

By Anne Louise Bannon

A Marriage Made on TV



I have to confess that when my editor first asked me to do a story on what marriage on what television teaches us about real marriages, my first thought was that she had to be kidding. A quick survey of your basic shows about families on the tube today shows a host of idiot husbands with all-knowing, long-suffering wives, and little variation on that theme.

"Everybody Loves Raymond" may be seen running in syndication now, but it's almost the archetype for this type of show. Ray Barone (played by Ray Romano) is a bumbling fool who spent half the show whining about not getting enough sex. Yet, given the callous, self-involved way he treated his wife, Deborah, why was he surprised? CBS' "Yes, Dear" is more of the same, with two idiot dads, only one of which is neurotically trying to get it right. The same theme occurs in "Still Standing" (CBS), "According to Jim" (ABC) and "My Wife and Kids" (previously ABC, now in syndication).

If that's supposed to be what marriage is about, then no wonder people run screaming from the altar.

The Medium Isn't the Whole Message

The problem is that television has never been a good medium for learning about marriage. When you look at the entire 50-odd-year history of television, truly functional marriages have always been few and far between. From dramas featuring single (usually widowed) dads ("The Rifleman," "Bonanza," "My Three Sons," "The Courtship of Eddie's Father," "The Andy Griffith Show") to the sanitized family-based comedies of the 1950s

and 1960s ("Donna Reed," "I Love Lucy," "Ozzie and Harriet," "The Dick van Dyke Show") to the dysfunctional relationships of today, what makes us laugh and what works in real life are two very, very different things.

Part of this is because television drama and comedy essentially are entertainment.

"These aren't catechism classes, and that's not their job," said Sister Rose Pacette, a Paulist sister who works with Pauline Media and writes the television column for St. Anthony Messenger. "We need to use our own marriage lens to look at what's going on."

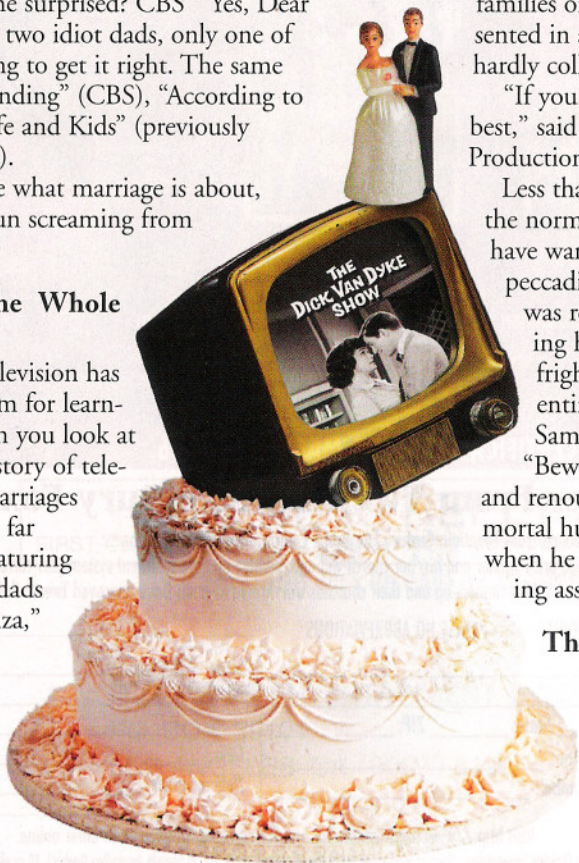
Back in the 1950s, which some regard as the heyday for families on TV, even on the shows where dad was presented in a more intelligent light, the relationships were hardly collaborative, healthy marriages.

"If you go back to 'Father Knows Best,' father knew best," said Father Frank Desiderio, head of Paulist Productions.

Less than ideal relationship models have always been the norm. On "Leave It to Beaver," June Cleaver may have warned husband Ward to look at her younger son's peccadilloes with more kindness, but it was clear who was really in charge, and it wasn't June. Despite having her name on the show, Donna Reed succeeded frighteningly well in anticipating the needs of her entire family before they could even ask. And Samantha Stephens, the magical star of "Bewitched," not only cut all ties with her family and renounced her magical powers so as to not upset her mortal husband Darrin, she was also expected to revert when he changed his mind and wanted her nose-twitching assistance.

The Role of Women

Part of the reason for skewed images of marriage is the fact that women were expected to be somewhat subservient in the 1950s and '60s. And as both Father Desiderio and Sister Pacette noted, most shows of the period were



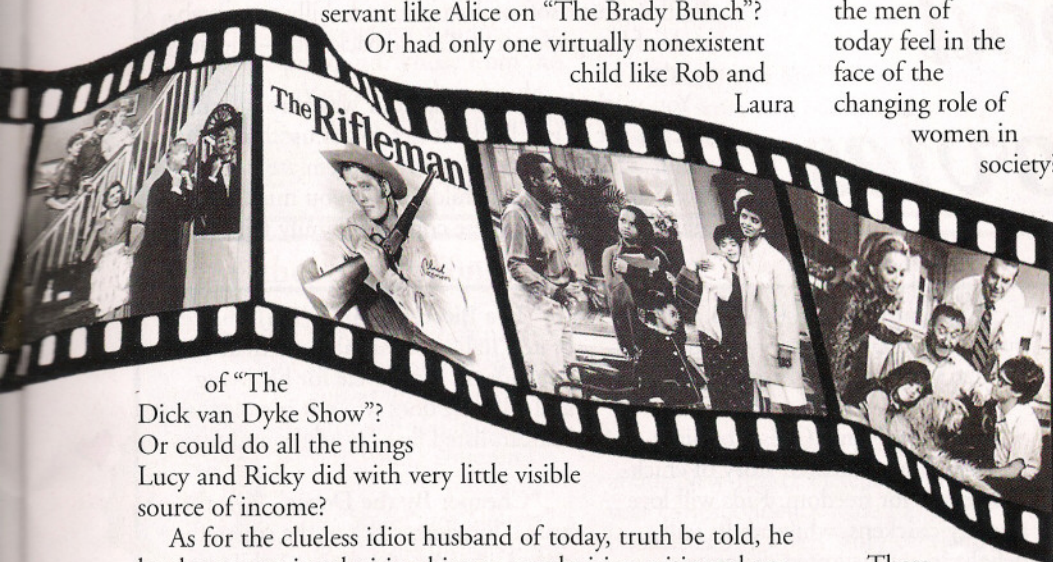
sanitized, idealized fantasy that had no bearing on reality for the vast majority of Americans, even then.

How many large families had a 24-hour, on-call, live-in servant like Alice on "The Brady Bunch"?

Or had only one virtually nonexistent child like Rob and

Laura

idiot husband is actually a reflection about how the men of today feel in the face of the changing role of women in society?



of "The Dick van Dyke Show"? Or could do all the things Lucy and Ricky did with very little visible source of income?

As for the clueless idiot husband of today, truth be told, he has long roots in television history, as television critic and analyst for Mediaweek Marc Berman has noted.

"Although the role of women has certainly changed over the years," he explains, "the bumbling husband has been around for over 50 years. Didn't Lucy, after all, always manage to pull something over the head of unsuspecting Ricky? Wasn't Darrin on 'Bewitched' bumbling? Or Herman Munster?"

And, in later years, Archie was always being outwitted by the non-too-bright-herself Edith, George Jefferson was always upstaged by the women in his life, and Ralph Kramden of "The Honeymooners" would almost be considered abusive in his treatment of the much more astute Alice by today's standards.

Still, at least there was some balance. Gomez Addams may have been wacky and weird, but he loved Morticia, and he wasn't the bumbling idiot Herman Munster was. Ward Cleaver's ability as a parent and husband could make up for some of Ricky Ricardo's shortcomings. Jed Clampett was the only sane one on the "Beverly Hillbillies."

Certainly, in that respect, things have changed, and not for the best. There is no wise and wonderful Bill Cosby to offset Jim Belushi's idiot character today. At least, not in sitcoms, which is where we tend to see marriage most often.

Factor in the Writers

Father Desiderio, who also oversees the Humanitas Prize, has long lamented the lack of originality in the sitcoms of today and solidly ascribes it to the networks being too apprehensive to try something new. He also thinks the gender of the people writing the shows plays a part.

"I do know that most sitcoms are written by men," he said. "It's a rare comedy that has more than one woman in the writers' room. It's interesting that men are writing about men behaving badly with their long-suffering wives, if there's a wife at all."

Which leads to the question, how much of this caricature

There doesn't seem to be any real answer. While many of the producers say that these shows are a reflection of their lives, Berman pointed out that this isn't necessarily entirely true.

"This ongoing trend of the husband being the bumbling idiot is a product of the mind of the TV writers," he wrote. "It's nothing more than a stereotype."

Which would fall in neatly with Father Desiderio's comments about the lack of originality in today's comedies. Except that Berman prefaced his remarks by saying that in his marriage, he is a clueless idiot. It is not reflected in what I've seen of him and his wife together. But the fact that he said it suggests to me that he is part of that group of men feeling a little lost in a new social setting in which communication and relating in marriage are key — and which have not been traditionally modeled by their fathers.

Any Decent Marriages?

So are there any good marriages on TV? There are a couple here and there. Will and Helen Girardi, of the cancelled "Joan of Arcadia" (available on DVD), had their rough spots, but functioned pretty well as a couple. Father Desiderio pointed out that Jed Bartlett, the current president on "The West Wing" (NBC), has a real relationship with his wife. And, of course, the Camden family on "7th Heaven" (The WB) is an important example.

Sister Pacette also suggested that if you look at how people communicate in their relationships, you might find some pretty solid examples, even if they aren't really marriages. The key, she said, is to look at TV through the lens of your values and see what you come up with. Which isn't a bad way to look at all sorts of things on TV besides marriage. **CP**

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