

WORKING WITH THE GRAIN

I had just started rehearsing the pilot for the series *Mad About You*. We were rehearsing the first scene. It took place in the kitchen, and Helen Hunt was looking for things to do, for props and business. She was a dervish of activity. I was trying to keep up with her, sending the prop master for this and for that. All the while I'm thinking, "She's scared, she's hiding from something. She's afraid to be funny, she's afraid of the jokes. She wants to keep moving. Stand still," I thought, "don't walk on the punch line or we won't get the laugh."

I caught a sideways glance, a worried look from Paul Reiser, the show's creator, co-writer and star. We were all new to each other, hopeful but naturally wary of one another. Would Helen's dedication to "true behavior in imaginary circumstances" get in the way of the audience's appreciation of funny writing? Neither Paul nor I knew the answer to that then, but there was a chill of caution in our shared glance. I took a deep breath and called a five minute break.

I was intending to take Helen aside to have a brief chat and share my concern. But something stopped me - some warning feeling in my gut. Instead, I took a walk. Not my usual activity at the beginning of a busy workday, but this time I went outside and walked around the sound stage.

My mind was racing: "I'd hate to hold her back...these are her instincts, she wants to be real. Her work is very honest, but is 'slice of life' funny? Well, sure, it can be, but will anyone hear the words over the clanging of pots?" By now I'd gone twice around the building and I was beginning to feel conspicuous. I wasn't sure what to do. I could talk to her, I knew, but I also knew that it's dangerous to separate actors from their instincts. Hey, on a great piece of marble, you work **with** the grain, right?

Back on stage, I waited. I watched her butter toast. She pounded and banged a lasagna to make it defrost. There's no vanity in the way she worked. It was honest and detailed. In a bedtime scene she automatically reached for a birth-control pill. I noticed that she wasn't afraid to sacrifice her natural grace, or dignity. It's a private reality that she was letting us share. I learned by watching that she was willing to let Jamie do anything. She was letting us see everything, whether foolish or secret - and that, I knew, was funny. I was falling in love as I watched her character unfold. And I felt certain that if I was, the audience would too. Paul and I laughed as she ran around the apartment. We laughed as Paul chased her: I could see he loved her too. We were becoming hooked on the Buchman reality.

I will always be grateful to Helen Hunt for exploring the truth through Jamie's behavior. And I will always be glad I didn't say, "Please stand still."

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