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The rise of the (morally conflicted) leading lady

This summer, a cast of strong female leads takes to the screen. But the landscape is changing, say some actors.

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In "Damages," the new FX cable drama that debuted this week, actress Glenn Close portrays a slick, high-powered lawyer intent on felling a white collar criminal. Her character, Patty Hewes, meets with former employees who believe they have been bilked by fat-cat billionaire Arthur Frobisher (Ted Danson). Hewes promises to make Frobisher pay.

But as the show progresses, it's clear that Close's powerful attorney is far from a moral paragon. In fact, she may be as much a predatory vulture as her current prey is said to be. As such, Hewes joins a cast of leading lady "heavies" appearing on cable and broadcast networks this summer and the upcoming fall and winter seasons. The list of gutsy women with more than a few flaws is long – "Saving Grace" (TNT), "Bionic Woman" (NBC), "Painkiller Jane" (Sci-Fi), "The Sarah Connor Chronicles" (Fox), and "In Plain Sight" (USA), to name a few.

While TV has always loved its bad girls, the emergence of so many multidimensional female protagonists tells as much about the industry as it does women's role in modern life, say media watchers.

"The bottom line is the economics of advertising," says Tina Pieraccini, communications professor at the State University of New York in Oswego. Women make up 60 percent of the viewing audience, she points out. As the baby boom generation matures, she says, "advertisers are discovering that women over 50 are good consumers." Just like their audience, these characters are tackling adult problems with an adult sensibility.

"In the early stages of feminism there was this idea that you could only have positive role models," says Elayne Rapping, author of "Media-tions: Forays into the Culture and Gender Wars."

Even some of the later pioneers, such as the first female detective "buddies" on "Cagney & Lacey," were always the moral center of their universe. "These women today are not necessarily perfect, they can be as messed up as anyone else," Rapping adds with a laugh. But, she adds, "that's more like real life and these are characters that more women can relate to."

The actresses in these roles welcome the broader range of these parts. "They're more willing to portray complex female characters," says Close of today's writers and networks. It's no secret that women over a certain age find it harder to work in films, she adds.

"Women who aren't just there to be pretty are much more problematic," argues Close. "These real, authentic, complex, strong female parts – that kind of writing is being done more for TV."

The landscape has shifted, agrees Lorraine Toussaint, who costars with Holly Hunter in "Saving Grace." "This is not our mother's generation anymore," she says. "We're so interesting in our 40s, and finally somebody is taking a chance on us."

In a number of cases, the stars have helped develop and produce the projects, shepherding them to the small screen. Courtney Cox, for instance, who stars as an amoral tabloid press editor in "Dirt," brought the show to FX and is the executive producer. Actress and writer Laura Kightlinger got her first writing job on "Roseanne," a sitcom that helped usher in an era of the more dynamic female lead.

"Back then, that was the only show on TV with a woman like that," says Kightlinger, who now writes and stars as a charming underachiever in her own series on IFC, "The Minor Accomplishments of Jackie Woodman." Today, she points out, the TV landscape is awash in the fullbodied female lead.

This explosion is also fueled in part by the changing economics of niche television. Whereas a broadcast network might cancel a show with say a measly 10 million viewers, the sheer number of smaller cable outlets makes it possible for a new show to thrive with a few million people watching. The June season premiere of "The Closer," a police procedural starring the new Emmy nominee Kyra Sedgwick as the tough as nails interrogator who flops at romance, drew 8.8 million viewers, making it the top-rated ad-supported cable show in history.

But while these flawed females may be more delicious for actresses to explore and may even be more accessible for audiences, not everyone sees their ascendance as progress.

"Many of these roles don't tell us anything about women, they could be played by men just as easily as an actress," says Barbara Gottfried, who teaches women's studies at Boston University. Appealing to women with such roles is just another marketing gimmick, one that reflects an age-old truism, she adds. Women will watch women whether they behave like a man or woman. But men will only watch women if they act like a man.

"It's still a man's world," she says.

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