

TELEVISION; They've Come a Long Way; The pioneer was Ethel, and later on came Rhoda. But sitcom sidekicks of the '90s are neither frumpy nor frowzy. These women wear their libidos on their sleeves.

Willens, Michele . Los Angeles Times (pre-1997 Fulltext) ; Los Angeles, Calif. [Los Angeles, Calif]26 May 1996: 7.

[ProQuest document link](#)

ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

The same holds true all these years and trends later. "We balance each other out," says Amy Pietz, one of today's more memorable sidekicks, Annie, on NBC's "Caroline in the City." "Annie is impulsive, to the extreme, and Caroline thinks things out, to the extreme."

For viewers, the sidekick is often a favorite character and even can take on epic proportions symbolically. Something about how we see our lot in lives: "I always was Ethel, and I'll always be Rhoda [Morgenstern]," feature film sidekick extraordinaire Rosie O'Donnell has said. Bonnie Hunt, who used to play sidekicks and then starred with one on CBS' recently canceled "Bonnie," is even blunter: "If I couldn't be Dick Van Dyke, I wanted to be Art Carney."

One would assume that with "Friends" and all its wannabes, the singular sidekick has been diminished. But there are still more than enough to go around. Aside from Pietz, [Joely] Fisher and [Julie] White, there are Leila Kenzle as Jamie's best friend and now business partner on "Mad About You," Holly Wortell as the makeup artist and best friend on "Bonnie" and Christine Baranski as the perpetually intoxicated and revenge-seeking Maryann on "Cybill."

FULL TEXT

It is said that Elaine May's million-dollar contribution to the much rewritten script of "Tootsie" was a simple but critical one: Give the lead character a sidekick, she suggested, enabling him/her to have someone to let it all hang out with.

In the world of television, the sidekick--specifically the female sidekick--has been a decades-long staple. From Ethel to Rhoda to Maryann, she has been the one to be confided in, confessed to, kibitzed with. She has been consistently funny, occasionally downright wacky and a necessary counterpoint.

"We were two very different people who were together because we loved each other," says Valerie Harper, who played Mary's pal Rhoda Morgenstern on "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" for four years and then on her own series for five more. "People are willing to go with you on that."

The same holds true all these years and trends later. "We balance each other out," says Amy Pietz, one of today's more memorable sidekicks, Annie, on NBC's "Caroline in the City." "Annie is impulsive, to the extreme, and Caroline thinks things out, to the extreme."

Let's face it, impulsive is a lot funnier than pensive, which is why the sidekick is so often the scene-stealer, the award winner.

"We've all talked about the fact that sometimes she gets the best stuff," Pietz says of the sex-minded Annie. "I think it takes longer to define central characters like Caroline."

"In the beginning, Amy, because of her Midwestern upbringing, got a little embarrassed about what she has to say,"

says Lea Thompson, who plays Caroline. "But I was jealous. I told her, 'Wait until you're the star and won't be able to say those things.'"

The balancing act may be changing a bit with the proliferation of stand-up comics-turned-stars. Some sidekicks now have to find fodder in the setups.

"It's a constant concern for the side players to stay present and have funny stuff to say," says Joely Fisher, who plays best friend Paige to Ellen DeGeneres' title character on "Ellen" on ABC. "Especially with such a strong lead." "A lot of times I have to find my comedy through the cracks," explains Julie White, who plays Nadine, Brett Butler's much-married neighbor and buddy in ABC's "Grace Under Fire." "I think that's one reason they hired a stage actress like me. If you're going to take a stand-up and teach her to act on the job, it's a lot easier if you surround her with people who are used to finding layers in characters and reacting a lot."

For viewers, the sidekick is often a favorite character and even can take on epic proportions symbolically.

Something about how we see our lot in lives: "I always was Ethel, and I'll always be Rhoda," feature film sidekick extraordinaire Rosie O'Donnell has said. Bonnie Hunt, who used to play sidekicks and then starred with one on CBS' recently canceled "Bonnie," is even blunter: "If I couldn't be Dick Van Dyke, I wanted to be Art Carney."

One would assume that with "Friends" and all its wannabes, the singular sidekick has been diminished. But there are still more than enough to go around. Aside from Pietz, Fisher and White, there are Leila Kenzle as Jamie's best friend and now business partner on "Mad About You," Holly Wortell as the makeup artist and best friend on "Bonnie" and Christine Baranski as the perpetually intoxicated and revenge-seeking Maryann on "Cybill."

This does not count female sidekicks to men, a la Julia Louis-Dreyfus on "Seinfeld," Liz Torres on "The John Larroquette Show" and Jessica Hecht on "The Single Guy." Nor does it count the sister as sidekick, such as Laurie Metcalf on "Roseanne" and Meagan Fay on "Mad About You."

*

Girl-to-girl stuff is the essence of what series sidekicks have been about from Laura Petrie's Millie on up.

But where once the talk revolved around recipes and kids, now there are layers of gold to mine. We're talking sex, infertility, work, PMS--and did we mention sex? Never have female friendships rung so true, and no one doubts the sincerity behind the hilarity when Cybill abandoned her family on Thanksgiving to accompany Maryann on a trip: "I'm not letting you wallow in this alone," she stated.

Certainly the kinds of issues discussed now by female sidekicks make those of years past seem almost laughably tame (if comforting).

"Don't forget, we were all still in twin beds," says Ann Morgan Guilbert, who played Millie Helper for five years on "The Dick Van Dyke Show." "Laura and I got into some messes together, but they'd be like her apartment in a flashback was so small that I had to cook half her dinner on my stove and bring it to her."

Still, Gilbert says the idea of Millie as sort of an Every Neighbor obviously hit home. She still gets mail from fans who watch the show in reruns on Nick at Nite. "I have no idea why people related to her," she says with a laugh, "but she was kind of nice and kind of dippy."

One thing hasn't changed. As Laura needed Millie, today's female stars need friends to depict the right stuff.

"The reality of a story like 'Grace Under Fire' dictates she couldn't get along without a Nadine," says Caryn Mandabach, president of Carsey-Werner, the company that produces "Grace," "Roseanne" and "Cybill."

Julie White and Brett Butler, both from the South, found an instant chemistry that White believes comes through:

"You get the feeling there's history there," she says. "As a single mom in my own life, my women friends have lifted me up and left me standing, and that's what people relate to."

With "Cybill," the story of a fading actress with ex-husbands and daughters to burn, a female friend was equally important: "When you're depicting women over 45 who are determined not to go quietly, they need someone with whom to share their fantasies," Mandabach says.

Baranski has said she was attracted to the role on the CBS sitcom because it was "a voice I hadn't heard on TV."

"Maryann wasn't the sympathetic mom or, worse, the supportive foil to the funny guy. She was extremely sharp, acerbic, very complicated but also vulnerable. I thought this was something that would really use my talents," she

told The Times.

A good sidekick is not only a memorable character in her own right but someone without whom the main character would be harder to distinguish and identify with.

"I couldn't do it without Holly," says Bonnie Hunt, who is best friends with Wortell on stage and off. "Her character helps define mine and vice versa."

"Being a woman, I know I have those relationships with people who are different but who mirror who I am," says Joely Fisher, who describes the challenge of her role as "finding the heart inside this superficial woman."

"I really think the times Ellen and I share the screen together, the dynamic is so wonderful."

Says Lea Thompson: "I like how Annie reflects on my character. The fact that Caroline could enjoy someone so outrageous makes her seem less goody-goody. And likewise, it softens Annie. The fact that {the writers and producers} have gone to great pains to make the audience like Caroline—and the fact that she would like someone who might seem like a floozy—makes it easier for Annie to get away with a lot."

NBC's "Mad About You," which is first and foremost about someone else's marriage, still needs those on the side to tell us about those in the middle.

"The show could survive without anyone but Paul and Helen," Leila Kenzle says, "but they would sorely miss Fran. She's one of their sounding boards, and through her Jamie gets to see what she shouldn't do."

She's referring to Fran's rather loose nature, an attribute given to a good number of the current crop of sidekicks—something a main character, whose likability quotient is always being closely monitored, tends to be more cautious about.

"The sidekick gets to say things like 'Feel my ass,'" Kenzle says with a laugh, "and be outrageous and drunk. You can step over the top."

"Rhoda could say the unsayable," Valerie Harper concurs. "Where Mary had to naturally keep from blurting things out."

"Ellen" sidekick Paige also says it all aloud: "She's a bit of an instigator," Fisher says, "and probably says most things before thinking about them. These kinds of characters are sort of 'this is who I am, love me or leave me.'" The audience is loving, not leaving. Fisher is stunned by the positive response she gets from young girls and boys, noting with a laugh: "At first I worried a little about it, but it's cool. I think it's her energy they're responding to and that's most like me. I mean, would I say what Paige says? Probably not. Am I as promiscuous? Probably not." As a result of audience response—and the talents of sidekick scene-stealers such as Baranski, Pietz and Fisher—the actresses are being given more time and space and allowed to grow in all kinds of ways. This month, Paige had a three-week story line of her own, beginning with her bachelorette party and ending with her (short-lived) walk down the aisle.

Even though "Caroline in the City" is only in its first season, the character of Annie is moving beyond stereotype quickly.

"I've already gotten so I don't sleep with anything that moves," Pietz says. "I think we'll be seeing a lot more of the reasons Annie does what she does."

Julie White's Nadine has also been given varied story lines of her own. This season she ended up staying put with Wade (husband No. 4) and they are expecting their first child.

"Now I will be growing in every way," jokes White, who adds: "I think the underlying story of this sidekick is she's being allowed to grow up a little."

Ann Morgan Guilbert looks with some awe at today's sidekicks, saying that in her day Millie was lucky to say more than "And then what happened to Rob?"

"I don't know that I could say Millie was allowed to grow and change," she laments, "but the writing became more fun after awhile when they had an idea what I could do. But {Millie} never had her own story line and was mostly useful in trying to calm Laura down."

So it is understandable that today's sidekicks choose to see themselves as something of a new breed. Yes, they are still often the girls next door, and yes, they tend to be emotionally off-center. But no longer are they the Ethel or

Millie variety—less attractive, less interesting. Dumb and dumpier may be a thing of the past.

"It used to be that the best friend was dowdy, the one who hadn't been the cheerleader," Kenzle says. "Now I could at least be the flag twirler. After all, Sandra Bullock is a movie star now. She's funny, charming and adorable and at one time would have been the best friend."

Bonnie Hunt takes a more realistic look at Hollywood today: "With plastic surgery, I think it would be impossible to find the old kind of sidekicks anymore," she says with a laugh.

Less the loser, perhaps, but the sidekick still needs to be someone easily recognizable, a quality that Supreme Sidekick Rhoda had in spades: "I think Rhoda was so endearing—and enduring—because everyone recognized her as real," Harper says. "If not as themselves, then as someone they knew. She was someone who worked to make her life better, even if she felt she didn't deserve it. And she covered insecurity with brashness."

Like the others, Rhoda was outrageous at times. But the current crop of sidekicks, and the people who create them, say outrageous need not be confused with oblivious.

'Sidekicks almost always used to be neurotic," Caryn Mandabach says. "But I don't consider Maryann neurotic. Psychotic, maybe, but she's well aware of what she's doing."

"We're not just types anymore," White says. "I think they want more complex people, even as sidekicks, often using us to show the more down, or iffy, stuff of life."

White says there have been some discussions—"though not very serious ones"—about a future life for Nadine, apart from Grace. The spinoff, of course, would seem to be the ultimate sidekick heaven. But a great supporting character does not automatically make the prime-time leap.

"I was afraid to spin off after four great years," says Harper, whose lovable loser got thinner—and got the guy—when she got her own show. "Her comic appeal was lost. Marriage and success made her less funny."

She came back to life with divorce and no doubt because of a couple of (family) sidekicks of her own, played by Julie Kavner and Nancy Walker. Still, when most of us think of Rhoda, we probably think of the one in Mary's building.

Looking back, Harper insists the role was "nothing but a blessing," though she has been careful "never to play another Rhoda." Bonnie Hunt was a superior sidekick in movies, stealing 1994's "Only You," for example, right out from under star Marisa Tomei. "It's a great career," says Hunt, only a bit longingly. "You have none of the pressure, and you get to come in and voice the opinion of the audience."

Maybe because she used to play one so well, Hunt realizes the importance of the sidekick role, both in terms of the product and the future. It's something all the current ones remind themselves of constantly.

"Gosh, I'd like to think Ellen would be less without Paige around," Fisher says.

"I think Nadine is real important," "Grace Under Fire's" White says. "She'd better be if I sold out the best years of my life to be someone's sidekick."

PHOTO: "CYBILL": Christine Baranski (with Cybill Shepherd, left) calls her Maryann "acerbic" but "vulnerable.";

PHOTOGRAPHER: ANACLETO RAPPING / Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: "ELLEN": Joely Fisher, right, with Ellen DeGeneres, terms their characters' dynamic "wonderful.";

PHOTOGRAPHER: ABC; PHOTO: "CAROLINE IN THE CITY": "We balance each other out," says Amy Pietz, right, with star Lea Thompson.; PHOTOGRAPHER: PAUL DRINKWATER;

PHOTO: "I LOVE LUCY": Vivian Vance holds the cards, but Lucille Ball owns the show.; PHOTOGRAPHER: CBS; PHOTO: REAL DEAL: "Everyone recognized her as real," says Valerie Harper, left, with Mary Tyler Moore, of her endearing Rhoda Morgenstern.; PHOTOGRAPHER: CBS

Credit: Michele Willens in an occasional contributor to Calendar

DETAILS

Publication title: Los Angeles Times (pre-1997 Fulltext); Los Angeles, Calif.

Pages:	7
Number of pages:	0
Publication year:	1996
Publication date:	May 26, 1996
Section:	Calendar; Calendar Desk
Publisher:	Tribune Interactive, LLC
Place of publication:	Los Angeles, Calif.
Country of publication:	United States, Los Angeles, Calif.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
ISSN:	04583035
Source type:	Newspape rs
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Profile
ProQuest document ID:	293290419
Document URL:	https://search.proquest.com/docview/293290419?accountid=8333
Copyright:	(Copyright, The Times Mirror Company; Los Angeles Times 1996 all Rights reserved)
Last updated:	2011-08-11
Database:	ProQuest Central

LINKS

[Linking Service](#)

Database copyright © 2018 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

[Terms and Conditions](#) [Contact ProQuest](#)