

The Rise of the *Dramedy*

The digital television revolution is segmented by age and socio-economics. Many viewers choose to watch TV on-demand on their laptops, tablets and/or smartphones. Others choose to watch on their (big flat-screened) TVs, and whatever's on when they click the remote is what they're probably going to watch—in the TV biz, this is called “auto play”. Some viewers turn on the TV as background noise, to keep them company; others channel-surf themselves into oblivion.

Older, or “legacy” viewers, with established viewing habits are still desirable to networks and advertisers because they're dependable. But older viewers are also less likely to switch brands and try something new. They're set in their ways and might just stick with, say, CBS for the entire evening.

Younger audiences, on the other hand, are mostly agnostic viewers. They don't know or care which network a show airs on; they just want to watch it. If they're using an app accessed via, for instance, AppleTV, they can speak into the remote, say the title of the show and the device will automatically offer platform

options: Network or iTunes? One-time rental or purchase? If it's a cord-cutting viewer, he/she is probably going to choose the platform to which they already subscribe. Or maybe they will opt for an aggregating "second window" service such as Hulu, or transactionally via iTunes.

The point is, while categorizing shows into rigid genres and timeslots is a business and viewing strategy of the past (along with broadcast networks' dependence on overnight Nielsen ratings), clear-cut genres and tones remain a viable approach in our fragmented, time-shifting TV landscape—especially for multi-camera sitcoms. Sure, many of these sitcoms are formulaic, often contrived and can sometimes feel old-fashioned, but never underestimate the power of habitual viewing, bolstered by the tug of nostalgia.

Meanwhile, dramedies are hybrids that tell a story with both comedy and drama (and sometimes even tragedy). They don't aspire to tell jokes with punch lines, and instead tend to go for the emotionally raw, uncomfortable, cringe-worthy but honest moment. At times, this level of honesty and vulnerability can be excruciating and make us squirm, and the laughs emerge from the characters'—and our—discomfort.

Speaking of laughs, Nick Greene, editor of *Mental Floss* wrote about the use of the awkward laugh track on the seminal dramedy *M*A*S*H*:

“The reason for its inclusion is rather simple. Studio heads at CBS had never even attempted to produce a comedy without a laugh track. It was a relic from radio days, and the thought of jokes hanging in the air without the affirmation of laughter made no sense to them. Even though *M*A*S*H* contained a mix of comedy and hard drama, CBS put their foot down.

“I always thought it cheapened the show,” said series developer Larry Gelbart. “The network got their way. They were paying for dinner.”

Despite this, the show’s producers were able to negotiate some grounds for dropping the laugh track. “Under no circumstances would we ever have canned laughter during an O.R. scene,” Gelbart said. “When the doctors were working, it was hard to imagine 300 people were in there laughing at somebody’s guts being sewn up.”

They were also able to argue for the removal of laughter altogether for a few episodes: "O.R.," "The Bus," "Quo Vadis, Captain Chandler?," "The Interview," "Dreams," "Point of View," and "Goodbye, Farewell and Amen." ("The Interview" was filmed in the style of a documentary, so the track's omission was pivotal to selling the concept.) After Season 6, the laughter was toned down immensely, and later episodes feature a hushed track that contrasts sharply with the all-out hooting and hollering of the show's early days."¹

Larry Gelbart's follow-up 1980 TV series was the short-lived NBC half-hour dramedy *United States*, which attempts to do to marriages what *M*A*S*H* does for war (according to the show's tagline). With no laugh track or background music, series creator Gary Markowitz and executive producer/showrunner Gelbart explained that the show's title is not about the USA, but rather the state of being united in a marriage, including sex, infidelity, death and taxes. Gelbart referred to the show as a sitcom, but the show's tone is intentionally unsettling, features complex, unmoored characters, uncomfortable silences and a dramatic approach to storylines versus the accessible jokes and less taxing but relatable humor of say, *Mad About You* (1992-99). *United States* was sadly a failed creative experiment, at least when it came to the Nielsen ratings; NBC pulled it

from the schedule within two months, after only seven of its 13 episodes had aired. It was ahead of its time.

Around the same time, trailblazing one-hour drama series showrunner Steven Bochco decided to test out the half-hour dramedy format with his short-lived ABC series *Hooperman* (1987-89), co-created by Terry Louise Fisher and starring John Ritter as a stressed-out San Francisco cop who inherits a rundown apartment building. The show has the story engines of a crime drama, with the quirky humor of a wild card character balancing his personal and professional lives. Simultaneously, veteran sitcom writer/producer Jay Tarses launched his half-hour dramedy, *The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd*, which aired on NBC from 1987 to 1988 and was picked up by Lifetime from 1988 to 1991 after being canceled by NBC. Molly (Blair Brown) is an erudite yet semi-bohemian divorcee living in New York City, navigating spotty employment, dating and trying to make sense of the random and often surreal aspects of her life. The show features a jazzy soundtrack, virtually no jokes, no laugh track and a meandering story sense that parallels Molly's bemused, ironic acute observations and soul searching. A particularly deft touch is Tarses' use of Molly's meddlesome mother Florence Bickford (Allyn Ann McLerie), as a judgmental Greek Chorus/voice-over to bring us up to speed in the latest happenings (or

lack thereof) in Molly's quotidian existence. The critically acclaimed series struggled mightily to survive amidst a sea of traditional laugh riot sitcoms.

After *Hooperman's* cancellation, Bochco teamed up with David E. Kelley on another half-hour dramedy—*Doogie Howser, M.D.*—which happened to be my first foray into writing for television. *Doogie* aired from 1989-1993, and features a young Neil Patrick Harris playing a precocious teenaged physician. It's a fish-out-of-water comedy, but the tone is nuanced, laugh-track-free and generally goes for the honest moment over the joke. The medical stories are serious business; the only thing Steven Bochco deplores more than bad puns are tropes and clichés. Any time the tone veered into cartoonish, Bochco rightly called foul. If I learned anything from working with Steven Bochco, it was to “rake” your dialogue (for extraneous words; more on this in Chapter 10). And when it comes to tone, to keep it smart and realistic as possible—even when writing about a teenaged physician.

In a Dramedy, a Happy Ending Requires Sacrifice

For decades, the broadcast networks were uncomfortable with the discomfiting dramedy, especially in the half-hour format—which was reserved for sitcoms, their bread and butter. One-hour dramas were the first to straddle the line

between genres, with juggernaut series such as *The Rockford Files* and *Moonlighting* blending crime with levity, violence with witty repartee. *Buffy*, *Bones*, *The Mentalist*, *Burn Notice* and *The X-Files* mix life and death stakes with character quirks, ideological banter and slow-burn sexual tension. *Twin Peaks* is in a Lynchian genre unto itself: part real, part surreal, part black comedy, part tragic drama. *Gilmore Girls* also balances quirky family humor with teen angst and heart, much like its predecessor *My So-Called Life*—another show ahead of its time.

Lou Grant (1977-1982), spun off from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, features Ed Asner reprising his role as the lovable curmudgeon, but the genre and tone of this wholly different series (created by TMTMS showrunners James L. Brooks and Allan Burns, and *M*A*S*H* writer/executive producer Gene Reynolds) veers from hilarious half-hour multi-camera sitcom into a grounded, joke-free one-hour drama set behind the scenes at the fictional LA Tribune. The show replaced anchorman Ted Baxter's (the late, great Ted Knight) buffoonery with the exploration of serious news stories in the city.

The prolific showrunner David E. Kelley built an empire on the smart, ironic, often humorous legal drama, but only *Ally McBeal* and *Boston Legal* were

intended to be dramedies. *Ally McBeal* incorporates musical interludes, via an imaginary Dancing Baby, rocking out to the 1968 song “Hooked on a Feeling” (with its catchy chorus: “Ooga-Ooga-Ooga-Chaka”) to externalize her biological ticking clock). It also features a moody soundtrack through Vonda Shepard’s ballads, which were woven into the show via the piano bar, the characters’ after-work watering hole. Kelley’s latest season-long procedural, *Goliath* on Amazon, is a legal drama with a few larger-than-life characters, but I wouldn’t classify it as a dramedy. Ditto: *Better Call Saul* and *Suits*.

Fargo is a stylized crime procedural with edgy humor, but still a drama. *House* and *Royal Pains* are medical procedurals featuring physicians seeking cures for mysterious (sometimes deadly) ailments, though still classified as light dramas, à la *Grey’s Anatomy*—which also balances comedy and tragedy. As creator/showrunner Shonda Rhimes aptly puts it: “I don’t think of it as a medical drama. It’s a relationship show with some surgery thrown in. That’s how I’ve always seen it.” It’s a nighttime soap with humor, pathos and the occasional darker, serious episode.

When I landed my first staff job on *Melrose Place*, as a viewer I’d considered it pure camp. But the producers took it quite seriously; the clever quips and bitchy

retorts would never have sustained the show without its emotional core. Still, *Melrose Place* was a nighttime soap, and the show and its ilk (*Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Knots Landing*) were never classified as dramedies.

Prolific showrunner/impresario Ryan Murphy and his writing/producing partner Brad Falchuk co-created the musical-comedy *Glee* (which was originally written as a feature) for Fox. *Glee*, with tribute episodes celebrating superstars such as Prince, Madonna and Michael Jackson, became a cult phenomenon among its young viewers on Fox from 2009-2015. As a one-hour musical-dramedy, *Glee* challenged the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences to reconsider the rigidity of their Emmy award categories. Is it a comedy, drama, musical, variety? Regardless, it was a huge ratings champ that capitalized on the even bigger success of Fox's *American Idol*. It was the right show at the right time: nostalgic, idealistic, funny, poignant and it even sparked a nationwide, sold-out concert tour. Its success paved the way for another phenom one-hour dramedy series that still (happily) flaunts its otherness and defies categorization.

Netflix's landmark series *Orange Is the New Black*, which premiered in 2013 (and has been renewed through at least 2019), is widely considered to be a one-hour dramedy. The minimum-security women's prison setting is serious business, and

while the inmates joke around, the consequences for breaking the rules aren't a slap on the wrist, but solitary confinement. This isn't *Prison Break* or *Oz*, and there are darkly funny, outrageous moments (especially from Suzanne "Crazy Eyes" Warren, portrayed by Emmy-winner Uzo Aduba). But tonally, it's intended to be grounded in reality. The montage of faces in the opening credit sequence, accompanied by Regina Spektor's "You've Got Time," are real-life prison inmates. One moment, a character could be on top of the world, the next lying in a pool of blood. Creator/adaptor/showrunner Jenji Kohan wants to provoke and challenge us. Her job is to access our empathy by creating the feeling of instability in which anything can happen at any time.²

Uzo Aduba is one of just two actors to win an Emmy for the same role in both the Comedy and Drama categories. The other is Ed Asner for *Lou Grant*, one of the original dramedies.

Send in the Clones

Created by Graeme Manson and John Fawcett, *Orphan Black* is a hybrid sci-fi/crime drama that offers up a dystopian world with a big dose of humor. Virtuoso actress and Emmy-winner Tatiana Maslany, who plays at least 10 different characters on the series, begins the show as grifter Sarah Manning, the one

clone in a large cloning experiment who for some reason doesn't know she's a clone. When she witnesses a woman who happens to look just like her committing suicide by jumping in front of a train, she's blindsided. But instead of going into therapy, Sarah steals the woman's purse and assumes her identity. In the pilot, she meets a second cloned sister, a German named Katja, who is shot dead in front of her, while talking to a fourth sister (a prissy, uptight soccer mom) on the cell phone of the sister who just killed herself (a cop). Confused? The creators manage to make this fast-paced, clever show both dramatic and satirical, poking fun at the evil "Neolutionists," a slick cult that creates clones and then brutally disposes of them, all in the name of making the world a better place. Manson and Fawcett even give funny lines to serial-killer sister Helena, and Sarah's foster brother Felix (Jordan Gavaris) adds a lot of humor with his unabashedly gay hooker-with-a-heart-of-gold character's zingers. As Spencer Kornhaber writes, "*Orphan Black* self-consciously apes Maslany's multiple-personality routine, switching between a dizzying array of genres but injecting them all with almost-subversive humanity and humor."³

Comedy and tragedy are at the core of NBC's breakout hit, the one-hour drama series *This Is Us*—which has the same tonal elements as NBC's stalwart but now

defunct series, *Parenthood*. *Jane the Virgin* is a heartfelt multi-generational family drama, told in a playful, humorous *telenovela* style; the series mixes grounded emotion with wacky black comedy hijinks; it's also a parody of shows in its genre, à la *Desperate Housewives*, which lampooned the nighttime soap. *Ugly Betty*, which also has its roots in a telenovela format, offers the same droll, romantic tone. Both are still categorized as one-hour dramas, as is *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, featuring high school angst, monsters of the week, and Joss Whedon's unique brand of badass snark. In its heyday, *Desperate Housewives* was also tough to categorize, which piqued curiosity and generated significant buzz. Creator/showrunner Marc Cherry hit the bulls-eye by appealing to Desperate Viewers.

In addition to these, let's consider more recent noteworthy, one-hour genre-blurring dramedies, that push the boundaries over to pitch-black satire: *Patriot*, *UnREAL* and *Fleabag*.

Patriot on Amazon takes us behind the scenes of a mercenary CIA-adjacent operative working on assignment under non-official cover (NOC); the stakes are global nuclear annihilation, but creator/showrunner Steven Conrad keeps the

tone mischievous and ironic throughout. It's a tough balancing act that he pulls off skilfully.

UnREAL on Lifetime takes us behind the scenes of a superficial "unscripted" dating show called *Everlasting*. The series, based the 2013 short film *Sequin Haze*, written and directed by *UnREAL* co-creator/showrunner Sarah Gertrude Shapiro,⁴ chronicles her toxic experiences working as a segment producer on ABC's *The Bachelor* (which she did in real life). But *UnREAL* is tonally too dark to simply go for straight-up parody; instead, Shapiro is after wry satire, sprinkled with outrageously contrived "cliffhanger" moments for maximum controversy and ratings points (part of the satire in this meta approach).

My UCLA colleague, former network president and producer Tom Nunan (*Crash*) posits that premium cable's emergence and dominance in ground-breaking quality television was fueled by HBO and Showtime's willingness to tackle cultural taboos. I wholeheartedly agree. They pioneered original one-hour dramas about a *Mafioso* family man on Prozac (*The Sopranos*); a graphically depicted social experiment in a maximum security prison (*Oz*); a vigilante serial killer (*Dexter*); a sexually charged funeral home (*Six Feet Under*); polygamy (*Big Love*), along with original half-hour dramedies including *Sex and the City* and

Girls (frank female sexuality); *Weeds* (an upscale suburban stay-at-home mom/drug dealer); *Nurse Jackie* (promiscuous, drug-addicted nurse); *Californication* (sexual addiction); *The Big C* (terminal cancer played for irreverent laughs); and *Getting On* (geriatric death and dying).

Fleabag on Amazon (a co-production with BBC Four) deals with the tough themes of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and grief, yet remains touchingly irreverent. Emily Nussbaum offers this rumination:

"*Fleabag* appears at the crest of a years-long wave of bad-girl comedy on cable; it's both a welcome phenomenon and one that, for viewers trying to choose new shows, can feel like an embarrassment of bitches. You may think you're weary of septic comedies of human pain, feminist comics working blue, and graphic sex scenes—all prevalent trends. The word "antihero" has certainly become a turnoff. But *Fleabag* is an original. She's at once a mischief-maker and a figure of pathos. (In a sense, her closest analogue is that tragicomic asshole Larry David.) By the final episode...which touches on themes of forgiveness, her story feels richer than many dramas. In those closing sequences, *Fleabag*

turns a trick worthy of Gypsy Rose Lee herself, exposing the merciful story that's hidden many layers beneath the cruel one."⁵

Perhaps that's the core of the dramedy itself: the ability to tread the line between pain, redemption and humor. We care—and we laugh.

Notes

¹ Nick Miller, "Why Did M*A*S*H Have A Laugh Track?," *MentalFloss.com*, May 19, 2014, <http://mentalfloss.com/article/56777/why-did-mash-have-laugh-track>.

² My interview for *TV Outside the Box* with showrunner Jenji Kohan is at routledge.com/cw/landau.

³ Spencer Kornhaber, "The Dumb Charms of *Orphan Black*," *TheAtlantic.com*, April 18, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/04/orphan-black/360842>. My interview for *TV Outside the Box* with showrunner Graeme Manson is at routledge.com/cw/landau.

⁴ *UnREAL* was co-created by Marti Noxon (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Girlfriends' Guide to Divorce*).

⁵ Emily Nussbaum, "Dirty Bird," *The New Yorker*, September 26, 2016.