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MANLY Pursuits

Goodbye, stoic and silent. This fall a slew of series is out to show that guys can have real feelings too

By JAMES PONIEWOZIK

Pity the poor, misunderstood TV male. O.K., don't. (But stop laughing so loud! It stings!) Consider this, however: while TV's menfolk hardly lack for meaty roles or paychecks, when it comes to self-reflection they almost bump into a glass ceiling. Feminism gave us decades of women who pondered what it means to be female—Mary Richards, Ally McBeal, Carrie Bradshaw. But a lack of curiosity about what being a man means is practically TV's definition of masculinity.

This fall, though, may leave you wondering when men turned into such sensitive, introspective creatures. On the syndicated talk show *The Other Half*, four men will attend Lamaze classes, test depilatory creams and offer daytime's female audience entree into the male psyche. The guys on HBO's *The Mind of the Married Man* reveal adulterous fantasies (and adulterous acts) and wrestle with being men in a PC era "where no one wants to hear s___ about [men's] problems." Single or suddenly adoptive fathers are becoming nurturers on sitcoms like UPN's *One on One*, the WB's *Raising Dad* and Fox's *The Bernie Mac Show*. And no less than three CBS debuts—*The Education of Max Bickford*, *Citizen Baines* and *Danny*—look at that

most stereotypically male of personal dramas, the midlife crisis.

"In *The Rockford Files*, Rockford never had feelings. He only solved crimes," says Dawn Prestwich, who created *Bickford* (8 p.m. E.T., debuts Sept. 23) together with Nicole Yorkin. "Until now, that's been the traditional male role on television." Few men in TV dramas have been so explicitly defined in terms of their maleness as Professor Max Bickford (Richard Dreyfuss). He describes himself as a man who "always surrounded himself with women." He teaches American culture at a women's

college, has a female boss and believes that women are "more thoughtful, maybe even a little smarter, than most men." But his woman's world is becoming hostile territory: he has grown alienated from his students, has just lost a powerful chair position to a woman (Marcia Gay Harden), and is flailing to defend teaching the works of "dead white guys."

He is, in other words, a liberal humanist whom circumstance is threatening to turn into an angry white male. But while *Bickford* often seems whiny—the angst of the tenured baby boomer doesn't ring



tragic to many folks—at least it promises to take Max into new emotional territory for a man. And then some. Dreyfuss, Yorkin says, “is not afraid to be shown looking at his own paunch in the mirror and feeling fat.”

Similarly, in the understated *Baines* (Saturdays, 9 p.m. E.T., starts Sept. 22), Senator Elliott Baines (James Cromwell) loses an election; his existence as the ultimate alpha male over, he must search his soul and remake his life, largely by reconnecting with his three grown daughters. (Al Gore, are your ears burning?) Why are men becoming so open? In a way, they're not. *Bickford* and *Baines* were created by women (just as men created Mary, Ally, Maude et al.), and like many “relationship” dramas they're expected to draw female viewers in particular. *Baines* creator Lydia Woodward believes the story transcends Mars-Venus issues, but says, “A man's emotional life is every bit as interesting as a woman's. Why not go there?”

The Other Half (weekdays from Sept. 10) appeals even more directly to women; its hosts (Dick Clark, former Partridge Danny Bonaduce, actor Mario Lopez of *Saved by the Bell* and doctor-model Jan Adams) promise “the world of women as seen through the eyes of men.” “It's sneaking a look into the other side's playbook,” says Bonaduce. “We're going to narc out men all over the country.” *The View* with different plumbing, the show gives women an archetypal man sliced into four parts: the daddy (Clark), the clown (Bonaduce), the hunk (Lopez) and, um, the other hunk (Adams). And with segments like “The Other Rules”—which will answer such burning questions as why men never call—it embraces essential differences between the sexes, rather than trying to paper them over. Says pro-

ducer Susan Winston: “I'm an ardent feminist who believes that men and women are really different.”

Even that hoary male type, the sitcom dad, is changing. The feminist era took us from *Father Knows Best* to *Father Knows Nothing*—buffoons like *Home Improvement's* Tim Taylor and Homer Simpson, whose lunkheaded maleness is their weakness. Now we're seeing dads like *Malcolm in the Middle's* Hal (Bryan Cranston), a boob but a nurturing one who wears every emotion on his sleeve. On the slight but earnest *Danny* (Fridays, 8:30 p.m. E.T., starts Sept. 21), Daniel Stern plays a single dad who has just turned 40, is vaguely dissatisfied with life and shares his innermost sentiments with his kids to the point of their exhaustion. Stern sees some of himself in the character: “I'm the dad who wants to share feelings, a child of the '60s who learned feelings are good.”

Decidedly less sunny are the family men in *The Mind of the Married Man* (Sundays, 10 p.m. E.T.; preview 10 p.m. E.T. Tuesday, Sept. 11), successful Chicago journalists who fantasize about affairs (or just have them) and chafe under domestic responsibility. Think *Sex and the City* minus the Jimmy Choo shoes and cosmos but with an extra dose of dread. Bookended by two close friends, one philandering and the other henpecked, columnist Micky Barnes (creator-writer Mike Binder) fights temptation for his hot new assistant (Ivana Milicevic) while trying to do right by his hot wife (Sonya Walger). (The series might better be called *The Groin of the Married Man*, where it mostly locates the cogitation.)

In trying to build a following for its unenviable, unsympathetic—or just pathetic—but self-aware men, *Mind* is daring. It can be biting funny. But it's

hardly a news flash to say men fixate on sex, not necessarily with their wives. The “it's not TV, it's HBO” raciness masks a core of sitcom truisms, right down to the lumpy male lead married to a gorgeous blond. (It can also be hard to distinguish Micky's implausible fantasies from implausible actual events, as when his assistant and her—of course—hot roommate do an erotic dance for him at her apartment.) Take away the masturbation scenes and nudity, and you've got one part *In the Company of Men*, three parts *Mad About You*.

Maybe the best way to convince people that you're giving away the male gender's dark secrets is to confirm provocatively what they already believe. (See also *The Other Half's* blowing the lid off why men don't look at maps.) But at best, these series show TV arriving at a more nuanced understanding of manhood. In the dreaded '70s “sensitive man” era, feminist guys tended to simply, implausibly, deny what made them different from women. The postfeminist backlash of the '90s gave us the chest-thumping likes of Comedy Central's *The Man Show*. Today's post-postfeminist TV man isn't perfect. But at least he's trying to strike a balance between being Alan Alda and being *The Man Show's* Adam Carolla.

—With reporting by Jeanne McDowell/
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