

CAGNEY & ... CANCELED?

Cagney & Lacey made TV history by coming back from cancellation—twice

During its six seasons on CBS, *Cagney & Lacey* was honored by the Humanitas organization, the Viewers for Quality Television and even the New York Police Department. The show won 14 Emmy awards, including each season's Best Actress trophy for either of its leading ladies.

But before all that, it was canceled. Twice.

Could've Been at Bloomingdale's

Show creators Barbara Corday and Barbara Avedon had originally set out to make a feature film about two women, and "you couldn't just write a script about two women sitting around talking. ... We had to have some sort of a franchise," Corday remembers in an interview with the Archive of American Television. So "the Barbaras" turned their leading ladies into New York police detectives, although they weren't particularly trying to be pioneering.

"We had a motto around the company, which was that in a perfect world, [the two characters] could work at the post office, or Bloomingdale's, or anywhere," Corday explains. "Because what we were interested in—and what two-thirds of our audience was interested in—was their conversations in the women's bathroom, and in the car, and at home with a husband, and on dates. The cop setting was just a skeleton on which we could pin the rest of the story."

When the writers sold the script as a CBS telefilm, they knew whom they wanted to cast as one of their leading ladies. While working in 1979 on a short-lived sitcom called *Turnabout*, they'd been impressed by lead actress Sharon Gless' combination of femininity and strength. They knew Gless would make the perfect Christine Cagney, their ambitious and quick-tempered creation. But CBS pressed for one of its existing stars, Loretta Swit of *M*A*S*H*, to land the role.

As the script circulated through Hollywood, "everybody and their sister wanted to play these parts," Tyne Daly remembers. At the time Daly had made guest appearances on more than a dozen TV shows but was best known for her work on the stage. With Swit's support, the writers and producer Barney Rosenzweig pressed the network to permit casting Daly in the role of married mom Mary Beth Lacey.



LORETTA SWIT



Loretta Swit starred as Christine Cagney in the telefilm that inspired the series, but Gless eventually was cast in the series role.

Marshaling Viewer Support

Broadcast in October 1981, the telefilm *Cagney & Lacey* was a ratings hit and was ordered to series. Because Swit was committed to *M*A*S*H* and Gless was tied up with CBS' sitcom *House Calls*, producers recast Cagney with actress Meg Foster. The network ordered the series version of *Cagney & Lacey* to debut in midseason 1982, but following Tom Selleck's popular yet incompatibly macho lead-in *Magnum PI*, the series took a bullet in the ratings and was pulled after just two episodes.

A persistent producer, Rosenzweig persuaded CBS to keep his cops on the beat and on the air, but for the fall season the network ordered up a third Christine Cagney. Gless had played a cop before and hesitated to pick up another badge, but with persistence—and *House Calls'* cancellation—Corday and Rosenzweig finally got their girl.

"The minute that show went back into production with Daly and Gless, we knew that it was going to be great," Corday remembers. "It was the first time that I really breathed, that this was Cagney and Lacey."

But with again middling ratings, the show was canceled once more in spring 1983. Rosenzweig, who had instructed his staff to store the addresses of fans who'd written letters, mobilized his database army to contact their local network affiliates and newspapers' TV critics to demand more of their favorite cops, while Daly and Gless drummed up publicity and support across the country. The strategy worked, and *Cagney & Lacey* became the first instance of a show that returned from cancellation thanks to popular demand.

Jiggle-Free TV

Cagney & Lacey debuted just after the era of "jiggle TV," when female detectives like the trio of *Charlie's Angels* needed to be young, nubile and glamorous. Now, Corday and Avedon had created a realistic portrait of two law enforcers who were actual working women. They crafted their two leads—one married with children, one single and dating—to best explore a full range of story areas and social issues.

Christine and Mary Beth encountered sexism at the station house and personally experienced storylines involving date rape, alcoholism, abortion and the death of a parent. "We dealt with issues that women in America were dealing with," Corday explains. "The cop stories were just the added layer."

"I think Christine Cagney was the most fascinating woman ever written on television," proclaims Gless, noting her character's seemingly contradictory fashion sense, curls and tough-as-nails attitude. Always looking for a promotion, the ambitious, upwardly mobile Cagney would happily "run and gun," or burst through a doorway to bust a perp. Meanwhile, the blue-collar Lacey "was more of what New York cops I talked to call a 'booster,'" Daly says. "She preferred to talk to people and to get their story. She liked citizens more than danger."

"They were smart, well-trained, and they had each other's back," Gless says. "But they were so different. I think that was to their benefit. They knew how to read each other—they just had chemistry."

"To me," Corday agrees, speaking of both the characters and the actresses who made them TV icons, "they were the Tracy and Hepburn of their day." — *Jim Colucci*

The characters "had chemistry," Gless says, which led to six hit seasons on CBS.

