

COUCHPOTATOES

"Cracking Up"
Monday 7:30 PM on Fox
Starring Molly Shannon and Jason Schwartzman

Fox's new sitcom, "Cracking Up" might as well have been called "When Good Talent Goes Bad." Created by the funny writer Mike White ("School of Rock," "The Good Girl") and starring a trio of usually amusing character actors, including Molly Shannon, Christopher McDonald and Jason Schwartzman, "Cracking Up" is derivative, stereotypical and just plain unfunny.

While most sitcoms aren't known for intricate plots and complex characters, "Cracking Up" dives into the deep end of bad TV. The audience is quickly introduced to Ben (Schwartzman), a psychology student who is assigned to evaluate and work with the youngest child of a Beverly Hills family who just happens to be a top donor for his university. Ben moves into the family's guest house and quickly realizes his patient happens to be the sanest member of the incredibly wacky family.

The writers behind "Cracking Up" must not have too much faith in their audiences as they are quick to spell out every little joke and milk each gag to death. Audiences know the family is crazy because within the first episode, each family member is introduced in a neat and orderly procession right along with their "quirks." These quirks help the audience peg each family member into an easy one-dimensional stereotype slot.

Audiences will know Molly Shannon's character is the alcoholic because Ben finds her trying to smash her way into the liquor cabinet with yard tools. Audiences will know Christopher McDonald's father is the liar because when Ben confronts him about his infidelity, he denies it even when it becomes apparent he is guilty, switching the subject to his expensive new SUV.

Nothing, however, compares to the atrocious writing and acting involving the children actors. Ben's young patient is played by 10-year-old Bret Loehr. While it's no surprise that young Loehr is not the top actor on the show, he is easily the most unlikable. There is nothing remotely appealing about this child actor. If this show has any chance at a future, it would be a miracle. If Loehr has any

chance at future acting jobs, it's a sign of the apocalypse.

It's his two siblings, however, who take the award for stereotypical acting that borders on the offensive. Jake Sandvig plays the show's token gay character. The oldest son, Sandvig's character, enjoys shaving his entire body and throwing flirtatious glances toward Ben, making it obvious that he's gay. And if the audience still didn't "get it," Ben makes a mental note remarking upon his repressed homosexuality. Caitlin Wachs plays the family's Lolita, a sexual tease meant to send both the visiting psychologist and male audience members into titillation. While it's nothing new for sitcoms to enlist the service of an attractive female lead and play up her sexiness factor to add eye candy to a bland show, what makes Wachs' portrayal as the naïve cheerleader so wrong is the fact that the actress is not even 15 years old! Jailbait in every sense of the word, Wachs' role as the family's daughter should be illegal.

Despite the presence of talented actors such as Shannon and Schwartzman, time and again the show falls into the pattern of traditional schlock and one-note characters. In every episode audiences can expect the same thing: Jason Schwartzman feeling uncomfortable, Molly Shannon getting drunk and acting wacky, Christopher McDonald lying to his children or wife and the children trying too hard to fill the sloppy roles written for them.

"Cracking Up" isn't the worst show on TV today, but it is wasting valuable airtime that could be put to a much better use. The best thing that can happen to "Cracking Up" and its audience is for the show to quickly be snatched up and destroyed by the Fox executives who are notorious for killing shows too soon.



- Robert Saucedo

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