

TV Sunday

'Malcolm' on top

Frankie Muniz stayed up all night to find out if he'd been nominated for an Emmy. What's he going to do when he actually wins one?

FRANKIE Muniz, nominated for Best Actor in a Sitcom by the Emmys, doesn't even try to be blasé about the clutch of nominations his show, "Malcolm in the Middle," just received. "It's awesome," he says. "Me and my mom had gotten up real early in the morning to watch it. We weren't expecting me to get nominated at all. We didn't even consider it. We were just getting up to see the show, and plus, we couldn't sleep anyway. They said my name and me and my mom went crazy."

"I'm surprised we didn't get the cops called on us for screaming so early in the morning. I really didn't believe it until the phone started ringing off the hook all day. It's hard to believe, but it's cool."

Last year, "Malcolm" won key awards for Best Writing and Best Directing even though the show itself wasn't nominated. This year, it has eight top nominations, including Best Actor (Muniz), Best Actress (Jane Kaczmarek, who was also nominated last year for her harried portrayal of Lois) and Best Sitcom.

The Emmys have a classic pattern of waiting two seasons before giving the nod to a hit series, so this could be "Malcolm's." The 15-year-old Muniz, for one, doesn't have any doubts about what will happen.

"I don't expect to win," he says. "I think the show will win, for sure. It would be awesome. We'll see."

The adults connected with "Malcolm" are more circumspect, but obviously thrilled about the attention coming to it.

A witty, one-camera comedy, "Malcolm" originally focused on the life of a kid from an atypically loud, boisterous family where the mom yells at the kids to pick up their clothes and the dad wanders around in his own little world. That all changes when they dis-

cover Malcolm is a genius.

Despite the exceptional pilot, you could easily imagine a familiar show about a super-smart kid who makes brainy jokes and is surrounded by dunces. Instead, the show blossomed immediately.

Most sitcoms with a family try to focus on the group until one character breaks out (like Kirk Cameron on "Growing Pains") and takes it over. "Malcolm" looked like it would focus on one genius at school and suddenly found a lot more mileage with his family life.

"We're the opposite of 'Family Ties,'" says the show's creator, Linwood Boomer. He's calling from a cell phone on the set of "Malcolm," where they're just filming the second episode (in which the oldest son, Francis — played by Christopher Masterson — "escapes" from a logging camp and returns home). "Family Ties" had lightning in a bottle with Michael J. Fox," says Boomer. "We've got lightning in ten different bottles."

Interestingly, Boomer captured that lightning by casting actors who weren't desperate to work. Usually, actors will sell their souls for a good part. But Jane Kaczmarek and Bryan Cranston (who plays the dad, Hal) were hardly the typical needy performers willing to say or do anything to get a role.

Kaczmarek, who describes herself as "the laziest actress in the world," is a case in point.

"I had to be talked into auditioning," Kaczmarek laughs. "I didn't want to act anymore. I had enrolled in UCLA in a bunch of courses that I just loved. I had a hard time getting pregnant, and my doctor suggested I take a year off, which I did. I so enjoyed not working — or not pursuing working — and so enjoyed being a mother when I finally got pregnant. I was doing a recurring role on 'Felicity,' which was all I wanted to

do. Working one day every three months is my idea of a career."

My husband [Bradley Whitford, who plays Josh on "The West Wing"] and I wanted to have another baby. So we called the agents and said, 'Don't send me on anything; I don't want to do series work.' But it was the end of April and they called and said, 'They can't find anybody; they're requesting you.'

"Then your actor vanity clicks in. 'They really want me?' So I read it and I really thought it was funny. So I worked four days, and I thought, 'Even if it goes, I'll be a mom on a kid's show. I'll work one day a week.'"

"Sure enough, we did the pilot. And one week in May, the phone rang and it was Fox saying my show had been picked up. Then NBC called the next day to say 'The West Wing' was picked up. And on Friday, the doctor called and said I was pregnant again. It was a life-altering week."

Cranston — who everyone agrees is the funniest person on the set — was also that rare actor not hungry for work. Cranston guest-starred on virtually every show in the '90s and knows he will work steadily for years to come. So when "Malcolm" came along, he knew the show was funny but wasn't convinced that the dad — just a dim bulb in the pilot — would be an interesting character.

"Oh yeah," says Kaczmarek, about Cranston's concerns. "I think he had about one line in the pilot."

"I read the pilot episode," says Cranston,

The smart money is betting on an Emmy sweep this year for "Malcolm in the Middle."

"which was brilliantly written and made me laugh out loud several times. After reading it objectively, I started to look at it subjectively as an actor offered a role. I looked at it and said, 'OK, I need a conversation here.' So I talked with Linwood Boomer, and I said, 'You wrote a wonderful script, and I think it's going to be a great show. I would like to be a part of it, but only if you make Hal an integral part of the family chemistry. I have no desire to play a character as limited as he seems to be in the pilot right now.'"

"And he stopped me and he said, 'I absolutely know what you're talking about, and I promise you that Hal will become a fully developed character.'"

It didn't take long for Boomer to keep his promise.

"It was the very first episode when we came back," remembers Cranston. "Hal

takes the kids to a race-car track instead of school. He's thrilled to be with his boys and wants to show them a good time, teach them something about life. Dewey ends up on the track and the boys end up in trouble and I end up kicking the security guard. And we try to fool mom and she catches us. I thought, 'It's starting. He has his own agenda.'"

And Cranston has his own agenda on the set.

"This is going to be a period of my life that I'm going to look back and want to be really happy about and proud of," says Cranston. "I don't want to have any arguments on the set, any problems. I want it nice and smooth, and now I'm in a position to influence that. And I do."

Having been on unhappy sets like "Cybill," which she describes as miserable, Kaczmarek says she is grateful for that.

So she's ready for the Emmys, even if she's convinced she won't ever win. That may be a reaction

from last season, when she got sucked up into the hoopla and couldn't help thinking that maybe she would win. (She didn't and Kaczmarek is rightfully proud of her reaction shot when the winner was announced — smiling and looking so pleased and saying, "Ohhhhh, how nice.")

Like the rest of the cast, she knows how lucky she is to be on a show that — if it maintains its quality for another three years — could rank as one of TV's best. And maybe it happened for her and Cranston and the others because they didn't need it to happen.

"Isn't that funny?" says Kaczmarek. "When it happens to you, you can't believe it. My husband was working constantly; I had my kids. Besides, I'm in my 40s."

"It gets humiliating being an actress when you're in your 40s. It's just stupid. So it is amazing to stumble on this at this time in my life."

