

## Gene makes the move to TV for *Something Wilder* on NBC

By JEFF PLESS

Anyone who knows Gene Wilder's work will readily admit that the actor has always seemed, well, a little out there.

In some of his more colorful film roles, the two-time Academy Award nominee has portrayed a sheep-loving psychiatrist (*Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex*), a mildly sociopathic confectioner (*Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*) and an accountant seemingly in serious need of a caffeine-intake reduction (*The Producers*).

But with his television series debut, NBC's *Something Wilder*, the two-time Oscar nominee seems to have taken (for him) a great, big gulp of normalcy.

In the series, which airs Saturdays, Wilder stars as Gene Bergman, a slightly past middle-age advertising executive. Gene and his younger wife, Annie (Hillary B. Smith), have abandoned the rat race

of New York City to raise their 4-year-old (fraternal) twin sons in Annie's peaceful hometown of Stockbridge, Mass.

Of course, having waited so long to try fatherhood, Gene would prefer to spend as much "quality time" with little Sam and Gabe (Carl Michael Lindner and Ian Bottiglieri) as possible. But between managing the fledgling ad agency he opened with his friend Jack (Gregory Itzin) and semi-incompetent brother-in-law, Richie (Jake Weber), and overseeing the remodeling being done to his 18th-century house, there are distractions aplenty.

For Wilder, the story idea couldn't have come along at a better time.

It was in the lonely, introspective period following his late wife's (actress Gilda Radner) death that Wilder found and developed a solemn appreciation of life and sense of *carpe diem*. And when

executive producers Lee Kalcheim and Barbet Kellman approached him with the idea for the series, it struck a responsive chord.

"I took a long time when I wasn't working and I found, I don't know, I would call it an awareness in life of the preciousness of each moment," Wilder says. "And they [Kalcheim and Kellman] came and told this little story about a man who, late in life, has twins."

"And I'm listening; (it) sounds - um - sweet, it's nice. Then they said, 'And if he'd had them at 26 or 7 or 8 years old, it wouldn't have been the same thing. (He'd) be busy worrying about paying the rent and getting an apartment, but now the preciousness of life. And then a hell went off, the preciousness of life.'"

"And that's when," he says "I don't like to use the word fate loosely, but it seemed very fatalistic to me, that this should come about for me at this time in my life and I thought about it and said yes."

Much like Tom Hanks' performance in *Big*, Wilder's portrayal of Gene presents the child inside every grown-up without simply showing a stupid adult. Gene identifies with his boys rather than being their unwitting, overwrought, frustrated and outdated victim. The show manages to thrive on their loving relationship without leaping off the edge of cutesy canyon.

Wilder himself has been happily remarried for more than three years now. He says one of the show's most enjoyable aspects is getting to vicariously experience many of the positive traits of fatherhood, without any of the negatives.

"If you (asked) me now," he says, "would I like to start a family and have fraternal twins? I would say no, I think not. Unless I could do it in a fantasy... If I could do it in a movie or a play or a TV show, yes. Because then I would have all the advantages except I could go home at night and be alone with my wife and not have to get up in the middle of the night and everything."

And so now, after playing so many off-the-wall characters on film and on stage, the actor-writer-director gets ready for *Something a Little Wilder* on television: parenthood.

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