

"In Sickness and in Health" aims to be fair

Actress appreciates sensitive script

By Steven Alan McGaw
"When I first read this script," reveals actress Marg Helgenberger, "it was just too much. I had to put it down." The script in question is "In Sickness and in Health", premiering Sunday, March 8, on CBS. But when she finally finished reading the work by Alan Hines and Joyce Eliason, she knew she had to take the role of friend and caregiver to a woman suffering from multiple sclerosis, a neurological disease that causes difficulty in speech, muscle strength and coordination.

Helgenberger, who won an Emmy for her work on "China Beach" after roles in "The 'Slap' Maxwell Story" and "Hill Street Blues", says there were several reasons she was drawn to the project, but her attraction to the story was largely personal.

"My father suffered from multiple sclerosis," she explains, adding that she had identified

strongly with the teenage daughter when she first read the script.

In the drama, Lesley Ann Warren and Tom Skerritt star as Anita and Jarrett Mattison, a couple who have forged for themselves and their teenage daughter Holly (Robin Lively) a simple, quiet life in Greenville, Texas, despite Anita's degenerative multiple sclerosis. Underneath a cheerful facade, Anita feels badly for the burden her deteriorating condition places on her family. Helgenberger says the character is "longing for companionship as well as caretaking."

Help arrives when the Mattisons hire Mickey (Helgenberger), a single mother who's recently inherited a home in the neighborhood and is struggling to make ends meet. Warm, optimistic, Mickey soon infuses the Mattison household with hope, freeing Jarrett's mind from constant worry. Mickey also becomes Anita's truest friend, volunteering for the arduous task of taking Anita out of her home. A handful of visits to nearby flea

markets makes Anita feel more alive than she has in a very long time.

Dormant feelings in Jarrett are also stirred, and his attraction to Mickey is reciprocated. An affair seems inevitable, despite Jarrett's love for and devotion to his wife and Mickey's genuine affection for her newfound friend.

While the characters of Jarrett and Mickey might easily emerge as unsympathetic, it is a strength of the script, Helgenberger says, that they do not. Jarrett's frustration is understandable, she says, and Mickey is simply trying to assuage her own loneliness.

Too often in cases like this, the actress points out, the feelings of others are forgotten in caring for the one who is sick. "You don't deal with the other issues," Helgenberger explains, adding, "If these things aren't discussed, the results are unhealthy."

As for playing Mickey, Helgenberger describes it as a "difficult role, but rewarding." The actress acknowledges the moral ambiguity of Mickey's actions, saying, "That's life... I don't like stories that tie up neatly with a bow at the end."

SA T U R D A Y



Dan Aykroyd and Kim Basinger are lovers from different worlds in *My Stepmother is an Alien*, airing Saturday on CBS. Jon Lovitz and Alyson Hannigan co-star.

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