

Sunday TV

When she was feeling great, "The Practice" seemed to forget about Camryn Manheim's prickly character. Then, when she was eight months pregnant, suddenly the whole show started to revolve around her.

Hit or Miss Manheim

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Emmy-winning actress Camryn Manheim has a new TV movie to promote. But the more exciting production in her life—her son, Milo Jacob, born on March 6—is cradled in her arms while we speak.

"I'm staring down at his gorgeous face right now," she coos proudly. Manheim, 40, made headlines when—like a number of other actresses who are single but decide to adopt or have a child—she got pregnant on her own terms, which are generally the only terms she lives by.

Those terms did not include natural childbirth.

"I know there's a lot of controversy about natural birth versus the epidural," she laughs. "But you couldn't pay me, I'd rather go through that 'Root Camp' show or 'Survivor.' That's right—I had an epidural. I'm 'The Weakest Link.' You can kick me right off."

Though Milo Jacob was born two days before her own birthday, you'd be wrong to think Manheim was hoping the delivery would occur just a little later. "I was trying to get him out!" she laughs. "People would say, 'That's so nice of you; you don't want to ruin his birthday.' Not I don't want to ruin mine."

"I very, very, I have a big party and my invitation says, 'Your presence and presents are requested.' I love presents." Then the star of ABC's "The Practice" takes a look at a home bursting at the seams with stuffed animals, a fire truck, a tiny

Harley Davidson motorcycle jacket, and other gifts from friends and family. "Although, after his birth, any more presents just are burdensome at this point."

Work obviously isn't a burden because Manheim was back on the set just two weeks after Milo was born.

"Yes, thank you very much for noticing," she laughs.

"Two weeks to the day. I want you to know that I also worked two days before I gave birth."

"Not only did I do 'The Practice,' but I did 'Gideon's Crossing,' 'Boston Public' and 'Will & Grace' all during my pregnancy."

"I'm trying to get the network grand slam. I just need to do something on CBS. I could do a 'CSI.' They need lawyers over there."

But to avoid being stereotyped as a legal eagle, Manheim stars in "Kiss My Act," a TV movie airing April 23.

A romantic comedy, it marks her first behind-the-scenes credit as co-executive producer. Manheim plays a bartender at a comedy club who dishes out comfort and one liners to the comics but is too afraid to get

on stage herself.

In a gentle spin on "Cyrano de Bergerac," Manheim coosches a bubbly blonde through a killer stage routine and a budding romance with a talent scout that Manheim herself fancies.

It co-stars Marlee Matlin (playing a friend that Manheim coaches through labor with sign language) and Daffney Goldman as a washed-up comic who urges her to grab the spotlight.

Though Manheim has numerous roles to her credits—Snow White in the miniseries "The 10th Kingdom," an acclaimed turn in Todd Solondz's "Happiness"—she says creating her own projects isn't just a question of flexing her Emmy-endowed muscles. It's a necessity.

"Really, it's necessary," Manheim says. She's already sold a feature-film pitch about an extra that plays a key role in the rise and fall of a famous star. "I'm never going to get the parts I want. If I have to lead roles and I be in romantic parts, I'm going to have to produce it myself. Because no one else is

going to do it."

But surely her Emmy win and the high profile of ABC's top drama has meant a flood of offers?

"You're very sweet to say that. But that's not exactly what happened."

"After I won the Emmy, one would think that it would have catapulted me into an arena where things would have come more easily. But there wasn't then and isn't now a place for women like me."

"It is frustrating, and that's why I have to produce. But it's frustrating in that my whole entire life has been frustrating that way."

"Things have never come easy for me, and I learned how to fight from an early age."

"And I continue to do so. It doesn't stop me, it just slows me down a little second."

Some fans might be thinking Manheim was slowing down for this season on "The Practice," that maybe her turns out of the spotlight—inevitable in an ensemble cast—were built-in breaks to deal with the difficulties of being pregnant. Think again.

When Camryn Manheim won an Emmy two years ago—and declared that she'd won it "for all the fat girls"—she wasn't surprised that the phone never rang with new offers. Above, with the other women in the cast of "The Practice."

"The way David [Kelley] works," laughs Manheim, "is when you're available and feel really good, he won't use you. Then, when you're eight months pregnant, he'll use you all the time."

"There are 22 episodes in a season. The first three, right out of the gate, when I'm in my first trimester and vomiting and nobody knows I'm pregnant, I had every line in the show."

"Then, I'm out of my first trimester, I feel fantastic, I'm ready to work and on my game. I think I go for six or seven episodes where I have one scene. I'm not used at all."

"Generally, I feel really antsy when I'm not being used. But this year was different because I had to prepare for having a baby."

"So I was pleased to have the time off. He has eight principals he has to satisfy, and I think he does really good."

"He works in mysterious ways, but it always seems to work out."

Motherhood is clearly working out for her as well.

"I'm with the dude all the time. But when I go back to work, I'll have somebody there on the set."

"I'm not sleeping, but never have I been so happily tired. I miss him! When he sleeps for four hours, I want to wake him up."

"People have already noticed this huge change in me. Everyone notices this calm. And obviously it's exhaustion," she laughs.

"But more than that, it's a peacefulness that you've put everything into perspective."

"Yes, this is a really great movie, and I want you to watch it. But if you don't, you can kiss my act."

"You know what I mean? I've got a baby boy now."

