

TV Review: Matthew Perry's 'Mr. Sunshine' Settles For the Familiar

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CHICAGO – Playing the same beloved character for a full decade tends to make an actor typecast for life, regardless of one's range or ability. That's the challenge facing all six stars of David Crane and Marta Kauffman's lovable and addictive sitcom, "Friends." Each cast member has had varying degrees of success when attempting to break out of their familiar onscreen personas.

Out of all the actors, Matthew Perry seems to have had the most difficulty altering his image. Perry's character of Chandler Bing was a wonderful comic creation—a deadpan straightman with a pained expression that could speak volumes, and a self-loathing sarcasm that seeped into every syllable. He was a perfect foil for Matt LeBlanc's free-spirited klutz, Joey. Though both actors went on to headline failed sitcoms ("Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip" and "Joey," respectively), LeBlanc's career rebounded in a big way this year with his inspired, self-deprecating turn in Showtime's hilarious "Episodes."



Television Rating: **3.0/5.0**

Yet while LeBlanc explores fresh comedic territory, playing a slyly manipulative version of himself, Perry is staying comfortably within Chandlerville in his new self-created sitcom, "Mr. Sunshine." The show's pilot episode is perfectly likable and well-cast, but there's simply nothing original about it. Every character and situation feels calculated and contrived, as if the entire show were the product of a focus group rather than a creative team. Perry plays Ben, a middle-aged variation on his "Friends" character, sporting the same grimaces and spouting the same quips until they begin to feel more and more like defense mechanisms as he finds himself approaching the big 4-0. As manager of a chaotic San Diego sports arena, Sunshine Center, Ben is the sort of self-centered egomaniac whose condescending remarks often represent the perspective of the audience. Bill Murray used to excel at playing endearing S.O.B.s like this, always allowing the viewer to be in on the joke. Yes, Ben is a devout narcissist, but it's easy to identify with his antisocial demeanor, particularly since he's surrounded by an ensemble of maddeningly cheerful idiots.



Allison Janney, Matthew Perry, James Lesure, Andrea Anders and Nate Torrence star in ABC's Mr. Sunshine.

Photo credit: ABC

The sublime Allison Janney plays Crystal, Ben's spectacularly tactless boss. She thinks it would be a great idea to deliver a speech to inner city youth that opens with the line, "Yay, black kids!" That's a typical example of the show's distressingly broad gags, yet Janney sells every moment with the same playful exuberance that recently lit up the silver screen in films ranging from "Juno" to "Life During Wartime." Crystal couldn't be any more different from press secretary C.J. Cregg, the character she played to perfection in all seven seasons of "The West Wing," and Janney seems to relish the opportunity to experiment with her skills as a physical comedian. There are moments in the pilot when the actress begins to resemble one of her own personal heroes, the great Carol Burnett. Her eyes have never looked wider or more vacant, devoid of the sharp intelligence that they often exude. However, one wishes that her punchlines were funnier, and that her character wasn't so similar to every other politically incorrect goofball on television. "Arrested Development" fans may find it impossible to watch any scene between Perry and Janney without being reminded of the nearly identical chemistry between Jason Bateman and Jessica Walter.



ABC's new sitcom Mr. Sunshine premieres
Feb. 9, 2011.

Photo credit: ABC

The least inspired character on the pilot is easily Crystal's naive chucklehead of a son, Roman (Nate Torrence), who's basically a portly version of Jack McBrayer's page on "30 Rock." As Ben's assistant Heather, Portia Doubleday (of "Youth in Revolt") proves once again that she has one of the most winning smiles in show business, though this time her smile carries an unsettling tinge of psychosis (stemming perhaps from a past incident where she lit a man on fire). Marketing executive Alice (Andrea Anders) emerges as the only character truly deserving of empathy. Favoring commitment over casual sex, she dumps her "friends with benefits" status with Ben in favor of a stable relationship. Her boyfriend is Alonzo (James Lesure), a spiritually enlightened ex-basketball player and natural-born optimist who is the absolute antithesis of Ben. It's clear from the get-go that Ben will have to evolve in a major way in order to win her love, thus giving the character an arc and potentially giving Perry the opportunity to subvert his trademark persona. Yet there simply isn't enough evidence in the pilot that the show will pay off on its promise. Too many scenes simply require Ben to bluntly spew put-downs that somehow are only audible to himself and the viewer. When Ben finds a workstation for the irritating Roman, he says, "This is as far away from my office as possible. I mean, this is a perfect job for you." A little of this shtick goes a long way.

Despite my misgivings, I'm still holding out hope that "Mr. Sunshine" will find its footing and develop its premise into something special. The show's colorful location holds endless possibilities for screwball complications and inventive set pieces. The bright and rather whimsical cinematography is by Michael Goi, who recently shot Lisa Kudrow's uproarious online series, "Web Therapy." Even Rob Cairns' music sounds like it belongs in a Fox Searchlight crowd-pleaser. "Mr. Sunshine" could turn out to be a pleasing evening entrée, particularly if future episodes begin to mix fresh cuisine into its assemblage of reheated leftovers.

'Mr. Sunshine,' which airs on ABC, stars Matthew Perry, Allison Janney, Andrea Anders, James Lesure, Nate Torrence, Portia Doubleday and Davis Pressman. The show was created by Matthew Perry. The first season premieres on Wednesday, February 9, 2011 at 8:30PM CST.



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