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A 'Friday Night Lights' marriage that binds in many ways

Connie Britton and Kyle Chandler act out a union with true-to-life domestic moments.



Actors Kyle Chandler and Connie Britton, photographed at the Four Seasons Beverly Hills, play Coach Erik Taylor and his wife, Tami, on the TV series "Friday Night Lights." (Ricardo DeAratnha / Los Angeles Times / February 6, 2011)

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By Maria Elena Fernandez, Los Angeles Times
February 6, 2011

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This article does not contain spoilers about Wednesday's series finale of "Friday Night Lights," but it does address story lines from the fifth season, which has aired only on DirecTV. The final season of "Friday Night Lights" is scheduled to begin airing on NBC on April 15.

"Eighteen years," Tami Taylor angrily whispered in last week's episode of "Friday Night Lights," referring to the amount of time she's been Coach Eric Taylor's loyal and supportive wife. Two words that packed a punch because of the way that Connie Britton quickly delivered them, sneaking them in with a pishing glance at her befuddled husband as she allowed uninvited guests into her home.

Then, just as deftly, Tami turned on her Southern belle charm: "Can I get ya'll anything — ice tea? Water?"

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She had played the coach's wife in the movie; he was cast because of his performance in one episode of "Grey's Anatomy." They became such good friends that they'd drive together from California to Texas when production began each season, Britton in her car and Chandler trailing on his motorcycle. Although they convincingly played a madly-in-love couple, in person their obvious affection and admiration feels more like sibling love. They tease each other incessantly and interrupt each other's sentences, but it's clear they are thrilled to catch up on a winter afternoon in Los Angeles, after a few months of not seeing each other. "Friday Night Lights" wrapped production last summer.

"Hi, sugar!" Britton called out as she walked toward Chandler at the Four Seasons Hotel. They kissed hello, cuddled up to pose for photos and started chatting.

On the series, things are not so cozy for the Taylors, who are at a marital impasse. For the first time in their life together, Tami has been offered the job of her dreams — as dean of admissions at a college in Philadelphia. And the man she has followed from town to town, chasing one football coaching post after another, wants none of it. Eric has put his foot down: "We live in Texas."

The Taylors are struggling, but in their own way: Nobody storms out of the house or sleeps on the couch. No one resorts to alcohol, drugs or an affair as an escape. They continue to raise two daughters, cope with stressful jobs and love each other — even when they don't like each other very much.

"These conflicts go on within life," said executive producer Jason Katims, who has been married to his high school sweetheart for 24 years. "Most of us deal with stuff and life goes on around us as we're dealing with stuff. Really great couples can have these big arguments. What's so great about what Kyle and Connie built as far as their own relationship, and the relationship of their characters, is that they allowed us as writers to be able to put that marriage through every challenge we could come up with because you knew you were going to watch them deal with it and thrive because of their connection."

Based on a book and movie of the same title, "Friday Night Lights" peaked on NBC at 6 million viewers and avoided cancellation only when the network entered into an unusual deal with DirecTV to split costs and distribution rights, giving DirecTV customers dibs at the high school football drama for the last three seasons. But the low-rated series — it averages nearly 800,000 viewers on DirecTV and 4 million on NBC — about a small Texas town where football means everything will still have its place in television history because of its social resonance.

Few small-screen relationships have come close to "Friday Night Lights'" most noteworthy achievement — capturing the intimate push and pull of relationships, with the Taylor marriage as the anchor. Joe and Allison DuBois of "Medium" also successfully portrayed the ordinary beauty of domestic life, but the psychic wife was less relatable. NBC's "Parenthood," also produced by Katims, and ABC's "Modern Family" depict contemporary ordinary family life without sinking into clichés, but none of the couples can compete with the warm authenticity of the Taylors.

"Friday Night Lights' stands out because it takes relationships very seriously and it takes feelings very seriously on both sides — men and women," said Elayne Rapping, a critic of popular culture and author of several books, including "Media-tions: Forays into the Culture and Gender Wars." "It's a good family show, and I think it's a role model for how you handle normal life. It's very realistic

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It's the kind of subtle moment viewers of "Friday Night Lights" have come to expect from the series, but especially from the Taylor partnership. Critically lauded by many as the best portrayal of marriage on television because of its realistic rendering of what it means to love someone for better and for worse, Eric and Tami Taylor, as played by the Emmy-nominated duo of Kyle Chandler and Britton, have managed to capture the many dichotomous moments in the life of a marriage. Where other TV series tend to focus either on the bickering or the saccharine, "Friday Night Lights" has thrived on nuance, creating domestic moments that simultaneously reflect adoration and frustration; tenderness and sarcasm; respect and fatigue.

From the beginning, Chandler, 45, and Britton, 43, had a fiery chemistry that blossomed off-screen into an easy friendship.

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because it's very grounded. It's not like a soap where crazy things happen."

In fact, if there's anything wild about "Friday Night Lights," it's in how the show was made. Created by Peter Berg, who directed the film and also wrote and directed several episodes of the TV series, "Friday Night Lights" was filmed documentary style with three cameras running all of the time on location in Austin, Texas. Although other TV series have used hand-held cameras to achieve a similar cinematic style, "Friday Night Lights" departed from all production norms. The actors, who never rehearsed and were not given marks, had the freedom to change dialogue and influence the story, which gave way to real conversations — not banter — and sometimes overlapping dialogue. Camera operators, in turn, were trained to pay attention and follow the actors wherever they moved, giving the audience a fly-on-the-wall point of view.

When NBC ordered the series and hired Katims as the show runner, he decided to follow Berg's artistic bent, even though it meant that sometimes Chandler would throw out entire monologues in favor of long silences. "I watched the pilot and thought it was amazing," said Katims, who also ran "Roswell" and "Boston Public." "I felt like my job was to try to emulate what [Berg] did and ultimately expand on what he did. As opposed to getting defensive about that, I got very excited that we were able to capture moments that felt more real and therefore more emotional than what episodic television usually is."

"Eighteen years" was one of those moments. The unexpected guests at the Taylor house were football boosters who were trying to lure the coach into staying in Dillon, Texas, to lead a new high school football All-Star team. As scripted, the Taylors were supposed to exchange heated words in the hallway, but Britton and Chandler decided that less was more.

"We created that moment together," Britton said. "That was supposed to be a big speech that I gave off to the side. Kyle and I wanted it to be more concise. I wanted that moment to be about her demonstrating how she'd been the quintessential football wife. She's so mad at him and they've interrupted them and she says, '18 years,' and with a smile on her face offers them tea. It's rote, and it's so cool."

Their success as an on-screen couple, the actors think, is in large part because of their early agreement about the Taylor marriage. Chandler and Britton wanted the Taylors to have a strong union that would be challenged but not destroyed by life's turns, and together they made that request of the producers.

"My grandmother who died at 99 used to say that marriage was a business," Chandler said. "That's not to say that it doesn't come with all the other trappings. But it's a business and a friendship, and Connie and I didn't want them to get divorced or have alcohol problems or sleep with other people because when that happens in the story of a marriage, you're limited. Once that trust and faith is broken, the magic is gone, and the audience doesn't care."

That magic created many memorable moments. Remember when Eric romantically held his wife, as they faced a mirror, in the first season and told her how he was madly in love with her, and she responded just as sweetly that she was not moving to Austin with him? Or also in the first season when Tami surprised Eric with the news that she was pregnant and he went from silence to laughter to kissing her?

"Friday Night Lights" kicked off with a poignant sports story — star quarterback Jason Street (Scott Porter) was paralyzed from a game injury and relieved by the scrawny second stringer Matt Saracen (Zach Gilford) — but the show zeroed in on daily life in Dillon and made exploring relationships its cornerstone.

"It was about being able to watch it and feeling those emotions as you go through different characters and scenes — getting married or having a kid or breaking up," said Aimee Teegarden, 21, who played Julie, the Taylors' elder daughter, who falls in love with Matt. "The most poignant moments on that show were when there was no dialogue. A lot happened in those quiet moments."

On "Friday Night Lights" and "Parenthood," Katims says he asks his writers to follow one simple mantra: "Everybody's best foot forward," which means the executive producer who had two children and built a life with his high school girlfriend isn't interested in creating false conflicts or high drama. His characters, like him, are trying their best.

Tami and Eric compromised and did the long-distance marriage thing for a while so that he could accept a college coaching job, she could keep her job as a guidance counselor and their teenage daughter's life would not be disrupted again. But the birth of their second daughter proved to be too much to juggle and Eric returned to Dillon. Young Matt was saddled with taking care of his grandmother, who has Alzheimer's, after his father left to serve in Iraq and his mother skipped town.

Star running back "Smash" Williams' (Gaius Charles) college football dreams were dashed when he lost his scholarship because he got into a fight at a movie theater with some racist kids.

"I find that most people if they're acting mean, they're coming from a place of fear, so to me these people of Dillon, Texas, are people who are trying to make their lives better, and even when they make mistakes, they are trying so hard," Katims said. "I think most people are trying very hard, and I find that compelling in life, and I find it compelling in my shows. I guess there's room for all kinds of different shows, and there's room for a more cynical perspective. But I'm proud to not be the voice of that."

Chandler and Britton are too. But when asked how they feel when viewers hail the Taylor partnership as the best representation of marriage on television, their brotherly-sisterly bandying begins, reminding us why we're going to miss them. (Chandler is starring in a J.J. Abrams' flick, "Super 8." Britton said she hadn't booked a new job.)

Chandler: It's a lie. The best portrayal of a marriage on TV, after I've gone through this entire diatribe about marriage, is "All in the Family." When Edith goes "Archie!" — that was the best marriage ever.

Britton: I would have to disagree with you. I think [the reporter] means something different.

Chandler: That's the way marriage should be! That's the way mine is.

Britton: When people say to us it's the best portrayal of a marriage, I think they feel it's resonant with them. I don't think there are a ton of people who feel that marriage resonated, Kyle.

Chandler: It's the best marriage ever.

Britton: They feel guided by our marriage. Was that show entertaining to watch? Yes.

Chandler: You don't see my lounge chair in the Smithsonian, do you?

Britton: What's really flattering and astonishing is when people come up and say, "You make me want to be a better wife and a better mother." I think that's kind of astounding.

Chandler: No one has ever said that to me.

Britton: I certainly would hope not.

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yell4yell at 4:24 PM February 07, 2011

A Fantastic Show...It deserved bigger Primetime ratings,however it was about real people and real emotions and not fantasy relationships and guns and the shallow bling culture we are now told is the norm.....therefore it didnt score big numbers....Both of these guys are great actors and deseve huge praise for there work. Thank You for all your hard work. You were very much appreciated. Qaulity.Well done also to Peter Berg for his imagination,balls and hard work having this vision. It was a good one...sadly as i said earlier,we now live in shallow

times and peoples taste buds have been ruined by the 'un ' reality tv we have to suffer and the vulgar hip hop culture that glorifies the cheap and tacky.

heartfixx2 at 11:45 AM February 07, 2011

I am saddened with the final season of such a spectacular show. I have watched every season with anticipation and appreciation.

Kudos to both Britton and Chandler for their artistic ability in making this show so successful. Best of luck to both of them in their future endeavors.

Tragic it has to come to a close.

KarenOakland at 11:18 AM February 06, 2011

Thank you great article. I never watched this show until they aired most of season 1 on ABC Family earlier this year - thought it was a "football show." I promptly fell in love with it and these two are the primary reasons why. (Connie Britton is amazing - I loved her on Spin City as well). I get that sense as well that her character shows women that it's okay to have your own voice and yet be so supportive of your husband at the same time. I wish I knew a Tammy Taylor in real life!