame. The fact that Midge didn’t even expect herself to go into comedy, that it was her husband’s job, is a red flag on its own; but what the pilot does best for a layman of this era is to establish this pre-feminist environment Midge will have to push against to succeed. Midge, for example, keeps a journal of all of her measurements, something she has done since she was a child, and even goes so far as to hide

her night beauty regimen from her husband to make him believe she wakes up with perfect hair and make-up – behavior that appears to have been passed down from her own mother who in the pilot worries her baby granddaughter has too big of a head and bemuses that her daughter is officially done wearing sleeveless dresses. Even Midge’s own father blames her for her husband’s failings – something that even shocks Midge. Sherman-Palladino’s music choices, as with *Gilmore Girls*, do a wonderful job to establish mood, tone, and style of the time period. Paired with the vibrant colors and sets of 1958 New York City, it all makes the audience feel like they’ve stepped back in time. What you ultimately get with *Mrs. Maisel* is the fast, witty dialogue of *Gilmore Girls* mixed with the epic scope and social commentary of *Mad Men*, and a comedy history lesson to boot.

Along the way Midge meets *Gilmore Girls* alum Alex Borstein who plays a hardened (West) Village bartender Susie at the comedy club “The Gaslight Cafe “ – which appears to be a fictitious stand-in for “The Bitter End”. Susie sees the rare comic talent in Midge, comparing her to Mort Sahl (an icon in his day). Finally at one point Susie tells an unsure Midge, “I don’t mind being alone. I just do not want to be insignificant. Do you? Don’t you want to do something no one else can do? Be remembered as something other than a wife... a housewife...” – a universal question women, hell, humans ask themselves. It resonates with Midge as it did me and it pushes Midge to take the first steps to go after her own dreams with as much gusto as she put into making a brisket or we can only imagine she put into getting back in her Rabbi’s good graces. It’s fitting that what will one day become one of the most important days in Midge’s life takes place on Yom Kippur. It is a day of atonement of sins, yes, but is also a day of starting over. Of re-birth. Of having your sins forgiven and wiping the slate. (In fact, she literally ends the day wearing wearing someone else’s shoes)

Also making an appearance are The Kingston Trio and, in a more substantial role, Lenny Bruce himself (played wonderfully by Luke Kirby), establishing that there are rules to this world (which includes being arrested for indecency) and that being innovative means sometimes you have to break these rules. Every actor in the pilot is a knockout, led by the adorably charming Rachel Brosnahan as Midge, and (as Sherman-Palladino always does) casting stalwart actors such as Tony Shalhoub and Marin Hinkle as Midge’s parents.

For me, what really struck home this piece in my heart was not just that it was about a woman who will pioneer comedy, but that this is the story of a Jewish woman in comedy. See, a short time ago I had a revelation. And hear me out, here. It may sound crazy... but... as a Jewish woman I feel unrepresented within the comic Jewish narrative. No seriously I do. Think about it... 99.9% of what we know as the traditional comic Jewish persona is male driven. And I don’t just mean this in the sense that this narrative is mostly populated by men. What I am talking about is the ideas or tropes that are usually identified as the classic heritage of Jewish comedy, or voice, comes from the point of view of a strictly male narrative. The style, the attributes, what consolidates a comic Jewish stereotype – from Alan King to Woody Allen to Jerry Seinfeld. And yes, this is a history that stems all the way from the ethnic comedy of vaudeville to the dining rooms of the Catskills “Borscht Belt,” so of course it comes from a male dominated society. But for me it was a persona I had adopted as my own, that I thought I was a part of. It wasn’t until I saw more of myself in the works of Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson (*Broad City*) and of Rachel Bloom and Aline Brosh-McKenna (*Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*) writing actual Jewish women that I

started to notice it more: I wasn't represented. Where I had previously thought I saw myself in

2

the worlds of Allen and Seinfeld, and even Aaron Sorkin to a degree, I only had to take a step back to see that alongside their "Jewish avatars" were mostly goyisha women. And that when any token Jewish women actually appeared, they were nags or annoying stereotypes with funny voices for laughs. And yes, to a non-New Yorker, Midge has a funny voice, but what her voice is in so many ways is authentic. Here is a familiar, confident, Jewish woman I recognize. And this is a good thing not just for seeing myself represented in the narrative, but also for what it does to the public at large. To show that we aren't just jokes and nagging mothers in a punch-line. Or bad dates their mother sets them up with. We are also part of this heritage of comedy. And I think there is no better person than Amy Sherman-Palladino (whose own father was a comedian during this era) to use her own Jewish voice to tell us all about Mrs. Maisel and how she made it to the top of comedy. So I recommend you watch this pilot and vote for it to be picked up for series (or else it won't, that's how Amazon works) And if the male in your life or the ones reading this still aren't sold on "Mad Men/ PunchLine for chicks" ... just tell 'em there are also tits in it.

Gracie Allen: Truth in Comedy

A Tribute to the great comedienne Gracie Allen

Outlet: Travalanche

They say the great ones never truly know how great they are -that the great ones do it without effort, without the knowledge of doing it any other way – doing what comes naturally. Gracie Allen was that kind of woman, that kind of comedian. But of course she wasn't as black and white as the medium in which she played. Gracie Allen never gave the same performance twice; she had no conception of it. If she had to eat on camera she ate on camera; if she had to darn a sock she'd darn a sock. Being truthful in her work was a given to Gracie long before the phrase "Method Acting" became part of our lexicon. She unknowingly went against convention in her Vaudeville days, wearing whatever she liked on stage (always a nice dress) at a time when performers wore the same outfit each night – costume was as much a part of the act as the lines or moves themselves. When asked by her husband and comedy partner, George Burns, one night why she brought her purse on stage when the previous night she had not, she replied simply, "A lady always carries a purse." When asked by a director of a Burns & Allen feature film if she could "cheat" towards the camera while eating, she answered, "But this is how I eat breakfast." Everything Gracie Allen the character said on stage, Gracie Allen the woman believed, and so in turn did the audience.

Gracie Allen's onstage persona was that of a scatterbrained woman with her own sense of logic – her mind was an open book. In real life, Gracie Allen almost never gave an interview as herself; to find an interview, usually very early in her career, where she speaks as herself, is rare. Gracie Allen was a very private and humble woman. She believed her own personality was not at all interesting and that the public cared only for her on stage persona, so why do interviews as herself. This kept Gracie Allen's real life shrouded in mystery and -whether she knew it or not – gave her a final vestige of privacy.

And who would have blamed Gracie's audience for being fooled into thinking she was her fictional persona? After all , Gracie Allen, wife of George Burns, mother and Vaudeville/Radio/TV/movie star, was playing a woman named Gracie Allen, wife of George

Burns, mother and Vaudeville/Radio/TV/movie star; even in almost all of Gracie's movies her

3

character had the first name Gracie and/or last name Allen. Not to mention Burns and Allen used many of the real-life names of Gracie's family members in the Burns and Allen comedy act. Even her real age is a mystery, as she never revealed it even to her husband and family. It was only after the 1900 census as well as her high school yearbook were discovered that her true age came to light. What is mostly known about Gracie, beyond her ditzy character, is from second hand sources, such as George Burns himself as well as her friends and family. Therefore, reconstructing the real Gracie Allen is more complicated than her character's sense of logic.

She was kind, giving, fiercely loyal and fought for what she felt was fair and just in the world. Her motto was simply, "To be professional; on time and don't push me around because I'm small." (Burns 1988) The 5'1" slip of a woman had that Irish passion and never let anyone forget it. Once in a Vaudeville act, after George refused to take a joke out of the act she didn't think was funny, Gracie refused to answer George's straight line – each and every time until George took the joke out of the act. Another time, in New Orleans, a local dry cleaner ruined an expensive dress of Gracie's and refused to reimburse her for the damage; Gracie stepped out of the act in different intervals each night in the middle of a joke, to let the audience know of her dissatisfaction, until the dry cleaner paid her back. Once, outside the Brown Derby, Gracie literally kicked George in the ass for not opening a door for her.

She helped her friends (and enemies) out with money when Vaudeville died, adopted two children including a son whom most would have considered sickly at the time, and made sure her sisters had everything they needed when they both were lost in a sea of dementia (Something she feared would happen to herself) She did all this while remaining, as Gracie would refer to herself, "a lady." She was embarrassed by the large burn scars on her left arm from a childhood accident (She always wore long sleeves because of it), and the fact that she had two differently-colored eyes, but according to George she never complained about either flaw. In fact, if she did complain about something one knew it was a big deal – she was a Vaudeville trooper on-and-off-stage. This made her appearance very important to her; something she was proud of. George remarked she never left the house with a hair out of place or her make-up less than perfect.

Gracie had unresolved issues with her father, also a Vaudeville hooper, who had abandoned her family when Gracie was a child – so much so that when Gracie's father came backstage to see his now-famous daughter, Gracie's only comment on the matter was: he had nothing to say to her when she was growing up and therefore she had nothing to say to him now. She was however very close to the rest of her family, her mother and sisters, and she loved her children fiercely.

She didn't think she was funny, even though American considered her its comedy sweetheart, stating that she knew funny, but wasn't funny. When asked to say something funny her response was, "Charlie Chaplin." George Burns says the only real joke he ever heard Gracie tell, after being egged on by friends was, "An Irishman walked out of a bar." She hated her feet, loved gossip and her only wish was to be able to wear a strapless, sleeveless, evening gown – the one thing her money and fame could not provide her.

In August 1932 The World Telegraph interviewed George and Gracie in their NY hotel room; it's one of the rare interviews where Gracie speaks as herself. She remarks, in the interview, how she is not looking to play Shakespeare and someday hopes to have enough money to retire and never work again. The reporter even mentions how during the interview Miss Allen kept staring out the window, waiting for her daughter and nanny to come back from a stroll in the park. This would be in direct parallel to her husband George Burns, who felt performing was his life and performed well into his 90's – one might say that after Gracie's passing, show business was what gave him the reason to live so long.

It is a lovely interview and a rare glimpse into Gracie's personality and her dynamic with George. Her excitement about their travels around Europe lifts off the page with the same enthusiasm George had talking about show-business. At one point, George, ever the raconteur, exuberantly tells the interviewer that he can't sit still when he talks: "I have to walk around and act out everything," to which Gracie mutters, "But perhaps you noticed that," looking on him lovingly before sharing an admiring smile (The New York World Telegraph 1932).

The love between George and Gracie is well-documented; he adored her and lauded her as the genesis of all his success, which was half-true. They were both responsible for each other's successes and they each referred to the other as the talented one. The difference was George lived longer to tell the tale. But after all, being the literal brains behind their act as the writer, storytelling was George's talent. Their love story sounds like something out of a storybook. He loved her, and pursued her, in Vaudeville while Gracie claimed she loved another. And like a great act one finish, after giving Gracie an ultimatum to marry him and drop her fiancé, or break up the act, Gracie called him early Christmas morning and agreed to marry him.

Together his sense of humor and her rare talent for the stage brought them great success as a team in real life as well as show business. And although their Dumb Dora act – the girl/boy double act with a nitwit woman and smart straight man – wasn't anything new for the time, Burns and Allen brought their originality – themselves -to their work, making it something new and innovative. But that wasn't how it started. When Gracie first met George he was doing an act that was just imitations of other, more established Big Time acts. But his act was breaking up and George needed a new partner. Enter Gracie Allen, stage right, an out-of-work hooper whose short respite from show business in stenography classes was a bust. They both needed new partners and George's act was cheaper so they agreed to do his "new" act. Only just like George's old act his "new" act was neither new nor innovative. The act consisted of jokes straight out of joke books – safe material – material that was sure to keep the fearful Burns employed, as new untested material was far too risky. George would later admit he had spent so much time in Small Time Vaudeville he was fearful of being more; he was happy coasting—he just couldn't admit it. But the more George and Gracie worked together the more confidence he seemed to get and the more new material he wrote – until it was the whole act. George went from a twenty-eight-year-old playing it safe to a confident star that played The Big Time, The Palace. They were each other's loves and muses – each encouraging the other.

And although Gracie Allen spoke of retirement as early as 1932, and not too long after she had the money to do so, Gracie didn't retire until her heart became too weak to continue in 1958. Gracie Allen's heart perhaps had loved too much to go on. She loved her husband George so

much that she stayed in show business longer than she would have wanted to for his sake. She

5

knew that show business was the breath of life to her husband – “He needs it for his metabolism,” She told Carol Channing on teaching Carol her old Burns and Allen act, when Carol appeared with George in Gracie’s place. (Burns 1988) And once George ventured out on his own she reminded him of the lessons she had taught him when they first met- truthfulness. If he didn’t believe what he was saying, how could the audience? “All you need in acting is honesty, and if you can fake that you’ve got it made, “George would always joke later in his life. But George believed as early as the 1940’s that, according to his biography on Gracie, “a joke just isn’t funny unless it has some truth in it;” he just needed to learn how to incorporate that into his delivery. (Burns 1988) George said he learned a lot from Gracie, but the most important was, “She taught me that you’ve got to make it sound like you’ve never said it before ...A lot of Gracie rubbed off on me.” (People October 31, 1988 Vol. 30 No. 18)

*George Burns won the academy award for Best Supporting Actor in 1976.

The Top Five Television Shows You Should Be Watching. (2016)

Outlet: Forcesofgeek

The Last Man On Earth

Fox Sundays; Hulu; Fox.com

“I love comedy where there’s a lot of tension and even though it’s very far-fetched, it seems very relatable.”

– Will Forte, creator and star

I have to admit that when I first heard the plot, and then saw the Super Bowl ads for Fox’s comedy The Last Man On Earth, featuring Will Forte’s character Phil Miller alone in the world, I did wonder how the concept was going to work. Yet by the time I reached the end of the first episode when Phil finally runs into another human, Carol, played by the great Kristen Schaal, I was almost disappointed his alone time had ended. Maybe this has to do with the talent of Will Forte to keep an audience engaged for a full twenty-odd minutes, but The Last Man On Earth is also an example of the greatest unwritten rule of television: execution over concept wins every time.

When The West Wing went on the air in late 1999, television executives said, and still say today, that political dramas don’t work. And think about it? How many successful political dramas can you count that aren’t the other two you are thinking of right now. The Last Man On Earth is just another example of how execution is the most important piece of the pie. Not that this comedy, which covers ground where only dramas have dared to tread—the aftermath of a world pandemic (without Zombies), is unique. Far from it. But in the hands of a less talented group than Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, known for The Lego Movie and upcoming Han Solo prequel, and the creator of one of my favorite recent SNL players, Will Forte (Please watch Guy in a Box—a lesser known skit that is genius), the concept alone wouldn’t have worked.

A touchstone of what makes the comedy on *The Last Man On Earth* so wonderful is the stakes. The one camera sitcom takes place in 2022, starting in the aftermath of the above mentioned

6

virus that appears to have killed almost the entire world's population. To talk about specific instances from the show would spoil the series, but, suffice to say, this world has consequences and the fact that Phil has lost his entire family is not ignored.

What excites me the most about *The Last Man On Earth* is that it is the first comedy series in a long time that surprises me. *The Last Man On Earth* isn't just a silly comedy based in a pretty scary situation. Or just a sitcom about a pretty flawed character (Phill) making comical mistakes as he strives to find his humanity in a world where humanity is on the verge of extinction. Every time you start to feel safe in each new world of Phil's or you think we've met the final person on earth some unexpected twist jolts you out of your seat and makes you wonder what could possibly happen next.

It is, again, really hard to talk about specifics in terms of performances and moments (and wonderful cast) without ruining these surprises. And in a world of twenty-four hour spoiler coverage and casting announcements posted as news, it is so rare to be able to be surprised by a show—and this one does it.

Catastrophe
Amazon Prime

"We wanted to capture something that showed the beauty of a growing relationship but we wanted to put it in a pressure cooker and make sure terrible things happen to them from the outset... like in real life."

– Rob Delaney, co-creator & star

I would seriously renew my subscription for Amazon Prime for U.K's *Catastrophe* alone. Witty, funny and adult, this slice into the concept that just because you're an adult doesn't mean you hold all the answers about love, parenthood, and sharing your life with a partner, feels refreshingly new. Rob Delancy and Sharon Horgan (who co-wrote the series together) play Sharon Morris and Rob Norris respectively. Two single adults in their almost to early forties, who are thrown together in what, on the surface, looks like a traditional 90s romantic comedy.

Rob plays an American in London on a business trip and Sharon an Irish school teacher, who, after a no strings attached week together find themselves surprised with the results of some shoddy birth control. Figuring they aren't getting any younger, the two decide to make it a go and Rob transfers his job to London so they can raise their baby together. Season One (only 6 episodes) is Rob and Sharon fitting into each other's lives and friends, while planning the arrival of their child and spending the rest of their lives together. From the get go you see how well suited these two are for each other, often being the only two in the room who understand each other. Bantering off one another in public and in honest, funny, sex scenes. *Catastrophe* is about the swirling storm of life, family and love, but also about how complicated relationships and parenthood are to navigate.

In Season Two (which according to a panel I attended at the TriBeCa Film Festival was meant to be most of Season One originally) we time jump to Sharon and Rob as parents a few years later. And I'm glad we got the season one that we did because I feel without the backstory of

7

their relationship you wouldn't be rooting for these characters to make it—and root for them you do.

Now don't get me wrong, Catastrophe is laugh out loud funny, but from truth—the core of which all comedy stems from. We laugh because we recognize. Being a parent and being married is hard—it's human. It's complicated. I'm personally not a parent nor married, and I still found ways to laugh and understand the situations Sharon and Rob find themselves in.

One of the most defining moments of Season Two for me was when Sharon, during a fight with Rob, says she doesn't have to be liked, and she's okay with that. A lifelong struggle for many women who live in a society that tells them being liked is the one quality they must possess to be a good mother, wife, sister or woman. Hearing a female character say this out loud (you can also see this as a theme in Season Two of *Kimmy Schmidt*) felt as good as laughter itself. With both Rob and Sharon at the helm, creatively and on screen, what you get is both points of view, male/female, American/Irish, and two actors writing to their strengths (and from experience).

Oh, did I mention Carrie Fisher (plays Rob's Mom) and her dog Gary Fisher show up? Catastrophe became my favorite new show from last year and I audibly sigh when I'm done with a season. Bring on Season Three!

Crazy Ex-Girlfriend
CW, Hulu, CWTV.com

“The whole show is about deconstructing stereotypes and deconstructing people and finding the truth beneath tropes. And so that's why the title is so, kind of, provocative in that way.”

– Rachel Bloom, co-creator & star

Every Late August/early September in New York City, and most big cities, you start to see the crop of posters for the new network fall television programs. On buses, subway cars and platforms. For those of us who have embraced the streaming culture to the hilt, it can sometimes be the first introduction to the new crop of shows, that is, if you don't follow Deadline religiously as I do, but still.

Nowadays, there is so much television (and thank God!) that as an actor based in NYC I have to admit I pay more attention to the NYC filmed pilots during the upfronts in May (when most commercial based networks officially announce their season) and then ease my way into fall television as it gets closer so as not to have an extreme television nervous breakdown.

I bring this up because I was familiar with the name Crazy Ex-Girlfriend before I knew exactly what the show was trying to accomplish, or was about, which meant my first real introduction to the series was seeing this (see photo below): a sparse white paper sign attached to a “MCEG”

subway poster that read: “My Femininity owes you nothing. #enoughnyc”

The cast and creative team of MCEG were greeted with much of the same attitude at their TCA (Television Critics Association) panel, before the show aired, much to their own shock and

8

dismay. After all, Rachel Bloom had already established herself with her irreverent YouTube musical channel of original content, and as a writer on shows such as Robot Chicken.

She and co-creator Aline Brosh McKenna — who took on the screenplay for the *The Devil Wears Prada*, where her aim was to explore what it meant to be called a “Devil” or a “bitch”—were both not new in terms of reputations to this crowd of reporters. I remember reading about said panel on Deadline, still not sure I would be watching this show, (I was never much a CW type gal) just keeping up with the industry (or maybe it was the headline), but it was reading the participants flabbergasted responses to the fact that not one reporter seemed to get what they were doing, made me want to watch more than just the pilot of this show.

I felt like an idiot — of course the title was part of the joke, in a way. *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, and in fact Rachel Bloom herself, would be the first one to tell you don’t forget there is not a “My”, is in fact a feminist show, hell bent on exploring the pejorative language thrown at woman since the dawn of time... and also have fun musical numbers in between. If you don’t like musicals, I might move on to the next recommendation, but I also think that shouldn’t deter you from watching this show. Much like the modern classic musical *Hamilton*, the hottest ticket on Broadway right now, Pulitzer winner and multi-Tony Award recipient, the songs in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (all parodies) include such a mix of musical theater and modern music references, both camps can enjoy the songs equally without feeling left out.

A little about the plot: Rebecca Bunch (Bloom) is a Type A, Ivy League educated, highly successful lawyer in Manhattan. On the surface she is happy, appearing to most to have it all, about to be made partner at her firm before she turns thirty, but of course Rachel isn’t happy and she is panicked. After a chance meeting with her theater camp ex-boyfriend, Josh, Rachel has a revelation—she was her happiest with Josh at musical theater camp. And bingo, she quits her job, moves to his hometown West Covina California (“Two hours from the beach, four with traffic.”), and in no particular order stops taking her medication and begins seeing herself in lavish musical numbers. Like the “Sexy Getting Ready Song” about the ridiculous lengths women go through to ready themselves for going on a date with a man (which ends with rapper Nipsey Hussle no longer having it with this “nasty-ass patriarchal bullshit”) or “Gettin’ Bi” a Huey Lewis like pop ballad about coming out as bi-sexual and the Astaire and Rogers-esque ballad “Settle For Me” about having no problem being a lover’s second choice.

Rebecca is not in a good place in her life, and like most women... make that people... is assuming love will bring her to a happy place. *Girlfriend* is a comic depiction of what love does to us and about finding your bliss-within. It isn’t that Rebecca hasn’t found love because she’s crazy, it’s because her idea of happiness, perhaps even society’s idea of happiness, has made her act “crazy”. And she isn’t alone.

Each character has their own issues to deal with, from her white boss with an American Indian name looking for his identity, Josh and his self-absorbed controlling girlfriend, Greg

(#TeamGreg) whose love issues could get his own series, and her new best friend, over-forty Paula who is living her life through Rebecca like Rebecca is a celebrity in one of her People magazines. You will fall in love with all these characters, played by Broadway veterans like Santino Fontana (yeah he was in Frozen but I've seen him in New York Theater more times than I can count — tell me his John Adams or Moss Hart isn't superior.) Donna Lynne Champlin

9

(I can never forget her in Hollywood Arms as a young Carol Burnett facsimile—and see her now in NYC at The Public's Taming Of the Shrew!!) and the new to you Pete Gardner as Darryl Whitefeather (Rachel's Boss) and Vincent Rodriguez III as Josh Chan.

Josh Chan being a rare character on television, or in entertainment in general these days, an Asian character whose ethnicity doesn't define him. Not only that, but something that is also rare, an object of desire. I have to admit this was something I didn't even notice was unusual in entertainment until it was brought to light by one of the creators of Netflix's Master of None, Alan Yang, who posed the question, and I paraphrase: "Have you ever seen an Asian man kiss anyone on screen?"

Even better, this isn't an example of open ethnicity casting — Josh was written to be Asian-American. I can't imagine what this must mean to Asian-Americans watching this series. I know how much it means to me to have a Jewish character I can relate to on television, and that isn't as rare. Not that you (or I) should relate to Rachel one hundred percent, she has a long way to go and grow (Did I mention even the episode titles are obsessed with Josh and not one is missing his name?) Rachel Bunch is a mess, but in her exaggerated flaws and jazz hands, we can all see shards of ourselves in the broken mirror that reflects back. In all the characters, in fact. Regardless of if we laugh more at the Music Man or the Katy Perry references.

The Americans

FX, Hulu & FXnetwork.com with a cable subscription

12696 "The Americans is at its core a marriage story. International relations is just an allegory for human relations."

– Joe Weisberg, creator, and former CIA

While putting this list together a friend of mine was shocked to discover The Americans was even on it. Not because it wasn't a good show, but because she assumed it was a big hit. And that had me questioning it.

Was I mistaken? But after a quick Google search I was sorry to discover I was, in fact, correct.

Maybe it's the premise? Influenced by the sleeper cells of Russian agents known as the Illegals Program that were busted by the CIA in 2010, The Americans transplants the story to the higher stakes 1980s Cold War era America. Elizabeth and Phillip Jennings appear to be average Americans on the surface, but their children (Henry and Paige) don't even know that their parents work for the KGB. I have to say I wasn't sure myself about the series. After watching just the teaser of the pilot I was hooked.

Its mix of music, editing, character and action was visceral from the start. The Americans has many moments of excitement, sex and life or death situations, terrible cliffhanger, but at its core is the relationships each character has with one another and not exclusively through the Jennings family. These relationships include the FBI agent (the finally no longer under-utilized Noah Emmerich) and his family (who moves next door in the first episode) his cohorts at work,

10

the Russian diplomats working in the Russian Embassy, as well as the contacts and the marks Elisabeth and Philip use to achieve their goals.

Headlined by amazing performances from Kerry Russell, Matthew Rhys, respectively as Elizabeth and Philip, the supporting cast of Richard Thomas, new standouts such as Alison Wright as one of Phillip's marks Martha, and Annet Mahendru as Nina, a Russian secretary caught up in a world she never counted on, make the show shine even further. The inclusion of stalwart character actors like Frank Langella, Dylan Baker, and one of the character actresses of my heart Margo Martindale as Claudia, is just icing on the soviet cake.

The Americans does what television does best: character exploration. Many will say the reason people feel more attached to television characters is because they come into our homes and aren't displayed on the big screen like gods, television is something more intimate. And I think that is part of it, but in today's culture where one is far more likely to stream the bulk of their movies than see them in theaters, I think the answer is far more obvious. Where most movies are mostly about plot, television has the luxury of more than two hours to delve into character, deeply and emotionally, you don't just let them into your home, but into your heart. Television is the character study of all character studies, because of time. Today more than ever, during what many call a new golden age of television, episodic filmmaking is connecting with film audiences as well. Franchised action movies appear to be universal between cultures and gender, reliable money for Hollywood, and escapism in bad times, but maybe the connection with the audience (especially via comic books) is more about the familiarity of a returning friend. On the surface, The Americans may appear to be all action, but it is a story about the human condition... with big hair, trickle-down economics, and a Fleetwood Mac Soundtrack.

Broadchurch
BBC America, Netflix

latest "If you are playing someone who is investigating a crime and the crime is actually unfolding as you go from an acting point of view, that's very helpful as you can't second guess... You can be as exasperated about the mystery of the characters as the audience will be."

– David Tennant, co-star

If you're an anglophile like myself or a Doctor Who fan... also like myself, the title Broadchurch is not foreign to you. However, for those who have just discovered David Tennant from his glorious and terrifying performances in the amazing Netflix series Jessica Jones, I have a feeling the title eludes you.

A short time ago you may have seen Tennant, with an American accent, on Fox's limited series *Gracepoint* playing Detective Emmett Carver, alongside *Breaking Bad*'s Anna Gunn (Detective Ellie Miller). *Gracepoint* is an American version of the ITV U.K. Series *Broadchurch*, also starring Tennant.

However, like most direct to American remakes of British television without finding a new point of view (I reference classics such as *The Office* and *All In The Family*) the British version is far,

11

far, superior. This may not be the American version's fault, as the original series, literally has the advantage of being first because of the organic nature in which it was produced therefore making it unrepeatable.

Created and written by Chris Chibnall, former *Doctor Who* and *Torchwood* writer and the next showrunner of *Doctor Who*, *Broadchurch* had such secrecy surrounding the mystery of the story even the final reveal of the killer was kept from the actors themselves. Believing the shroud of mystery the characters felt would in turn help the actor's performances, the actors were kept in the dark until the final three scripts. And even though Chibnall had a final endgame in place, he used what the actors were doing on screen as he wrote the final episodes of the series and even had an alternate ending in case the reveal was leaked to the public.

The concept behind *Broadchurch* is a story of a small town after the murder of a young child, and how in that aftermath a well-knit community deals with the media scrutiny and suspicion on/of them. The intriguing who-done-it drama and its themes are thrown into full gear not long into the first episode by the murder of twelve-year-old Danny Latimor.

Tennant plays Alec Hardy, a hardened Scottish Detective Inspector, new in town, with a chip on his shoulder. He is paired with Detective Inspector Ellie Miller, a townie who had been promised Hardy's job only to return from vacation to discover her new promotion had been given to the more experienced, big city, male counterpart. Miller and Hardy are the core of the series as they work together to find Danny's killer. Is Miller too close to the town to think clearly and is Hardy too much of a stranger to do the same? Complicated by the fact that the little boy was Miller's son's best friend, it becomes a portrait of two families and their matriarchs in juxtaposing situations. Two mothers; two detectives.

In a performance that won the superb Olivia Colman (*Hot Fuzz*, *Rev.*, mostly comedy) a BAFTA award, Colman is sympathetic and heart wrenching. Alongside Tennant who is almost unrecognizable as Hardy, disheveled inside and out, dealing with the memories of a past that plagues him. Pushing himself, often too hard, to not make the same mistakes he has made before. Miller and Hardy appear on paper to be two mystery archetypes, yet in the right hands, of actor and writer, have become new and fully formed. Not to mention that it is refreshing to hear Tennant's natural Scottish accent, which he rarely is given the chance to use.

Tennant puts in one of his greatest performances as Hardy, mostly because of the kind of character he is. While *Jessica Jones* is a close second in this critique, what *Broadchurch* does to surpass what are both equally rich performances, is that Hardy gives us a side of Tennant

most of us are not accustomed to—the opposite of charming. Hardy is troubled and it bleeds through him without any pretense, without a filter. Jodie Whittaker (*Attack The Block*, *Cranford*) as Danny's mother fills the screen with her heart-wrenching performance all the way through season two.

While Hardy and Miller, as well as the Miller and Latimor families, are the centerpiece of the series, the other characters, a town filled with suspects, are set up as perfect foils to the plot. More archetypes are brought to the surface as three dimensional characters: the town priest (played by *Doctor Who*'s Arthur Darvill), the ambitious reporters (local and otherwise), co-workers and friends to the woman who runs the local hotel and newspaper. Everyone,

12

including Danny's family, are suspects. What you get is the Agatha Christie framework for the modern age.

The conclusion of season one is chilling and is what all great drama (to quote Alex Dineleris' Ted Talk) should be: surprisingly inevitable. Meaning it is an ending that is both shocking and believable, in retrospect. Season two takes place in the aftermath of the killer's trial and, in a smart transition, changes from more of a beat-by-beat who-done-it-to to a different kind of mystery as well as delving into both sides of a U.K. murder trial.

What you get with *Broadchurch* is great performances, intriguing interpersonal relationships, and a gripping mystery that has captured your attention throughout the entire tale.

TOP FIVE: SHOWS YOU SHOULD HAVE WATCHED (2016

Outlet: Forcesofgeek

In this new era of television, it's rare for a series to be forgotten. Thanks to DVD, iTunes and streaming media, there's a good chance that you can find most modern series if you look hard enough.

Here are five series that you might not have watched the first time around, but that doesn't mean that they don't deserve your attention.

1. *The Wrong Mans* (2013-2014)

"What would happen if something of that magnitude would happen (an American high stakes action movie)and it happened to just two ordinary guys."

– James Corden (creator/co-star)

For those of you who are just now discovering James Corden through his popular late night talk show, *The Late Late Show* – and its carpool karaoke sketch – or experienced him for the first time in the film adaptation of *Into The Woods* as *The Baker*, let me introduce you to another James Corden.

James is a Tony award winning actor (*One Man, Two Guvnors*) as well as the talented

writer/co-star of the highly popular U.K. series, Gavin & Stacey. His Hulu and BBC Two's dark comedy *The Wrong Mans*, co-written by Corden, Tom Basden and co-starring Mathew Baynton, contemplates the notion of what would happen if two regular guys were thrown into an action film.

After witnessing a car crash and then passing out, County Council worker Sam Pinkett (Baynton) discovers a phone near the crash and keeps it, hoping to return to its rightful owner, who he assumes is the injured man from the crash. What happens next is that an unlikely hero, alongside office oddball Phil Bourne (Corban), finds himself unwittingly thrown into one outrageous incident after another.

13

Where *Last Man On Earth* (which I recommended in a previous column) has me exclaiming, "Well that surprised me, what will happen next?" *The Wrong Mans* is more, "How CAN they get out of this one?" Believably and comically, they do find a way out.

The first season of *The Wrong Mans* is a roller coaster ride of high volatility. Although the second season is good, the shorter season of episodes makes it difficult to build the mystery with the same high octane momentum as the previous season.

Still, the continued chemistry of its two leads and the comedy itself more than make up for any shortcomings within season two. My overwhelming excitement for James Corden's success (For Doctor Who fans like myself, he will always be our little Craig!) is only sullied by the fact that we won't see a season three – or more writing from him – in the foreseeable future.

2. *Jekyll* (2007)

"I think there's a commonality between writing comedy and writing thriller-based, horror-based stuff. It's about punchlines."

– Steven Moffat (creator)

Before there was the U.K. phenomenon known as *Sherlock*, there was *Jekyll* – as in *Mr Hyde*. Yes, Steven Moffat, co-creator of *Sherlock* and current showrunner (for one more season) of *Doctor Who*, the man who brought you the world of weeping angels, *The Silence* and unleashed the *Cumberbatch* on us all...first dipped his toe into similar territory with *Jekyll*. Since first shown to me by a friend several years ago, this series has held an high place on my go-to list of recommendations.

I have often remarked how shocked I was that this U.K. drama hadn't yet been redone or rebooted...until now. *Deadline.com* reports that *Jekyll* will become a film, written by Moffat, and starring Captain America himself, Chris Evans, in the foreseeable future. This gives you even more of a reason to watch this series now.

Unlike *Sherlock*, this take on *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is not just a modern retelling, but also a sequel of sorts. *Jekyll: The Next Generation*. What's the real story? Is this some kind of genetic disorder? These are topped with an amazing performance by James

Nesbitt (as our main character, Doctor Tom Jackman), and some Moffat favorites you may recognize from Doctor Who and his classic sitcom, Coupling (The U.K. version, its first and only one).

The twists and turns of each episode of Jekyll will have you gasping out loud. Surprising and engaging, it will have you on the edge of your seat. Don't make the length of this recommendation persuade you; but, like many of my recommendations in my top five column, I don't want to ruin the surprises that can only be described as an old time serial-type format without the cheap theatrics.

14

Make no mistake – there are plenty of theatrics, but none cheap. Unfortunately, Jekyll was only one season, and in the U.S. would be considered more of a mini-series; but it is very much worth your time. You will be wanting more, but it will still leave you completely satisfied.

3. Green Wing (2004-2007)

“It's a bit of a hybrid, isn't it? It's a sketch-meets-comedy-drama-meets-soap. It's kind of unique, it hasn't got a forerunner, really.”

– Victoria Pile (creator)

Another U.K. Show...I know, but bear with me. Now a show I don't have on this particular list (but would happily add to another list soon) is Showtime and BBC Two's Episodes, which I mention because it happens to star two of the leads of Green Wing, Tamsin Greig (The Second Greatest Marigold Hotel), and Stephen Mangan (Houdini and Doyle), my initial draw to the show.

Mangan and Greig along with Doctor Who's Michelle Gomez, are the major factors that I would consider my “gateway drugs” into enjoying this series. Green Wing's two seasons of comedy tell the tale of a group of wacky, and sometimes not so wacky, doctors and administrators in the green wing of the fictional East Hampton Hospital. Often described in the U.S. as a “British Scrubs”, Green Wing feels more like Grey's Anatomy if it were stuck inside a Monty Python sketch.

Greig (Dr. Caroline Todd) plays the new doctor in town acting as the audience's eye – and “straight woman” – into the madcap (yes, I just used madcap – deal with it) world and characters of the show. Mangan (at his best, as Dr. Guy Secretan) plays a pompous doctor with big ideas (e.g. he has invented a game, “GuyBall”). Julian Rhind-Tutt (as Dr. ‘Mac’ Macartney) plays the good guy on staff. Gomez (as Sue White)...well, let's just say she plays the liaison officer, almost like a head of H.R., who is the craziest of them all.

Anyone who may already know Gomez from her turn on Doctor Who, and therefore know her great talent for taking a character off solid ground and into the glorious heightened stratosphere, will not be disappointed. However, those just discovering her will be a fan of Sue White's for life. I'm not usually a fan of broad comedy, but this has the mix of broad strokes, callbacks, word play, and sight gags (e.g. Gomez does everything from wearing very long arms to literally flying

from the ceiling). And for those of us who were first introduced to Olivia Colman in Broadchurch can get a kick out of comic turns as Harriet.

The comedy in Green Room is off the wall, surreal...and, often, flatout bizarre. It isn't a surprise that the creator and writers hail from sketch comedy (of Victoria Pile's sketch show, Smack The Pony). But, there was a dramatic shift, from my perspective, during the season one finale (Episode 9), that switched this show for me from "just funny" to "highly recommendable".

The shift felt so drastic that, if I didn't know any better, I would have assumed the finale episode of the season one was in fact the first episode of season two. I understand I am in the minority in this, as many people feel season two is the weaker of the two seasons. Maybe it's my sense

15

of humor, or maybe it was because by the end of the season I had grown to love these characters and cheer on in all their foibles and successes.

Oh, and baby-faced John Oliver has a few lines in the pilot, so keep an eye out for that.

4. The Riches (2007-2008)

"The Riches is The Sopranos meets The Beverly Hillbillies. It's a show about outsiders, and through their perspective we experience America and see how we live in a whole new light."

– Dmitry Lipkin (creator)

When The Riches first aired, the immediate draw for me was comedian, actor and literal (and figurative) marathon runner, Eddie Izzard. I stayed for the show. Most importantly, The Riches became the reason I finally knew Margo Martindale by name (Four years before her career-changing, Emmy-winning turn in Justified) instead of by the usual moniker for great character actors, "That woman who was in that thing."

The Riches is a dark comedy, if not dramedy with a capital D. Wayne and Dahlia Malloy and their three kids are Irish Travelers, con-artists, married to the family they travel with in the same way we would look at the Italian mob: the only way out appears to be death.

When Dahlia (played by Minnie Driver) is released from jail after two years, only to find her family worse for wear and her teenage daughter about to be married off, Delilah and her husband Wayne (played by Izzard) decide enough is enough and run.

When fellow travelers run a couple off the road in the chase of them, the runaway family (The Malloys) stop to help the couple (the Riches), only to discover the couple are, in fact, dead – gruesomely so. Fearful their fellow family members will return for them, the Malloys decide to lay low in the dead couple's new home until the coast is clear.

What they don't know is that the Riches bought their new home sight unseen after the husband, a lawyer, was hired by his CV alone; and, you guessed it, everyone assumes the Malloys are now the Riches.

The Malloys ran away to go legit, and becoming the Riches became a proposition too good to pass up – getting the American dream the best way they know how, by stealing it. The dark humor of the series comes from the family balancing their lies with their true identities, all while dealing with serious issues, e.g. Delilah’s drug habit.

Not to mention the rich suburbanites of Edenfalls (Yes, that’s the name of the town) aren’t far from strife themselves: their neighbor and soon-to-be friend, Nina (Martindale), whose marriage to a gay man has left her lonely...to Wayne, a.k.a. Doug Rich’s new boss, Huge (played by Gregg Henry), whose money, prestige, and ego epitomizes the dark side of the American Dream.

16

The Riches is about the darkness of our shared human experience and that the old adage of “the grass is always greener” is right on the money, pun intended. Not to mention, The Riches was the first time I ever saw a transgender character on television dealt with in a non-mocking way.

An aspect of the show before Izzard was brought on board (Izzard identifies as transgender himself), the Malloys’ youngest son prefers to dress in what western society refers to as “feminine” clothes, and his family has no problem with it.

At its core, The Riches is a fish-out-of-water dark comedy about identity. Also, keep an eye out for a very “meta” moment when Izzard and Driver, both Brit’s playing Americans in the series, pretending to play two british characters, by using their real accents as covers.

5. Happy Endings/Marry Me (2011-2013; 2014-2015)

“I think the issue is the pace of it and the realism. I know we go to some weird places as a story, but there’s a kind of gritty realism to it in places, and some heart that I think would maybe be lost in multi-cam”

– Jonathan Groff (showrunner)

Much like Parks and Recreation, many would agree that Happy Endings didn’t really kick into gear until the second season; and, much like the first paintball episode of Community, things just started to gel at that point. Now, if you just had no idea what that first sentence just meant, this may be a big reason why Happy Endings wasn’t renewed for a fourth season, in what Vulture called, “[one of the] worst TV decisions of the 2012–13 television season.”

In fact, when the recent Vulture Festival in New York City featuring a reunion of the cast went on sale, it sold out within minutes. Much like many shows you hear are great, but have never seen before, this show has a rabid fandom. And why is that? Think of Happy Endings as a mash up of Friends and Gilmore Girls on double the coffee: snappy, fast, witty dialogue mixed with millisecond pop culture references on acid.

Happy Endings is the story of a tight-knit group of friends who, after the first scene of the pilot,

are left to pick up the pieces after one of the friends jilts the other at the altar. You have the dizzy sweet one and ex-bride, Alex (Eliza Coupe); her uptight, Type A sister Jane (Eliza Coupe); Jane's sharp, funny, sexy husband, Brad (Damon Wayans, Jr.); adorable, single gal-about-town, Penny (Casey Wilson); freeloading Max just looking for Mr. Right (Adam Pally); and the ex-groom and food truck extraordinaire, Dave (Zachary Knighton).

You'll be happy you stayed and sad it ended. That's why I tagged on the first season of *Marry Me*, an NBC show from *Happy Endings* creator David Caspe. Also starring Casey Wilson (who, by this time, had married Caspe and served as his best muse), *Marry Me* was meant to take you from engagement to marriage, but only lasted one season.

17

It co-stars the comedic chops of Ken Marino (*The State*), John Gemberling (*Broad City*), Sarah Wright Olsen (*House Bunny*), Tymberlee Hill (*The Hotwives*), Dan Bucatinsky (*Scandal*; *Gilmore Girls: A Year In The Life*), and Tim Meadows (*SNL*). Written for Casey, and with a smaller group of friends, *Marry Me* gives you a few episodes to say goodbye with, making the pain more sweet than bitter.

And then you should start the show all over again and catch the jokes that were so quick, you missed them the first time. Don't cry because it's over, cry because *Happy Endings* was a thing.

A big, funny, crazy thing. And you're gonna love it.

Just Carrie: A Tribute to Carrie Fisher **Outlet: Travalanche**

"I don't want my life to imitate art. I want my life to be art." — Carrie Fisher

The day after Carrie Fisher passed away in December, and for subsequent days afterward, letters still flooded the U.K. newspaper *The Guardian* where Fisher had an advice column. Not because these people had no idea the actor/writer had just died, but because they thought maybe in some way Fisher could still reach out to them, just as her character Princess Leia had reached out when she was in need: "Obi-Wan Kenobi, you are my only hope."

After its premiere in 1977, *Star Wars* became a surprise hit that not only changed the way films were made and how we consume them, but went on to become a global phenomenon. Its creator George Lucas has even referred to it as a "religion," and for many it holds a cult-like quality over their lives. And what may just be a film for some, has for millions become a beacon of joy passed down from generation to generation. For most, Carrie Fisher's likeness as Princess Leia has been in their lives since childhood or early adulthood. Whether the film was the glue that brought their family together or solace for them in bad times, Carrie Fisher's status as a pop culture icon is one draped in the nostalgia of youth, a line of demarcation between childhood and adult responsibility. I have to digress for a moment and admit that I began writing this essay the day after Carrie Fisher died; but when her mother, Debbie Reynolds, passed away that same night, I just put it away. This is in fact my third, as they say in show business, "pass" writing about Carrie Fisher since her passing. For many, 2016 was a hard year personally and creatively, one which included the loss of so many great artists who had touched

our lives. Carrie Fisher was no different but her connection to our childhood as a symbol of, well, hope, gave the end of 2016 even more of a sting. I ended 2016 with a scratched cornea, meaning the year had both figuratively and literally broken me. But I see now that my writer's block was in fact caused by how hard it was to write about Carrie Fisher in the past tense – so much of her life was lived in the vibrant, take-no-prisoners, present. Because Carrie Fisher to me, and to millions, was more than a pop culture princess. She was a wit, a mental health and addiction advocate, a script doctor, an advice giver, a raconteur ... a bullshit barometer. (Not to mention Dog Lover and Coca-Cola connoisseur) Carrie was once asked who she would be without Princess Leia: "Just Carrie" she responded plainly. It doesn't feel right to celebrate forty years of Star Wars without Carrie Fisher. But maybe the best way to celebrate this day is to

18

remind people of her real impact beyond the stars. So in celebration today here is my new (and a little of the old) essay, I hope you enjoy it.

"You know the bad thing about being a survivor... You keep having to get into difficult situations in order to show off your gift."

I was lucky enough to have met Carrie Fisher a few times and crossed paths (more on that later) with her on a few occasions over the last fifteen years (as a fan). For me, Carrie Fisher was an inspiration at a very formative time in my life, and is even more so now, after her passing. Now, I'm not talking about Star Wars. And listen, I'm not saying there is anything wrong with remembering Carrie Fisher for Star Wars – as our Princess Leia, and later, General Organa. Carrie herself knew (and repeated in interviews) that she knew that would always be the first– and probably the last – line in her obituary. As she said in public and in private to those who knew and worked with her (including actress Maria Thayer who recalled the same story on my podcast The Fordcast), Carrie Fisher's impact as a strong female character set the mold – or at least the on-ramp – toward women in (what Carrie called) "all-boy fantasies." Women who stood up for themselves and were able to take the blasters right out of the boy's hands and save themselves. First impressions for children are important, as is equal representation, inspiring across the boards and sexes. In 2004, on the radio show Fresh Air, Carrie recounted how she had gone to her first fan convention and was shocked when a woman told her that Leia had inspired her to become a lawyer. What Leia was, and Carrie Fisher became, was a role model – embodying a visual example for men and women, girls and boys – of what a woman's place in the world could be: working alongside the menfolk, not two steps behind. In the end, Carrie Fisher the person became an icon, as herself: a kickass woman who, like Leia, spoke up for her beliefs and demanded to be heard. For it was in real life that Carrie inspired people, especially women, not only for being outspoken, but also the notion of survival with a sense of humor. Yes, I spent many a day as a tiny tot watching Star Wars religiously, while simultaneously chewing on the tiny nose of her Empire Strikes Back action figure; but it was her words as a writer that I mentally chewed on, way past my teething stage. Look – the internet is lousy with far more qualified people than myself to talk about Star Wars, especially today of all days. I would just be another voice in the crowd, and I don't need or like to do what has already been done. Carrie taught me that. After her death, I was warmed by how many journalists and social media users took the time to remember Carrie Fisher the writer, the wit and – if I can be so bold – the humorist. Not to mention acknowledging her as a voice for mental health and addiction who has inspired millions fighting their own personal battles, Star Wars was just the vehicle that brought her to us. The same way Leia fought her war of resistance against the Empire, Carrie was

fighting her own wars with mental health and addiction, and in time helped others fight this same battle by example.

“Do not let what you think they think of you make you stop and question everything you are.”

George Burns, a humorist in his own right, once said, “Someone who makes you laugh is a comedian. Someone who makes you think and then laugh is a humorist. If you’re familiar enough with the work, comedy, and banter of Carrie Fisher, you know she possessed very little self-censorship when it came to letting an opportunity for a joke or pun pass her by – so much so that it was as if she had been a vaudeville comedian in a previous life. When asked where she got her personality, she replied, “Sears.” In fact, Carrie Fisher would be the first one to

19

make a joke at the expense of her own death. In fact, she would want us all to laugh and make jokes. Yes, I think I would be paying Carrie Fisher the best possible tribute when I say she never left a hole – I mean, that she never left a void – go un- ... okay, well maybe that isn’t appropriate for this medium ... but Carrie would have loved the effort. Because what Carrie Fisher did was take ownership of her own narrative by making fun of it.

“I thought I would inaugurate a Bipolar Pride Day. You know, with floats and parades and stuff! On the floats we would get the depressives, and they wouldn’t even have to leave their beds – we’d just roll their beds out of their houses, and they could continue staring off miserably into space. And then, for the manics, we’d have the manic marching band, with manics laughing and talking and shopping and f*%#ing and making bad judgment calls.”

If Nora Ephron’s mantra was “everything is copy,” then Carrie Fisher’s might have been that “nothing is sacred” – or in her own words, “If my life wasn’t funny, it would just be true, and that is just unacceptable.” Carrie weathered two marriages (she was actually married only once, but often called the father of her daughter her “second husband”), drug addiction issues, bipolar disorder, drug relapse, being committed, electroshock treatment, being left by her “second husband” for a man, her mother’s failed marriages (take a breath now and:), and her mother’s two husbands, who took all her mother’s money and left her bankrupt (and breathe again). However, Carrie found a way to comment and poke fun at every melodramatic moment of her life (“I am a spy in the house of me”); and, as absurd as it sounds, I am now half-expecting Carrie Fisher to comment on her own death, throwing out one of her one-liners on a talk show or in an emoji-riddled tweet (Most of her tweets, if you are unaware, were in need of a cartographer and a U.N. Translator). I wouldn’t be surprised to discover some letter in her will from Beyond. The. Grave. I mean, you can already trace Carrie Fisher’s life by her fiction (or roman a clefs) alone: *Postcards From The Edge* (rehab), *Surrender To The Pink* (first marriage), *Delusions of Grandma* (motherhood), and *The Best Awful* (institutionalization and release). There are her more recent memoirs detailing the in-between, as well, including the book and Broadway show *Wishful Drinking*, many of which echo lines and moments from her aforementioned novels. You might say Carrie Fisher’s life was an open book (yes, I said it...); and, you know what, Carrie Fisher was fine with that. She said it helped her cope; and, just as importantly, it helped other people cope through her honesty. Since her death, stories of fans who spoke to Carrie at signings and conventions – and even in private twitter messages of advice about their shared troubles, have come out of the woodwork. She counseled, advised, and commiserate with people, not just by example as most celebrities do, but with the personal, imperfect precision of

her candor. I say imperfect because what Carrie Fisher taught us was that “perfect” was overrated.

That even though she was born into Hollywood royalty as the daughter of a movie star and a pop star, and starred in a global franchise as a Princess, that didn’t mean she was free of problems – far from it. “Say your weak things in a strong voice,” she would say, “I’m very powerful about my weaknesses.” She inspired many to take ownership and control of what might otherwise tear them down, and not just in brief fan encounters. Carrie Fisher was known to bring strangers and friends to stay in her guest house: those who needed a place to stay, addicts in recovery, even one woman she had just met at an AA meeting who was living in her car. Carrie once expressed that it gave her a sense of community, being open and honest about herself with people, even strangers. She felt that commenting on her own life in humorous ways

20

helped her feel somehow outside of it all, looking down. This way of living life, of not feeling ashamed of one’s own weaknesses – of making sure life was funny – became a battle cry for many people, including myself. And although I personally don’t struggle with mental illness or addiction, she opened my mind up to a world I would have never been privy to. She had this effect not only on her fans, but on many people. The outpouring of remembrance on Twitter from people who had never met Carrie, or who only met her briefly, spoke of how she touched so many with an openness we normally don’t grant to strangers. Even Mark Hamill, her Star Wars co-star (Luke Skywalker) said the same about Carrie when he recalled their first meeting. Stories still pour into Twitter and Facebook about people who sat next to her at a charity event, or on an airplane. And the overall theme (except for maybe the guy who got drunk with her in first class) was that Carrie’s connection to people seemed to come from a genuine place. Sharon Horgan, the star and creator of *Catastrophe* (Carrie Fisher’s last filmed performance), said “Carrie Fisher was so real it was dangerous.”

“So it’s not what you’re given, it’s how you take it.”

My story with Carrie Fisher may be the least interesting. The first time I met Carrie Fisher was after I had just moved to New York and there were far more Barnes & Noble around than there are today. I attended a free signing for Carrie’s book, *The Best Awful*. It was a moment I had been waiting for since my mother took me as a young teen to the used book store in our hometown and I bought a beat up copy of *Surrender The Pink*. Carrie, first of all, was funny, and that meant something to me at that age. I don’t remember when I first knew that, knew that she was funny – that she could spin words in the air the way my youthful mind dreamed up, in comic couplets and wry, irreverent phrases. All I know is that Carrie Fisher being funny was what led me to buy that first book, and later pay more attention far past a childhood fancy. And I knew long before I read her fiction, the above-mentioned quote, “If my life wasn’t funny, it would just be true...” resonated with a little dyslexic girl who was struggling. I had clung to that phrase as my own mantra. When I would come home from school, crying my eyes out from being bullied, there was that line telling me: “Have a sense of humor. Life is hard. You can get through this.” I would try to craft my own one-liners (e.g. “Majoring in acting in college is a high-priced degree in waitressing,” and “I’m Jewish, the other white meat!”) and practice my “talk show” banter. I wrote her quotations, among others, on my notebooks and brown paper-covered school books. I borrowed her other books from the library and never missed a talk show appearance. Any memories of Star Wars I had slowly faded away, replaced by Carrie Fisher *The Writer*. At this

signing, not only had I brought her current book, but the aforementioned beat-up copy of *Surrender The Pink*. I was young and nervous, and sat in the back.

On every seat in the small room across from Lincoln Center, were papers with the rules of Barnes and Noble: no pictures (pictures in line that don't stop the line are fine), and no signed memorabilia...books only! I saw two people holding *Return Of The Jedi* 8x10s (a young man and woman) sit down next to me, read the paper, and then leave. I was appalled. "How dare they!" At least stay and hear her read her amazing words. Carrie arrived and posed for pictures in a comedic way that suggested she found the whole idea absurd. After all, that was her persona: the child of a celebrity who saw it for what it was, in all its, well, absurdity. After Carrie read from her book, I made my way through the line until I was finally face-to-face with my hero. "You make me want to be a writer," I blurted to her and then she smiled and said only one sentence to me. It confused me, so I gave her an odd look back, and just walked away. What

21

had she said to me? Later, while recounting the story to a friend, I tried to remember. She had said something about...trying. I think...

My friend interrupted, "Did she say, 'Do. There is no try?'"

"Yes," I exclaimed, "How did you know that?"

"That's Yoda, Lauren. She spoke Yoda to you."

The last time I had seen *Empire Strikes Back* was in high school and it wasn't like I hadn't had all the Han Solo and Princess Leia scenes memorized; but, I guess it hadn't occurred to me she would speak Star Wars to me. I wasn't there for Star Wars. And my friend and I both just laughed our faces off.

"There's no room for demons when you're self-possessed."

I've often said being dyslexic is like having a buffet not of your choosing and everyone's plate is different. Carrie Fisher grew up with a love of books and words, and so did I – only that part of my life was a tragic romance. And today, her frankness still resonates with me – especially after, three years ago, I was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease ... "Say your weak things in a loud voice." This is the first time I have admitted publicly to what has been a four year struggle with my health. And even now, saying this in print is scary. Here's the thing about Carrie Fisher: she was still sensitive and vulnerable and filled with self-doubt like all of us are – and this isn't a guess, this is based on her own words and her Twitter feed. Up to her death she was still fighting against Hollywood's and society's age and beauty restrictions on women: "Please stop debating about whether or not I aged well. Unfortunately it hurts all three of my feelings." Or in a lighter mode, at Montreal's Just for Laughs Festival 2016, "Can everybody see me okay? I have to double check because I'm from Hollywood, and ya know, women my age tend to be invisible there."

Her last book, *The Princess Diarist*, published only a month before her death, contained Fisher's personal diaries from when she was nineteen and filming *Star Wars* in 1978. It was raw, unedited and unflinching, and showed – at least to me – a young woman I recognized as once

having been in my life, and one I think many women could relate to. It also showed how far Carrie Fisher had grown emotionally. What many creators of current heroic female characters in pop culture seem to forget is that strength in a woman (or any human) isn't about how strong she is physically, or how little emotion she expresses; it's that vulnerability is its own form of strength. "Be afraid. But do it anyway," was how Carrie Fisher said it. That's bravery.

"I have problems; my problems don't have me."

What I think may be the most important thing about the last years of Carrie Fisher's life is that, unlike her Fresh Air interview in 2004, she now understood not only what Star Wars meant to people, but also what she had meant to people. There is a moment in HBO's Bright Lights, the documentary about her and her mother (most likely filmed in 2014), in which Carrie tells the camera that she believes her fans look up to Leia and not her. Yet with all the stories of people's interactions with Carrie, sharing their stories with her, of how she had helped them with their

22

depression, anxiety, and so on, I can't imagine that, by the end of those two years, she didn't see how they loved her, just Carrie. She looked people in the eyes, made sure they got a picture (even when they weren't allowed to), held hands, and often hugged people as soon as they started crying. She showered them with actual glitter, because everyone deserves a little glitter in their life. Some might say she faked this for the money. Carrie herself even comically called them "lap dances" but at least from the outside it looked like the resurgence of Star Wars had helped her understand her own appeal. Through the release of The Force Awakens I found myself being reminded of my love of Star Wars and my first introduction to Carrie. I had forgotten what it had meant to me. I started co-hosting a Harrison Ford podcast and now, if someone quotes Yoda to me, I know it. Because of that podcast, I was lucky enough to attend the Catastrophe TV panel at the Tribeca Film Festival and the premiere of Bright Lights at the NY Film Festival with Carrie (Debbie actually called and sang to us over the phone). It even seemed odd to me at the time, but in 2016 I crossed paths with Carrie Fisher about four times. The last time I saw Fisher was a signing for The Princess Diarist, in NYC. If you've seen Bright Lights or read her Twitter feed, you'll understand why I gave Carrie a package of Coca-Cola Lip Smackers, because it made me laugh and I thought it would make her laugh, too. It did. I also had the feeling I should give her a little note to tell her how she had helped me. The signing was November 22nd in New York City, and she collapsed on Dec 23rd, preparing to land in Los Angeles.

"I feel I'm very sane about how crazy I am."

Meryl Streep's posthumous quotation from Carrie at the Golden Globes this year, "Take your broken heart, make it into art," seemed like the fitting epitaph to her life. And then about a month after Carrie's passing, a Women's March was held around the world. A feminist icon herself, Carrie was there, to my own surprise and delight. In posters and signs, shirts and slogans, the rabble-rouser Princess from the rebel base shone big and bright. Mixed in with the rebel princess signs were a few "Carrie Fisher sent me," because send us she had. After Carrie Fisher passed away, her ashes were kept in a giant, vintage Prozac pill-shaped impromptu urn (a favorite item of hers). Not her idea, per se, but her spirit. So...we should all be so lucky to live life big enough to end up in a big, giant, porcelain Prozac pill. Carrie Fisher's life, like the books she loved, now has a clear beginning, middle, and end. Carrie went from the Princess to the

Jedi Master. She became Obi Wan Kenobi the teacher ... or perhaps one of the letters sent to The Guardian sums it up best:

“Hi Carrie....I know you’re dead. But that shouldn’t stop you from continuing to respond to those who are sick and suffering, because come on, you were super-human in life – and in death you’ve become even more powerful.”

“Back then I was always looking ahead to who I wanted to be versus who I didn’t realize I already was, and the wished-for me was most likely based on who other people seemed to be and the desire to have the same effect on others that they had on me.”

Carrie Fisher — 1956-2016

For more of my work please visit www.laurenmilberger.com