



October 8, 2011

Women and TV: They've come a long way - maybe

By KATE TAYLOR

From Saturday's Globe and Mail

Some of this fall's hottest new shows are by and about women. But industry insiders are far from convinced that sexism is fading to black

Sporting stilettos and a black miniskirt covered in little white hearts, Whitney is hanging around the lobby of her own building, hoping to bump into last night's first date. He lives there too because, the thing is, he's actually her live-in boyfriend of three years. She's forced him into this piece of role-playing because they never had a first date, having fallen into the sack immediately after meeting at a drunken party.

Yes, Whitney is a stereotype-mocking go-getter, as is her creator, comedian Whitney Cummings, who not only stars in the eponymous new NBC comedy, but has also created the brassy *Two Broke Girls* for CBS. Cummings is one of many provocative women on television this fall, generating much debate among industry insiders and critics about whether the medium is any less sexist than ever. After all, some of this season's female characters are mere vessels of nostalgic sexism - the retro air hostesses on *Pan Am*, the scantily clad bunnies on the already-cancelled *Playboy Club*. But others are large, unapologetic figures, from the sexually assertive Whitney, to Julianna Margulies's happily divorced litigator on *The Good Wife*, to Zooey Deschanel's in-your-face nerd on *New Girl*.

If there's lots of discussion about female roles onscreen, there's much less noise about the stark reality behind the scenes. Most writers' rooms are stuck in the age of those cottontail outfits: In both Canada and the United States, they are a bastion of male hackdom.

On the heels of Tina Fey's memoir *Bossypants* - in which the TV powerhouse describes the writers' rooms of NBC's *Saturday Night Live* as places so male that the staff would sometimes pee into cups because they were too lazy to visit the toilet - two new U.S. studies have revealed that there is a lot of truth to Fey's testosterone-crazy characterization.

The most recent employment numbers from the Writers Guild of America, West (WGAW) found that women made up only 28 per cent of TV writers between 2005 and 2009. And the numbers appear to be getting worse: A survey by the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University estimates that the number of women writers dropped to 15 per cent in 2010-11 from 29 per cent the previous year. Meanwhile, the nominees for writing at this year's Emmys were almost all men (as were the winners in both the drama and comedy categories).

Although many Canadian TV writers say they operate in a more egalitarian setting, there is no reason to believe the situation here is much different: Currently only 32 per cent of the active members of the Writers Guild of Canada are women.

"You have an industry that is incredibly intense in terms of pressure to produce," says Darnell Hunt, the UCLA sociology professor who crunches the WGAW numbers. "You make a TV show, you don't have many opportunities to get it right. Show runners [head writers, who oversee the rooms] hire teams they feel extremely comfortable with, people who look like them. Nine times out of 10 that means white men are hiring white men. You may have a token woman or a token minority, but women and people of colour are having a hard time being welcomed into the club."

Although Hunt has not finished compiling the guild's 2010 numbers, he speculates that the drop shown in the San Diego study is a reflection of the recession taking its toll on the people who are likely to be the most recent hires.

Reflecting on those low numbers, female TV writers complain of a "We've got one of those" tokenism in many writers' rooms. "There is definitely still a culture of competition among women for the perceived spots for women," observes Alexandra Zarowny, who has written for numerous Canadian shows, including *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, *Murdoch Mysteries* and *The Listener*. "It is not that they set out to achieve that in the room, but that is the way it works out. It would not be surprising if you had a room that was all male. It would be surprising if you had a story room composed only of women unless it was, excuse my language, a vagina show."

Zarowny, like Hunt, argues that it's all about comfort: "There is a big cone of silence that drops over a story room. People can say anything to each other. Guys have said to me they feel constricted if there is a woman in the room: How honest can they be about their thought process?"

The trick women learn - especially in the notoriously competitive field of comedy, where women are stereotyped as being less funny than men - is to go straight for the dirty jokes and erotic content. "There is a tendency to go blue right away," says Rebecca Addelman, a Canadian comedy writer working in Los Angeles, "to prove right away that you are not some wallflower who can't handle a joke about a hand job, to prove you are there to be funny, to do what they are all doing."

But aside from telling dirty jokes, do women behind the scenes deliver less-stereotypical female characters on the screen? Some of the most talked-about new and returning shows suggest that might be the case. In the U.S., alongside Cummings's unusual double-hitter, Elizabeth Merriwether is writing *New Girl*, the Deschanel sitcom; Michelle King is the co-creator, with her husband, Robert, of *The Good Wife*. That drama has three men and three women in the writing room.

"There seems to be a demand for female characters, and strongly written female characters are doing well on television," notes Adrienne Mitchell, the executive producer and director of *Bomb Girls*, an upcoming Canadian show about female munitions workers in the Second World War, that has two men and three women on its writing staff.

Like many Canadian observers, she points to the success of Tassie Cameron, who has created the Global hit cop series *Rookie Blue* with two other women, Ellen Vanstone and Morwyn Brebner. The show about neophyte police officers in Toronto follows as many female as male characters.

"The cop shows, the lawyer shows, they want to make sure they have a woman in the room for character development, for story development," Cameron says, adding about her own show, "Whether we are addressing big issues of discrimination or not, a traditional male world like policing is interesting to explore from a female perspective, the rookie female cop. There is even more tension."

The San Diego study does show some slim evidence to support the view that more women in the writing room will produce more women onscreen. On programs with no female writers, women made up 39 per cent of the characters; that number rose to 43 per cent when there was at least one woman in the room.

Still, female TV writers know there is no rule of good writing that says you have to have the same gender as your characters. "It's up to the individual. I know women who create women who are only appendages and victims," says Hollywood writer Nancy Miller, the creator of the title character on *Saving Grace* - a tough-talking, alcoholic cop played by Holly Hunter as the very opposite of an appendage.

Conversely, women can create very powerful fictional men. It was three women, Mitchell, Janis Lundman and writer Laurie Finstad Knizhnik, who created the violent Canadian series *Durham County*, starring Hugh Dillon as deeply flawed cop Mike Sweeney. The fact that women had created such a dark show caused much comment when *Durham County* first appeared in 2007.

"For centuries male writers have been able to show women themselves. Now when you have women create strong male characters, it is a bit of a shock," observes Lundman, producer on that series and on *Bomb Girls*.

The reality is that most TV shows, written by groups of writers rather than single authors, are formulaic: TV writers are often working with characters they did not create themselves, and have to be ready to write whatever they are handed. "I think men and women can create both men and women. All men have mothers; all women have fathers," says Zarowny. "I am not writing about myself."

Still, those who want to see more balance in the writer's room believe it will affect how women and minorities are depicted on TV, adding not only a diversity of characters but different storylines and new points of view. "This is not just entertainment. This is about how a nation presents itself," Hunt says. The WGAW runs a script-judging contest designed to hook up diverse writers in mid-career with show runners, but Hunt also thinks broadcast regulators need to step in and demand progress.

That seems a long shot in both the United States, where the regulator is obsessed with squelching obscenity, and in Canada, where the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission cares about little other than ensuring Canadian content. Hunt also says the networks tend to say the diversity problem can be solved only by the autonomous show runners, who pick their own writers. The show runners, meanwhile, say the networks, whose money is on the line, breathe down their necks, vetting what writers they choose.

In one instance, that has actually led to affirmative action: Dan Harmon, the show runner of the NBC comedy *Community*, has said he was directed by NBC's prime-time entertainment president Angela Bromstad - who has since been shown the door at NBC - to make his writing room half female. "I think we have to stop thinking of it as a quota thing and think of it as a common-sense thing," he told the website A.V. Club, explaining that, while he had to hunt harder to find women writers, they brought a new energy to his writing staff that he really appreciated.

Too bad Bromstad has left the building - even if Cummings is lurking the lobby.

Which of TV's new 'women-centric' shows look good?

An awful lot of network TV is aimed at women viewers. And it's true that not much network TV is actually made by women. The new season's batch of shows by women and featuring strong female characters is definitely unusual. But are the shows any good?

New Girl (Tuesdays, 9 p.m., Fox, CITY-TV) is the best and the first to be picked up for a full season. There's all the charm of Zooey Deschanel as a young woman recovering from a love rat, but the character, created by Liz Meriweather, is more than that. The give-and-take with the sad-sack male characters is deft screwball comedy, and Deschanel plays a broad without reminding viewers unduly of that.

2 Broke Girls (Mondays, CBS, 8:30 p.m.; CITY-TV, 9:30 p.m.). One of two Whitney Cummings creations this season had a strong pilot with a pair of contrasting female characters, and dialogue with bite. The second episode had jokes about female masturbation - it's gone crude, but at least it's female-centric crudeness, some say.

Suburgatory (Wednesdays, ABC, CITY-TV, 8:30 p.m.) was created by Emily Kapnek, with a central female character who is thrown to the wolves (or mean girls) in the suburbs. The show lost its satiric bite in the pilot; while some wit remains, it's just solidly sentimental, no different from other series.

Up all Night (Wednesdays, NBC, CTV Two, 8 p.m.). From *Saturday Night Live* writer Emily Spivey, this is a comedy about a hard-living couple finding that a baby changes everything. It's more droll than hilarious, but the portrait of new a mummy (Christina Applegate) has a humorous ring of truth. A keeper, picked up for all of this

season.

Whitney (Thursdays, 8:30 p.m., NBC, CTV) is Whitney Cummings's stage act of a twentysomething as a sort-of doofus broad, but it's just bits, not a TV show. Cummings can't act; and for all the female-friendly lewdness, it's still a half-baked sitcom.

I Hate My Teenage Daughter (Wednesdays, Fox, Global, coming late November) was created by Sherry Bilsing and Ellen Kreamer. The show has, wisely, been retooled and held for a late launch. The pilot was a stew of moms shouting and their daughters shouting back. The funny was missing.

- John Doyle

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