



## Harper's Bazaar

The actress-writer  
Julie Halston

**H**ere's my deal. I grew up on Long Island in a white middle-class community where Kraft Macaroni and Cheese is a regional dish. Dad was a tobacco and candy salesman. Mom was a mom. My adolescent life revolved around school, church, television, friends, malls, Whip 'n Chill, the Beatles and boys.

I was a typical American Girl. But somehow along the way, I became a minority - of what group heaven only knows, but a minority nonetheless. So when and how did it happen? Divorce at 28? Living in New York City? Gay friends? Wearing wigs for fun?

Not long ago, my wigs were really flipped when conflicting worlds collided. But let me explain. There I was, bewigged and bedecked to the nines in an off-Broadway comedy I had written about my life. People seemed to like the show and, lo and behold, I was offered a network-television development deal. Those who know said, "You are the girl of the '90s. Outrageous, smart, funny," Gee, thank you. So-o-o...

I'm flying first-class from New York to Los Angeles. A sitcom pilot is being written for me and the actor-writer Harvey Fierstein. Although Harvey has won three Tony awards for his own plays and his acting, we are told that we need a name television writer to get the green light. Anyway, we all agree on the characters and the premise: A high-strung but lovable divorcée given to theatrical, outrageous behavior moves in with her best friend. He is wry, smart, and gay. They will share wacky, urban adventures.

As I push back my seat and listen to the vague hazy sounds of airplane Muzak (something that increases my anxiety about everything, not just flying), I'm distracted by the entrance of a very pretty, blonde aerobics instructor who has literally bounced onto the flight. We know what she does,

since she is wearing a button that says YES! I'M AN AEROBICS INSTRUCTOR. She's giggling and bobbing like a marionette, high as a kite from no food and too much oxygen. There was, I think, a brief period when I looked like this girl, but now I'm a large German woman. (A man on the moon and someone can't develop a "thinning lens"?) Her name is Flicka, she says to her seatmate, a businessman. Flicka??!! Well...actually, she says her real name is Sydney, like, y'know, the country. He just nods.

We ascend the skies "without incident" (my mother's term), and I try to calm myself a bit even though I'm feeling a little insecure. Yes, I remind myself, I can look attractive especially when "professionals" are called in. I am, everyone tells me, a natural for television. My mind wanders into a daydream: When I arrive at the studio, the head of the network greets me: "Here she is boys! Our new Lucy, our new Maude!" The show will be the *Laverne & Shirley* of the 90s. Harvey will become the first openly gay sitcom star. He will be showered with awards - an Emmy, a Peabody, and a doctorate from Indiana University.

My reverie ends as the plane lands, Flicka bounces off the plane completely unencumbered. She has no luggage, no handbag, no makeup case, no nothing. She skips, yes, skips out the door into a bath of golden purple twilight. She is literally shimmering. No doubt she is on her way to the first of many Twelve Step courses of miracles, but I'm a little awed. So what if she's as dumb as a box of hair, LOOK AT HER!

When I get to the hotel, there are flowers from my agent, Louis, and a fruit basket from the network the size of a Subaru. Eight o'clock the next morning, I arrive at the front gate of THE STUDIO. "Do you have a pass?" I guess my press kit wasn't fully circulated.

Cast, crew, studio executives, and wanna-be-anything-in-TV types gather round for our first table-reading of the script. Everyone is so nice, all ex-New Yorkers, all divorced, all ethnic and/or gay, now living in L.A. We read, they laugh, it's time for lunch. Lunch?! – 10 minutes ago we had breakfast.

Harvey and I have some questions for the writer. Would my character leave her husband just because he's a little piggish? A stronger reason would be helpful – cheating, wife beating, or maybe he's a Letterman fanatic. Also, we need some funny punch lines, don't you think? The writer assures us, don't worry, everything gets rewritten all the time, and with your delivery, believe me, they will be hysterical. And with that, he scurries off to the executive dining room. But...but...but...

The dining room turns out to be larger than the jumbo jet we flew in on. Cater/waiters stand around a table laden with so much food I don't feel bad I missed Di's wedding. The director is telling me I'm an incredible actress even though he's never seen my work and just met me 10 minutes ago. Maybe he's very insightful. Or just nice. Or just crazy. And with that he scurries off to the executive dining room bathroom.

The next day we all meet on the set. An exact replica of a New York City apartment. Real food in the refrigerator. Real lettering on the door. Bathroom cabinets that will never be seen fully stocked with products. For the next 12 hours we walk through the set, scripts in hand. The cast is fabulous, all talented and nice. Our writer sits in a director's chair. He is also our executive producer. He seems distracted. Maybe he's thinking up funnier lines. But then he announces it's time for his martini, and leaves.

For the next week, men in suits and baseball caps quietly walk in, watch, whisper, and walk out. Our associate producer prowls the set, looking for pretty girls. Our director "shares" with us that he really wants to be living in New York, directing off-Broadway drama, which is great except that in seven days we are taping an unfunny sitcom in front of a live audience. Help!

Harvey and I ask about the rewrites. Don't worry, we are told. The first week is the process of notes, which consists of the following. The director: "Be more real. Don't go for the easy laughs." (Not one of our more pressing problems.) The suits: "Don't be real. Go for any laughs. Harvey, be gay, but not too gay. Julie, be New York, but not too New York. You're a typical American girl, but remember to be you...y'know, outrageous." The designers: "Show

the costumes." The associate producer: "Who's the redhead?" The writer: went to lunch. The coffee-wagon man: "The arc of the story is disjointed."

Notes to myself: Maybe if I looked better, I would feel better. Besides, I'm too New York: let's do an L.A. kind of thing. I go to the ivy-covered portals of a well-known workout studio for a class in stretch and tone. The instructor is hugging someone. We line up for class. Two men and 12 women. A clone of Candy Spelling approaches me. Holding my arm, she says, "You are under tremendous stress. It's written all over your face. Are you an Aries?" No, I'm Sag. I say; I mean I'm a Sagittarius. She goes on with great purpose. "Mercury is in retrograde for the next 10 days. You can't do a thing. But see Raisa immediately. She will give you a massage, a colonic, and an ear cleaning. For the next 10 days do nothing, but for God's sake, get cleaned out!"

Sorry, no time, must run back to the TV studio, where the notes have now become dictums. OFF WITH HER HEAD! The trademark hairpiece flies out the window. OFF WITH THE DIVORCE! She's still married, but separated. Maybe she'll even go back to hubby. OFF WITH THE OUTRAGEOUS! She needs to be smaller, more nurturing – let's show her cooking and cleaning up the apartment. WHAA!?!? I quietly suggest that this character is not me, the supposed '90s girl, and, more important, she ain't funny. Harvey is frustrated, too. The smart, successful, openly gay character is now smart, semisuccessful, and gay but depressed. (You can be openly gay, but you'd better be a little unhappy about it.)

WAIT! WAIT! WAIT! Suddenly, I pull behavior that, until this moment in time, I've only read about in Star magazine – the "not walking on the set until changes are made" behavior. How could I have become Shannon Doherty? I'm a nice girl from Commack, Long Island. Doors open, doors close. I stand firm. What happened to the larger-than-life, flamboyant characters that we were told made us so unique? Those were the people who made everybody laugh. Couldn't we express ourselves a little bit – just a little bit?

Blank stares. After much muttering, slight changes are made, and the characters are a tad less cloying. Instead of skim milk, we're now 2%. We tape in front of live audiences in the afternoon and evening. We tape every scene about 500 times, getting every possible angle. The audiences are responsive, but after watching the same scene for the 490<sup>th</sup> time they do get a little restless. Needless to

say, the cast is numb by the time we finish, but others are more perky. The director: “Stars! You and Harvey are stars!” The suits: “The audience loves ya! This just might fly!” The designers: “You looked great!” The associate producers: “Who’s the blonde she’s a hit!” The writer: “I’m gonna make a zillion dollars!” The coffee-wagon man: “Here. Have some coffee, you need it.”

No, you won’t be seeing this brassy divorcee with her gay male best friend on prime-time this season. We’re not on the schedule. Surprise! Test-market audiences couldn’t sympathize. And how am I feeling? I keep thinking of what *Angels in America* playwright Tony Kushner said when he accepted his Tony Award last spring. “This is a scary orchestra!” he yelled over a chorus of strings trying to cut off his acceptance speech after 30 seconds. Scary orchestra indeed, but we heard him.

Ah, well, I still dream my blue-light TV dream. I’ll just have to pitch my voice firmer and louder and talk even faster than I already do.