

Frisky foursome sows some 'Wild Oats' Sunday on Fox

By JOHN CROOK
Four twentysomethings explore what cast member Tim Conlon calls "that five-year stretch of open road between the end of college and the beginning of a mortgage" in "Wild Oats."

The new sitcom premieres Sunday, Sept. 4, on Fox. Conlon plays Jack Slayton, a brash and frequently shallow photographer who likes his life the way he likes his women: uncomplicated.

Too bad. In the opening episode, he clashes, then clinches, with his beautiful and brassy old flame, Shelly Thomas (Paula Marshall), and struggles to do the right thing as he sees his sensitive best buddy, Brian Grant (Paul Stephen Rudd), falling in love with her.

This opening half hour is rife with some of the raucous sex jokes ever heard in a Fox sitcom (which is saying something), but Conlon tells a fretful interviewer not to worry.

"I don't think that talking about sex is 'stooping' to anything," he says firmly. "I mean, it's one of the things we do in life. But yes, we definitely will be doing shows about other things."

Occasionally gamy dialogue

aside, "Oats" does boast an immensely likeable quartet of principals.

The Ontario-born Conlon, a 27-year-old former stand-up comic, was the first signed for the show and seems a likely candidate to be its first breakout star. He honed his craft in Second City workshops in Toronto, and was one of the youngest headliners on the Canadian comedy circuit. His feature film credits include "Angels in the Outfield" and "Revenge of the Nerds III."

"I've always wanted to have something to do with entertainment," he says. "I started out doing stand-up, which I really, really wanted to do. And I always wanted to act, and I always wanted to do good comedy on television. I think it was more of a goal than a dream I had, and I was lucky to get where I am now with these people," he says of his castmates.

With so many of his scenes played opposite the comedically cutting Conlon, Rudd acknowledges that he will have his work cut out for him if he doesn't want Brian to turn as bland as oatmeal.

"On my part I try to show a roughish side," says the stage-trained

actor, who had a recurring role on NBC's "Sisters." "Not so much like Jack's, but an air of stability or confidence."

Jana Marie Hupp rounds out the main foursome as Liz Bradford, Shelly's best friend. Although she isn't an active part of the principal romantic triangle, she serves a valid dramatic purpose, says executive producer Len Diamond.

"Jana's a really good way, if we're talking about this triangle, to reach out to the other single world and comment, bring in guys," he says. "(Liz is) in that dating hell. She's the smart woman, foolish choices gal."

Hupp and Marshall, both married in real life (Conlon and Rudd are single), say they are glad to be out of the maddening singles scene where "Wild Oats" takes place.

"When I was dating, I had a lot of insecurities about my looks and personality, and sort of throwing myself out there," Hupp recalls. "Almost like I had... no inhibitory nervous or something like that... And then going 'Oh, my God, reel back! Reel back! You shouldn't have said that!'"

"As far as dating," Marshall adds, "I think it's hard (in Los Angeles) to find out who are the real people. But we're all looking for love. And I think that's what (the show) is really about."

Footnote for "Seinfeld" buffs: If both Huff and Marshall look familiar, there's a good reason.

Huff played the young woman who had George Costanza (Jason Alexander) so lovestruck that he converted to the Latvian Orthodox faith.

Marshall had a prominent role in an even more famous "Seinfeld" episode, playing a young college reporter who erroneously "outed" Jerry and George as gay lovers ("not that there's anything wrong with that").

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