

MATERNAL INSTINCTS

How two single urban moms revived the sitcom format



Jane Curtin, left, and Susan Saint James

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IT WAS 27 YEARS AGO this spring when TV critics first declared the sitcom dead. Then, with its debut on March 19, 1984, a new CBS comedy called *Kate & Allie* suddenly became a midseason sensation.

Two years earlier, hot off her Emmy win for the short-lived kids' program *Hot Hero Sandwich*, writer Sherry Coben had been scheduled merely for a meet-and-greet with the network's new East Coast chief. But when she was asked unexpectedly for some series ideas, Coben improvised by harkening back to her high school reunion in Cherry Hill, N.J.

"All these girls who had been the be-all-and-end-all in high school had now peaked, and were divorced and saddled with a couple of kids," the now 57-year-old writer remembers. "They came in alone, and as they got progressively drunker, you could see them being happy just to have someone to talk to. I remember thinking that they should move in and raise their kids together."

The CBS exec bought Coben's pitch on the spot. In the resulting pilot script, originally named *Two Mommies*, Allie Lowell, a cautious and conservative recent divorcee and mother of two from Connecticut, moves her brood into the Greenwich Village apartment of her more carefree college friend, the also formerly married mom Kate McArdle.

"I'M SURE IT'LL BE HILARIOUS"

That same spring, Susan Saint James, who had brought touches of comedy to her detective role on *McMillan & Wife*, had moved east to live with her new husband, then-*Saturday Night Live* show runner Dick Ebersol. Presented with *Two Mommies* by CBS, Saint James immediately felt in sync with what she calls Kate's "fake it until you make it" attitude. Now 64 and living in Connecticut, she remembers how Jane Curtin, the

former *SNL* star, was initially reluctant to take the part of Allie. So just like Kate, Saint James says, she applied some enthusiasm. "I said, 'Come on, Jane. We'll do it, and I'm sure it'll be hilarious.' Then in the pilot, two seconds after we walked out on stage for the opening scene, the audience started laughing when they saw Allie wallpapering the closet. And that was it—we never looked back."

Kate & Allie was an immediate ratings hit. The show was also unusual in that it was produced in New York, allowing its ladies to explore some real-life city exteriors during its trademark opening and closing segments. Finding suitably equipped shooting space indoors, however, would prove more of a challenge. In Manhattan's Ed Sullivan Theater, decades before the place was spruced up as the home of David Letterman, "we would be working on one side of the stage, and on the unlit parts there'd be rats the size of my cat," Saint James remembers. "It was the 1980s, New York at its grittiest."

Kate & Allie didn't shy away from urban reality on screen as well, liberally tackling hot-button issues like homosexuality and homelessness that were affecting the parents and kids of its day. In its 5½ seasons, the show was both "revolutionary" and "underappreciated," Saint James says. "It was funny and heartfelt, without beating you over the head."

To this day, the actress says, she meets women with daughters named in tribute to the sitcom's leading ladies. But her most telling compliments often come from the possibly unlikeliest source. Thanks to Ebersol's job as a sports producer, "I'm around football a lot," the actress explains. "The players are a very mom-centric group, and *Kate & Allie* was a show their moms would have on. So I get most of my feedback now from these big 30-year-old guys, who remember being raised with *Kate & Allie*. That's really kind of fun." — *Jim Colucci*



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