

Thursday, September 21, 200

Sara Ramirez:  
Callie TorresKatherine Heigl:  
Isobel "Izzie" StevensSandra Oh:  
Cristina YangEllen Pompeo:  
Meredith GreyKate Walsh:  
Addison ShepherdChandra Wilson:  
Miranda Bailey

Photos by ABC

# Grey's ladies

Hospital show's appeal lies with its strong, but flawed, women

By Donna Freydkin  
and William Keck  
USA TODAY

## Cover story

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night for its season premiere (ABC, 9 ET/PT), television's No. 3 scripted series overall, and No. 2 (behind *Desperate Housewives*) among women 18-49.

For actress Ellen Pompeo, there's certainly no gray area when it comes to understanding why female viewers check in for their weekly dose of these multiethnic, complex femmes.

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ping) Meredith. "In the past, you'd have to go to cable to see a character so raw."

The creative talents behind the show resist categorizing *Grey's*. "We don't actually tend to think of it as a 'chick show,'" says executive producer Betsy Beers. "We like to believe that the themes and issues we deal with on *Grey's* are universal. For example, how does one juggle long hours at a demanding job and still try to have a successful personal life? Half the men and women I know wrestle with that on a

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A ★★★★★ season kickoff for *Grey's* tonight (9 ET/PT, ABC); TV preview, 2D

By Donna Freydkin and William Keck, USA TODAY

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The creative talents behind the show resist categorizing *Grey's*. "We don't actually tend to think of it as a 'chick show,'" says executive producer Betsy Beers. "We like to believe that the themes and issues we deal with on *Grey's* are universal. For example, how does one juggle long hours at a demanding job and still try to have a successful personal life? Half the men and women I know wrestle with that on a regular basis, as do I."

But, Beers adds, "having said that, I can't deny there is a strong female voice in the writing as it was created by, and is run by, a woman" — executive producer Shonda Rhimes.

Fan Renee Dechert, an associate English professor at Northwest College in Powell, Wyo., was pulled in right from the start of the pilot by the voice of Meredith, which opens and closes each episode, much like *Sex and the City's* Carrie Bradshaw or *Desperate Housewives's* Mary Alice Young.

"Obviously, a female perspective is shaping how we'll see what we're about to see," Dechert says. "And just to make sure that we've got it, she'll do a closer at the end. Such a narrative technique is entirely in the tradition of *Sex and the City*, a show equally based on feminine fantasy."

To be sure, the *Grey* ladies are no wallflowers or saccharine sisters bonding and giggling over cafeteria Jell-O. They struggle. They make mistakes. They compete. They support. They commit. They cheat.

And each character's choices affect the audiences' affection. Viewers have come to both love and loathe not only Meredith Grey but also tough-talker Miranda Bailey (Chandra Wilson); snarky, abrasive commitment-phobe Cristina Yang (Sandra Oh, who declined to be interviewed); emotional train wreck Izzie Stevens (Katherine Heigl); deeply ambitious and bossy Addison Shepherd (Kate Walsh); and the mysterious hospital-basement dweller Callie Torres (Sara Ramirez).

**'Strong, unique voices'**

To Walsh, the show's appeal to women is as glaringly obvious as her character's scarlet lipstick.

"Every character has such a strong voice, a unique voice," says Walsh, 38. "It's really rare, as a woman, to see women interestingly and accurately portrayed on television. You get relegated to the mom or the long-suffering wife or the whore or the cop. To actually see women with all the complexities and facets of the male characters we've seen through the years ... people didn't even know they missed it until they saw it."

Wilson, 37, received an Emmy nomination for playing "The Nazi," the interns' not-so-affectionate nickname for their supervisor. A serious soap opera fan, she consumes four hours of daytime viewing every day. "I'm sitting here going through my tapes right now," she says, speaking from her home. She believes *Grey's* qualifies as a soap "like *Knots Landing* or *Dallas* was — where you want to come back next week and see how each situation resolved itself."

But unlike the often one-dimensional divas on traditional soaps, *Grey's* women don't get involved in petty catfights. The cast credits Rhimes for consistently keeping their characters respectable and believable.

Wilson reminds that when there was a locker room brawl (over a syphilis breakout), it was between characters Alex and George, not the ladies.

"It's encouraging a different experience for women and showing that it is entirely possible we can be friends and still be competitive," says Heigl, 27, whose emotional intern Izzie quit the medical program in last season's finale after getting involved with a heart patient and committing medical misconduct in her struggle to keep him alive.

### **Bring back Izzie!**

In the new season, the women unite in a campaign to get Izzie reinstated. "And that's fascinating, because that just does not happen very often," Heigl says. "We're all competing for the medical cases or to get the best surgeries, but they also all helped Izzie at a time when she was making a crazy decision and basically throwing her career away. They stood by her and didn't abandon her."

Rhimes, 36, also has assembled prime time's most colorful cast. And that, too, accounts for the show's appeal, says Ramirez, a Latina whose orthopedic surgeon (and the object of George's affections) becomes a regular this year.

When Ramirez, 31, met Rhimes in New York last year to discuss her role, she said she was elated to discover "that Shonda was an African-American woman. She reflects on TV what I see as my experience in the world. She's got people of different races and backgrounds, but doesn't make a big comment about it. They are characters who have flaws, and — oh, by the way, they're African-American. Or Asian. Or whatever."

By all accounts, this diverse cast has bonded off-screen as well. Walsh says she's closest to Heigl and in fact had drinks with her and co-star T.R. Knight (George) the night before this interview. "It's safe to say that we totally love each other," Walsh says, laughing.

"It's a very fun atmosphere on set," echoes Pompeo. "It would be too difficult if we didn't have fun with the hours we have to put in."

For one episode, real-life knitters Wilson and Heigl taught Pompeo how to handle needles and yarn. Walsh and Heigl live near each other and often meet for drinks and prior to awards shows get gussied up together in one of their homes.

"There's an unbelievable amount of support and encouragement among these women," says Heigl. "We're very much there for each other in a way I haven't experienced outside of my very, very close friends that I've had since childhood. And I've had past working relationships with women that haven't been that supportive ... that have been more competitive."

Heigl recalls receiving a phone call at home from Pompeo after last season's finale showed the emotional scene in which Izzie broke down and climbed into bed with her beloved, dead patient, Denny.

"Ellen was so incredibly supportive and complimentary," Heigl says. "That meant so much to me because I'm so critical of myself and value her opinion. It made me want to cry."

Still, the actors have separate lives off-screen. "We don't have (much) time to hang out," admits Pompeo. "We spend all day together, and it's not like we're going to run home and hang out together, too. We all have things to do ... boyfriends, dogs to take care of."

Pompeo lives with longtime boyfriend Chris Ivery and their two poodles. Walsh is single. Heigl became engaged in June to musician Josh Kelley. Ramirez says she has a beau. Oh split from her *Sideways* director, Alexander Payne, after a brief marriage. And though Wilson declines to discuss the nature of her relationship with the father of her three children, daughters Serena, 13, and Joy, 8, and son, Michael, 10 months, keep her quite busy.

Wilson realizes what fans truly want to know is who their favorite characters will be hooking up with.

"The setting, the medical emergencies, the individual quirks of the characters, the humor — that's all secondary," says fan Petra Otto of Neenah, Wis. "In the end, I'm tuning in every week to watch them find love ... and hope that they all get loved in return.

"Heck, I even want McDreamy to make the right decision so that he, too, can be happy. But the sly writers added a twist here, didn't they? McDreamy can't be happy without breaking one of the gals' hearts."

On the strict orders of tight-lipped Rhimes, the cast has been given a gag order about revealing anything plot-related.

This season "you see everybody stand on their own a little bit more," says Walsh. "You get to see a different side of all of us. A little more history of where they've come from

and where they're going. Every character in the show takes on a different direction. It's a lot more in-depth but still in the structure of the hospital and cases."

And Otto will be happy to learn the messy, misguided love triangle of Derek "McDreamy" Shepherd (Patrick Dempsey), his wife Addison and lover Meredith will be resolved. And a new twist will come via the arrival of Derek's sister.

### **Fans caught up in the action**

Viewers feel so passionately about all these hookups, breakups and entanglements that some have even accosted Walsh in public to offer insight and encouragement.

"I was doing this event in Chicago, and this woman who'd had a few drinks came up to me, grabbed my arm like she knew me and said, 'You need to let McDreamy go! Let it go. It's done,' " recalls Walsh.

Not even Pompeo knows how the triangle will play out. "I don't know that I end up with anybody," she says. But Pompeo would be just fine continuing without a clear resolution, allowing Meredith to play the field, as many a man would do. *Sex and the City* aside, it's something rarely seen on television.

"It's what a lot of women do, anyway," Pompeo says. "But guys get a pat on the back, and women get a reputation."

Heigl believes female viewers are responding to such sexual liberation. "We've all been in those circumstances where there's been a double standard, where a man can act any way he wants, but if a woman behaves in a similar way, she's labeled something," Heigl says. "I think a lot of women appreciated that Meredith stands up for all women in a way."

Heigl says she still hears from female fans "how much they loved Meredith's speech to Derek that 'you don't get to call me a whore!' "

Heigl pauses.

"Was it 'whore' or 'slut'? I can't remember. But anyway, people loved it."

*Contributing: Ann Oldenburg*