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Clucking in the Henhouse, With Ambitions of Swans

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Though only in its second season, "Starting Over," the syndicated reality soap opera, already appears poised to become one of those gold-standard programs that defines a genre, attracts a dedicated audience and goes on to a brilliant career under regular fire for failing to be good as it used to be. This show just might, in other words, acquire the status of "Saturday Night Live" or "60 Minutes."

Just what is so charming about this show?

"Starting Over" is the brainchild of the reality grande dame Mary-Ellis Bunim, who died in January, and her partner Jonathan Murray, who is now an executive producer. The setup is this: six women down on their luck come to reside in a house under heavy surveillance, where they are charged with improving their lives. Under the guidance of Rhonda Britten and Iyanla Vanzant, a pair of life coaches — part social workers, part culty priestesses — the women perform eclectic and sometimes dubious exercises designed to refine their relationships, careers, fig-

ures and dispositions. They learn martial arts, get in touch with lost relatives and — this being television — get therapeutic blond highlights. While they transform, they cry and fight. Finally, after a series of breakthroughs, the women leave in triumph, new leases on life in hand. (Naturally, some fail and depart in shame.)

After each departure, a new woman arrives. "We started out thinking that women would leave at five to nine weeks," Mr. Murray said in a telephone interview. "But it's more like seven or eight to 15 weeks." Long stays mean viewers get attached to characters. Often someone comes to the house to accomplish a practical task (get off welfare, learn to drive), only to end up confronting a bruising personal history (abandonment, cancer). The suspense derives from the expectation that sooner or later a woman's old demons will surface to sabotage her good intentions. That's enough to come back for. Though "Starting Over" lacks a star, it gets by with a most valuable player: Ms. Britten. A self-help guru who in childhood saw her father kill her mother and then himself, Ms. Britten

puts into practice the 90's creed of self-invention, that less lonely and more commercial alternative to 60's self-discovery. As a coach she advocates a surprisingly sturdy model of contemporary feminine integrity. On "Starting Over" women in their 20's are expected to separate from their mothers, forgive wayward fathers and stop partying. In their 30's they must settle on a career, stop being sanctimonious and get along with other women. In their 40's and 50's they should lose weight, get out of debt and stop living through their kids.

"Initially we were looking at a show that might air in prime time, with men and women," Mr. Murray said. "But it's really women that we felt were in the position of needing a second chance, who have been forced into making certain decisions about their lives. Women like to focus on whether their life is what they want it to be. Often men fill their life with stuff, and seem happy not to ask those questions."

The cast of the current season includes Kim, a girlish matron who has vexed friendships with women; Towanda, an angry sister of Toni Braxton, the pop star; Josie, a single mother, whose baby is also in the house; Sommer, a former fat girl with an opaque personality; Sinae, an albino who can't see very well; and Jennifer, a complaisant type whose father is in

prison. The first few weeks of the season were dominated by Deborah, a hormonal tinderbox who complained of hot flashes, but she left the show. It turned out that she thought she was pregnant, by accident, though she had excoriated Josie for being sexually irresponsible. Hypocrisy is thrilling on "Starting Over."

The henhouse setup always supplies plenty of "Ricki Lake"-style oh-no-she-didn't moments, which are the key to success with female viewers in daytime. The message boards on the "Starting Over" Web site crackle with indignation. "Don't think Kim needs a push-up bra," one viewer writes. Others chime in: "Sommer thinks that gastric bypass is a 'cure all'" or "Josie is NEGLECTING HER DAUGHTER." And, more soberly, "Jennifer's little-girl voice is the only clue you need to diagnose her arrested development."

But if "Starting Over" provides grist for moralizing, it also often exhibits a conscience. While the women learn to cultivate the greedy virtues that are the cornerstones of the recovery movement — confidence, pride, ambition — they are also expected to broaden their

interests to encompass kindness, humility, compassion, even philanthropy. "Starting Over" sometimes seems like the sanest show on television.

Last season, when the show was set in Chicago, it was especially sensible. "Starting Over" had a quiet premiere and the women were genuinely as described: "From all walks of life." There was a kindly slattern trying to wrest comedy from menopausal discontent, a boozy former foster child striving to afford college and a nerdy widow who considered her ratty, overgrown hair a tribute to her dead husband. They were great. They needed help.

And like Freud's early patients, they responded to the "Starting Over" regimen as if to a miracle.

Now that the show has moved to a showpiece house in Los Angeles, fans worry that the wholesome show might get flashy. The appearance of Millee Taggart-Ratcliffe, a "Guiding Light" alumna, as executive producer, cannot have assuaged those fears. But it is too soon to tell whether the show will become more contrived or more Hollywood, and it is a good sign that none of the women in the house wants

to be an actress — so far.

The other novelty this season is Ms. Vanzant, an inspirational speaker. She leans on fanciful, even upsetting, therapeutic techniques, like regression therapy. She also likes to haze: the women she works with have had to perform sackcloth penance, walking around in drab clothing until they can face their vanity. Kim, who likes to dress up, took this assignment particularly hard.

Last season Kim would never have had to give up her clothes and makeup. And Rain — a beloved figure from an earlier cast, with a keen moral sense — would have prevented Deborah from huffing off the show the way she did. In Chicago, the women would not be fighting so much; they would be more modest and grateful in that simpler house.

Wow. The more you think about it, the clearer it becomes: "Starting Over," television's newest institution, is not as good as it used to be.