

'The Mommies' — taking reality TV a bit too far?

Suzanne Gill

There aren't many countries where a couple of housewives can be clowning for the PTA one year and have their own TV series the next. And perhaps that's as it should be.

Yet that, in a nutshell, is the story of the comedy duo of Marilyn Kentz and Caryl Kristensen, a couple of car-pool buddies from Northern California who now star in NBC's "The Mommies" each Saturday night. In a mere three years, Kentz and Kristensen have taken their idea for a women's stand-up act from their kitchen tables to America's living rooms.

It all started when the older Kentz faced a mid-life panic attack and started dragging her friend off to various classes and community college events. Nothing seemed to help until the two attended a how-to-be-a-stand-up-comedian lecture and decided what today's woman needs most is a chance to laugh. Their own lives became the source of their material. The joked about childbirth, midlife bulge and other women's bawling habits. They went from playing club meetings to booking night clubs. They even appeared in Las Vegas (though they sent the act down for one night and flew

home to trick-or-treat with their kids). Women came with other women one night, then returned with their skeptical husbands the next.

Soon The Mommies were spotted by network scouts eager to sign the next Roseanne Arnold or Tim Allen or (even) Bob Saget, and series development offers began coming in. They accepted a deal from NBC's Perry Simon because, says Kentz, "Our whole show was about giving women a chance to see that they're not alone. And he was really behind that."

They were whisked away to Hollywood, but not, it turns out, made over. NBC encouraged them not to take acting lessons. They went before the cameras to film a series of brief "Mommie Moments," which aired last spring while the script, set and co-stars for their series pilot were being readied.

The pilot found Kentz and Kristensen folding laundry, waiting in the school parking lot or just sitting around the kitchen table, rattling off pastiche from their stand-up act.

Results were mixed: The Mommies not only haven't learned to act, in their brief history together they haven't developed a great sense of comic timing either. They just tell

the truth as they see it. To some viewers, it's cathartic; to others, it's just crass. Jokes about sonograms and menstrual cycles don't necessarily make good family viewing.

Worse, to date the friends' strong bond has worked against the success of the show, making everything on the set — even the other cast members, who include the estimable David Dukas as Kentz' husband — just so much background.

At a summer press conference to promote the show, Kristensen reacted in mock horror when a questioner suggested The Mommies are a bit rough around the edges. "You're saying we're not polished? I'm so shocked." Pausing months later on the way to a story conference, she says the main focus of cast and crew is to "evolve the show into a stronger version of what it is now."

"The Mommies" debuted to better-than-expected ratings, which may be an indication that the show will catch on, like ABC's "Home Improvement," with an audience that's more visceral than polite. "Home Improvement," however, has something "The Mommies" so far lack — a strong voice on the opposite side of the gender fence.

Kentz and Kristensen, who have their husbands' support for their comic endeavors, are quick to point out that they aren't man bashers, just post-romantic realists. In an upcoming show set at a bridal shower, the pair open the eyes of the bride-to-be.

"We take it out of the jokey-joke," says Kentz, "and now we're talking about the real thing, what I really said to Caryl, not on stage." She adopts a nasal tone. "Have you ever lived with a groomer? The clipping noises in the morning, blowing his nose in the shower?"

"And that is not a joke."
Maybe that's the problem.

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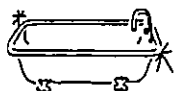
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