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PRIME TIME TAKES ON RECOVERY THIS SEASON, AS CHARACTERS STEP UP TO CONFESS THEIR CRAVINGS. CAN THEY STICK TO CARROTS AND CLUB SODA?

REHAB MADNESS

PHOTOILLUSTRATION BY TODD REUBLIN

BY JOHN GRIFFITHS

Those were the days.

For the lead character of Fox's fresh new comedy, Kitchen Confidential, they were days of booze and coke. And in flashback, viewers of the series premiere saw just how fast this brazen charmer had lived in his salad days.

It's a surprising opener, but even more surprising is the series' that-was-then, this-is-now raison d'etre. Jack—a formerly fast-living, now-humbled chef played by Bradley Cooper—is a fully sober guy, with a one-year chip from Alcoholics Anonymous to prove it. He also has an A.A. sponsor to help him stay off the path of self-destruction. Not that he checks in with him daily, which, as anyone familiar with the twelve steps will tell you, is essential to recovery. Still, Jack is clearly in sobriety, and that's a popular place to be in prime time this season.

Kitchen Confidential is just one of a slew of shows with a main character who is either recovering from—or still battling—the likes of alcoholism, drug addiction and eating disorders. Alcoholics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous... is it all the new guy? Viewers who have endured such real-life struggles—or watched others endure them—can find kindred spirits on shows as varied as the WB's 7th Heaven, ABC's Grey's Anatomy and Showtime's The L Word. The Goldschlager standard? FX's Rescue Me, which stars Denis Leary as a fireman who fights attending A.A. meetings with the ferocity of Godzilla.

Just how addicted is TV to the various forms of addiction? Well, before its recent departure, Six Feet Under (re)covered sexual addiction and youthful binge-drinking, while Showtime's ballyhooed Queer As Folk said goodbye with an unflinching—but ultimately hopeful—look at a gay man's bout with crystal meth. Last season on ABC's Desperate Housewives, Felicity Huffman's alter ego consumed her kids' Ritalin, and perfect Bree (Marcia Cross) sent her kid off to boot camp, partly for smoking pot. On ABC's Lost, Charlie Pace (Dominic Monaghan) continues to sweat at the sight of heroin, while on NBC's Medium, Patricia Arquette as the psychic mom avoids booze (this on the advice of a fellow psychic, who explains that it's natural for seers to want to quash...
their spooky talent with the sauce). Over on Fox, the caustic Dr. House (Hugh Laurie on House) has a penchant for popping Vicodin. And when we last saw HBO's Sopranos, Christopher (Michael Imperioli), an equal-opportunity substance abuser, was working the twelve steps.

And why not take the prime-time plunge? Addiction and recovery are "part of the world we live in," says Darren Star, who created Sex and the City and now shares creator-executive producer credit on Kitchen with David Hemingston. "I think the stigma is off in some ways, and people can identify with anyone in a struggle, whether that struggle is addiction or whatever." What's more, "people are drawn to characters who are on the precipice."

For Sex's Carrie Bradshaw - based on writer Candace Bushnell - it was a shoe fetish and a serious nicotine habit. While Kitchen is based on the memoirs of star chef and ex-heroin addict Anthony Bourdain, "Our guy is more coke and boozie," Star says. "Which definitely adds to the guy's struggle. He jumped on the party bandwagon a little too hard and lost his way. Now he's got a second chance to recapture that success he once had."

Kitchen's cooks stress they're making a comedy, not a documentary. Jack's addiction is just one facet of his personality - and the show. "It's something that deepens the character, that makes his world more interesting," says Star. As Hemingston sees it, Jack's A.A. membership is "important to him because it's going to inform his conduct, but it's incidental to his daily life. He wants to live life to the fullest, but he's kind of on the razor's edge. I don't think these impulses ever evaporate."

So far, Jack is hanging in there. In one episode, he is confronted by an old girlfriend still bemoaning the day he was so bombed he passed out in her mother's lap. To his credit, he apologizes - a reference to the twelve-step principle of making amends to those wronged in foggy days. "Jack isn't running away from his past, he's running toward his future," says Hemingston, a Columbia Law School grad who previously worked on Just Shoot Me and American Dad. "That's where I think the hope comes in in the show."

And what of the actor who brings this flawed hero to life? "I find Jack very admirable," says Cooper, a Philly native last seen on Alias and in the hit movie Wedding Crashers. "I mean, he could be a guy who's still doing drugs, sitting at a bar in two at the afternoon. But he's not. He's sober, working as a line cook, doing a job that he's way overqualified for so somehow get his life back in order."

Jack and his fellow strugglers have brought TV to a major turning point, in the view of Brian Dyak, president of the nonprofit Entertainment Industry Council (www.ecoinline.com). The group provides producers with in-depth information on addiction, and its annual Prism Awards honor entertainment projects - primarily TV shows - that accurately depict alcohol, drug and tobacco use. Among those praised last spring: Housewives and Christine Lahti, for her performance as a pot-smoking mom on the WB's gone-but-not-forgotten Jack & Bobby.

"Whoever thought there'd be something like Weeds?" marvels Dyak of the Showtime series that debuted this past summer. "I think we're looking at a new generation in the creative community, and I think the recovery community is as strong as it's ever been."

Hollywood's increasing awareness might explain why Weeds, despite its cheeky premise about a mom who deals pot, isn't exactly a Cheech-and-Chong lark. The conflicted Nancy Botwin (Mary-Louise Parker) cringes at the thought of schoolkids buying her goods, and her brother Andy (Justin Kirk) attends Marijuana Anonymous. Maybe he caught Reefer Madness, Showtime's campy - and surprisingly affective - musical about the perils of pot.

Even more controversial: FX's Stuckeved, a demented about three guys and a gal with anorexia, bulimia and/or a compulsive eating disorder. These New Yorkers attend the Belt Tighteners, a spookily hard-core version of Overeaters Anonymous (the group's screaming mantra: "That's not okay!").

The show's creator, executive producer and star, Eric Schaeffer, writes from experience. "I have been in recovery for twenty-two years from drugs and alcohol, and I've been trouble with my own eating disorders for twenty-five years. So it's something that I know intimately."

While the jury's still out on NBC's new Thick and Thin - a much more straightforward sitcom in which formerly zaftig Mary (Jessica Capshaw) also attends an O.A.-like support group - critics have called Schaeffer's approach to recovery too glib. But he defends his comic ways. "Anyone in recovery for any addictive disease knows that laughter is endemic and essential," he says. "It means you have some objectivity. So that was my number-one challenge: to make sure that I wrote a truthful show, one that combined some fun with the pathos. He's thrilled to be part of the trend of Rehab TV. "Addictive diseases are certainly more in the mainstream. It follows suit that in film and then in television, it would be more open-season as a subject matter."

PAM GRIER OF THE L WORD IS OVER THE MOON. From the set in Vancouver, where she's working on season three, the actress says she was "incredibly moved" while researching her character, Kit, a former disco diva who, despite being in recovery, owns a hot West Hollywood club (call her the modern Sam Malone).

"I have several friends in A.A., and they let me read their books and attend meetings with them," Grier says. "It brought me to tears. So I'm grateful to be playing a person who has been able to handle some very complex issues, and all because of A.A. [Kit] had no one else. She had deep-seated regrets that, if she hadn't uncovered, she would have continued to numb with drugs, drinking, sleeping. Once she went to the first meeting, she committed. And as painful as truth can be, it's making her healthier. She has..."
a new-found trust in herself."

Not that every show is bent on getting their heroes the help they need. On Just Legal, the WB's offbeat new lawyer show, Don Johnson plays Grant Cooper, a serious drank who turns to a higher power—in this case, not the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous but an eighteen-year-old upstart (Jay Baruchel) to help him get his life together.

"Grant Cooper is a heavy drinker—some might call him a functioning alcoholic, but we would never call him a recovering alcoholic," says creator-executive producer Jonathan Shapiro. "He's playing an injured, wounded, disillusioned character who's meditating himself. And he'll pay the price for that. The effects of his drinking will be played out realistically."

Realism is key, as well, to Kitchen's Hemingston, who like many inside and outside the industry counts friends and family members in recovery—people who've stopped drinking and found a higher path. "Being so close to the subject matter naturally allows for a certain veracity. Between the actors and the writers, everyone brings a wealth of experience in background information," says Star, who calls Anthony [Bourdain] "probably our best source."

Kitchen's writers listen to his gut, Hemingston says, but "we have the A.A. manual in the room. We know what the twelve steps are and we're thinking about them, but we're also thinking critically about a man—his personal reflections and what he's had to overcome." They can always turn to Cooper, too. "I have a lot of experience with [Jack's] plight and that world, so it was pretty accessible for me," he confides. His major indulgence these days? "I'm drinking way too much Emergen-C."

For Star, the writing process is "about trying not to be judgmental. Just because characters are flawed doesn't mean you can't love them." He doesn't rule out the notion of Jack "slipping," recovery parlance for hitting the bottle or vial again after a stay at abstinence. "It's all up for grabs," he says. "There's the sense that when people are in recovery, they never slip. But I think they do. That's interesting to explore: how do you stay on a diet for the rest of your life?"

And the issues go beyond substance abuse. "I see recovery as a metaphor for what all of us are going through," Hemingston says. "Everybody knows there are different stages and incidents that propel us toward reexamination. It's part of the reason people have sought out religion, why they are appreciating the moment more. American society is on shifting sands sometimes, and people are taking stock of their lives."

Even in the prime-time soaps, on Fox's The O.C., high-school vixen Marissa (Mischa Barton) spent much of last season knocking back booze by the pool. Meanwhile, seemingly perfect local mom Kirsten (Kelly Rowan) also had a drinking problem. Indeed, she was the subject of her very own intervention and starred this season in a halfway house in Lake Arrowhead, having rehabbed over the summer. Her admission: "My name is Kirsten and I'm an alcoholic." Her counselor's advice: "Get a sponsor, attend meetings."

"Depicting such journeys without making them seem pat is a challenge," says Josh Schwartz, the drama's wunderkind creator. "You don't want to ever condescend to—or patronize—either the character or the audience. You have to make sure you understand why the character is behaving [a certain] way, that it's not just a plot device. We've seen Kirsten with a glass of wine in her hands for two years and watched that slowly increase."

As Rowan explains, Kirsten, who recently lost her real-estate mogul dad, "went through what a lot of people in recovery identify with—they allude to a spiritual hole. The mind or the soul can feel out of sorts or not connected to the world. On the outside, there's this veneer—the perfect family, the perfect husband, they have lots of money. But underneath, there was always a sadness to this character."

This season, Rowan reports, Kirsten has worked on her recovery. "She was concerned whether she was ready to come home [from rehab]. As much as she misses and loves her family, the idea of coming home too quickly was a little scary."

AFTER A&E'S SURPRISING SUCCESS THIS YEAR WITH THE CONTROVERSIAL INTERVENTION— which profiled the real-life struggles of drug, alcohol and even shopping addicts—TV's reality genre is on a binge, too. Witness this summer's Rent Camp, which threw wayward teens like Lauren (who bravedly called herself a "self-destructive drug user" in interviews) into a rehab camp in the mountains.

But Breaking Bonaduce, VH1's latest nostalgia-tweaking reality run, hits a new rock bottom. Danny Bonaduce, onetime child star of The Partridge Family, initially agreed to let cameras capture his marriage counseling. Soon, though, producers witnessed his downsizing a bottle of vodka, taking Vicodin and injecting steroids. Then they were broadsided when he slit his wrists after his wife asked for a divorce. Crisis somewhat averted, Bonaduce was soon seen on air talking about his new life—in rehab.

The actor says he doesn't regret exposing his "personal demons" so boldly. Yes, "the show was very painful," he says. But, call it Network-style exploitation or the ultimate low "share" (recovery speak for letting folks know where you are in life), Bonaduce's grim honesty has earned some surprisingly positive reaction, for the star in particular. "And now that I have several months sober," he reflects, "I have a sense of freedom I've never felt before."

There's also the reality that the show may have helped some viewers struggling with addiction. "My wife kept telling me that, and I believe her now. The message boards have been lighting up."

"You shouldn't hide the reality of your situation," he says. "If I continue on that path [of sobriety], the show will have been well worth it."—J.G.
**HIGH TELEVISION’S DEPICTION OF THE USUALLY TRIUMPHANT ADDICT HAS BEEN AROUND NEARLY AS LONG AS TWELVE-STEP PROGRAMS THEMSELVES. HERE, A CHOICE SELECTION OF REHAB MADNESS MILESTONES:**


1982: *Meet Sam Malone*, a recovering alcoholic — and bartender — on Cheers.

1984: Karen Fairgate (Michele Lee) shocks her neighbors in *Knots Landing* when she does a stint in rehab.

1985: Lucy Ricardo (Lucille Ball) learns the pitfalls of slurping too much Vatametavegamin.

1988: *Journalist Murphy Brown* (Candice Bergen) comes out of the Betty Ford Center and takes a new TV job.

1989: James Woods nabbed an Emmy for his turn as the other Mr. Wilson in Hallmark Hall of Fame’s *My Name Is Bill W.*

1991: *On Veronica Mars*, a crime-solving teen (Kristen Bell) has a problem: her mom’s in rehab.

1993: John Larroquette stars as a recovering alcoholic on his eponymous sitcom. The show later shies away from the topic for happier times and ratings.

1998: *On Dallas*, Sue Ellen Ewing (Linda Gray) makes it clear she likes her vodka. Later, she identifies as an alcoholic.

2003: Abby Lockhart (Maura Tierney) battles a major problem with booze on ER. Her buddy, Dr. John Carter (Neal Wylie), later conquers his own yen for pain pills.

2004: *On Veronica Mars*, a crime-solving teen (Kristen Bell) has a problem: her mom’s in rehab.

2005: The sweet comedy *My Name is Earl* — about a smoking, cheating, beer-guzzling lug (Jason Lee) trying to change his ways — is billed as a show about karma. But the title suggests more...