

ENVELOPE ENTERTAINMENT

Men as second fiddles to the women? Sure, why not, say these 'Mrs. Maisel' actors

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Actors Tony Shaloub and Michael Zegan play father and husband of the lead on "The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel." (Jennifer S. Altman / For The Times)



Here's a twist: The marvelousness of "The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel" is pretty much reserved for the women on the show. Fortunately, three-time Emmy winner Tony Shalhoub, who plays the title character's dad, Abe, and Michael Zegen, who plays her wayward husband, Joel, are delighted to make hay from the back seat as the women drive the plot surrounding the Mrs. in question (Rachel Brosnahan), a 1950s housewife who, when ditched by her husband, decides to become a stand-up comic.

Shalhoub and Zegen sat down with The Envelope at Bond 45 in New York City to discuss what makes them laugh – and the importance of heads being blown off.



Considering the name of the show, and that the Maisels split in the first episode, I didn't really think you'd be sticking around, Michael.



Zegen: My parents said the same thing.



Shalhoub: A lot of people asked me, "Is he going to be gone?" No! He's never leaving.



Zegen: Amy (Sherman-Palladino) and Dan (Palladino, co-showrunners), unless you get them drunk don't really reveal too much.

Shalhoub: I prefer not knowing too much, because when you're doing any given episode, it's like life. We don't know what's going to happen in our lives. If you know too much it can sometimes color or inform what you're doing. It's more liberating to blindly put one foot in front of the other.



Actor Tony Shaloub (Jennifer S. Altman / For The Times)



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"Maisel" is very female-centered; the men are really more supplemental to the story. Does that feel different to you both in some ways?



Zegen: I did "Boardwalk Empire" and "Rescue Me," which are pretty masculine shows. It does feel different to me, but after the pilot aired, one of the Teamsters who was driving me said, "I loved the pilot." It's funny and universal in that regard.

Shalhoub: I find it liberating. There's a pressure that's lifted. We're not really driving story so much, we're in more of a reactive mode, and that's freeing because these men are not your typical TV male characters. One thing I talked to Amy and Dan early on about, before I got on board – I wanted their reassurance that this wasn't going to be a typical TV dad who's the brunt of everyone's joke. That's been done to death.

With so much television today, one marker that makes things stand out is when story lines don't go where you expect.



Zegen: For me [the series] turned into something even greater than I'd expected. I didn't know how big it was going to be. I walked into the Gaslight [comedy club] set and I was like, "This is incredible." Then in the second episode it's like, "Oh, they got more money." This scene I'm walking through the garment district and they had like 200 extras and they shut down streets and there was a 1950s bus driving by and I thought, "This is going to be a big show."



What's your dream arc for upcoming seasons with Joel and Abe?

Shalhoub: It's risky to get ahead of ourselves, because we're not privy to what the writers have in mind. But Abe – as we transition into the early '60s and Kennedy and Nixon and the Cuban Missile Crisis, I'd like to see that he gets really obsessed as a father, as a citizen. I'd love to see that this is another huge obstacle in his path.

Actor Michael Zegan (Jennifer S. Altman / For The Times)



Zegen: I would like for Joel to find something he's good at. He doesn't have a game plan right now. Right now he's kind of miserable – and I just want him to be happy.



Have either of you ever done stand-up?



Zegen: No desire at all.

Shalhoub: I can't imagine anything more terrifying.

Zegen: I applaud anyone who has the courage to do that. Getting heckled – that's something I don't need to experience.

Have you ever been heckled?

Shalhoub: Only in my marriage. I'm kidding. Not really. I have had horrible experiences where you're asked to emcee something, or run a live auction, and you can't get anyone's attention. That to me is like what stand-up must be like when people don't laugh.

Zegen: I had a sketch comedy group in college, and we did a show once where the audience just decided not to laugh. We did three shows that weekend – Thursday and Friday were great, and Saturday nobody laughed. When it happens, you cannot get off the stage fast enough.

So what makes you laugh?

Zegen: I've always been attracted to sarcasm. I grew up watching "The Simpsons" and "Saturday Night Live" and my dad raised me on Bill Murray movies. Randomness, random humor.

Shalhoub: I like political humor, the kinds of things ["Late Night" host] Seth Meyers does, and ["Late Show" host Stephen] Colbert.

Zegen: These days it's funny, but so depressing.

Shalhoub: But I need it; I need to be able to look at that material to get some relief. These guys devote all their time and energy to finding that perfect comedic line.

Zegen: I was listening in at the last table read, and there are lines on paper that wouldn't be funny – but when Tony says them they're hilarious. How do you do that?

Shalhoub: I wish I knew.

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