

TV Sunday

She starred in the two best sitcoms of all time. She's battled alcoholism and diabetes. But it wasn't until Mary Tyler Moore took control of her career with the new TV movie, *Mary and Rhoda*, that she finally realized what the rest of us have always known...

There's something about Mary



Mary (with Dick Van Dyke) initially turned down "The Dick Van Dyke Show" — one of the best best sitcoms of all time.

By MICHAEL GILTZ

MARY Tyler Moore returns to her most beloved character in the TV movie *Mary and Rhoda*, airing next Monday on ABC. The surprise? What sounds like a no-brainer for any network was actually a struggle to make.

It was planned as a sitcom, then as a TV movie that might lead to a series and then the whole project ground to a halt.

But for the first time in her professional career, the 63-year-old Emmy winner took control of the situation, showing the same determination that Mary Richards always did when something really mattered.

"I thought, 'There's nobody else who's going to do this,'" says Moore. "And if you want it done, you better start holding the reins and driving it." And I did. And I found it terrifying but also enlightening and very, very satisfying."

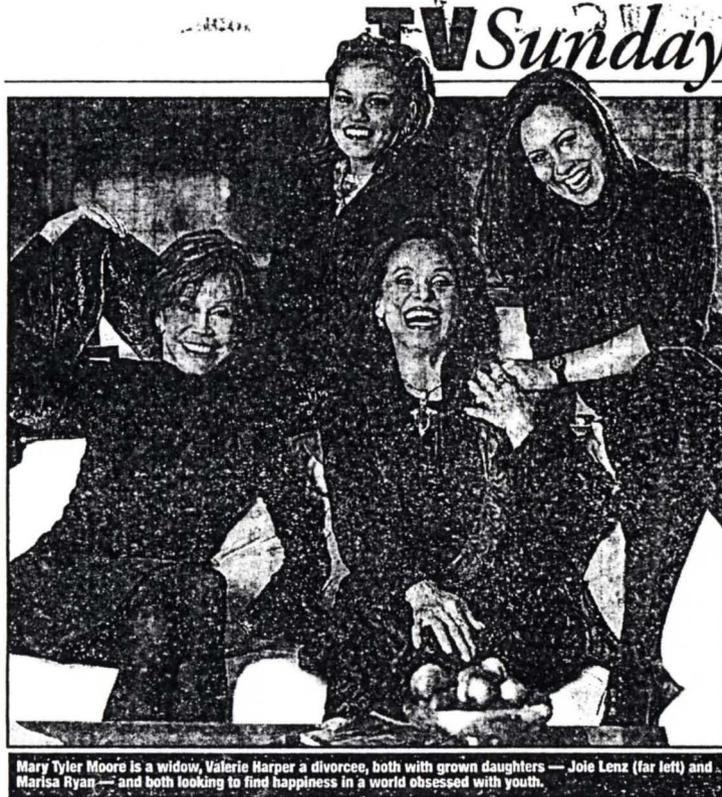
In the film, Mary is a widow and Rhoda a divorcee, both with grown daughters and both looking to find happiness in a world obsessed with youth. Mary also returns to TV journalism, a world that's much seedier and more tabloid-y than it was during her days at WJM.

Moore — who wrote her autobiography years ago — plans to return to writing as well, inspired by how happy she was to be calling the shots as an active producer.

"I didn't keep a journal [during the making of this movie], but I have very fresh in my mind all the experiences," says Moore. "I'm going to complete the outline for it and determine whether it's a good long piece for a magazine or in fact a book."

"I tend to think it might be a book because it's not only the accounting of what happened the first time I got the idea for this show. It's also about the growth on my part," she says.

"I was around MTM" — the immensely



Mary Tyler Moore is a widow, Valerie Harper a divorcee, both with grown daughters — Joie Lenz (far left) and Marisa Ryan — and both looking to find happiness in a world obsessed with youth.

creative production company that was named after her — "but I was never a part of it. I've always said [ex-husband] Grant Tinker was the one who ran that company and did it beautifully. I was always too scared or just felt inept to step into any other role besides actress."

Ironically, her willingness to let others make the important decisions played a key role in Moore's success. She initially refused to audition for *The Dick Van Dyke Show* — another series that always makes the short list of the best sitcoms of all time.

"I turned it down," remembers Moore. "I said to my agent, 'No, I've had my heart broken too many times this week. I'm not going.'"

She was depressed because of two parts she'd just lost. But her agent persisted: this was Carl Reiner from the legendary *Your Show or Shows*, who specifically wanted her to read for the part of Laura Petrie. She had to go.

Moore relented and — according to Reiner — she only had to read two words before he knew she was the one and he jumped up to drag her into the producer's office. "Well, it was more than two words," she laughs. "It was a couple of sentences at least. But that's just what he did."

"He opened his palm and put his hand on the top of my head and said, 'Come with me,' and as if he was conducting the rudder of a ship,

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— Mary Tyler Moore

he steered me down the hallway to Sheldon Leonard's office."

After five seasons, Reiner pulled the plug on *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, "knowing that they would inevitably start to repeat themselves. It's almost unheard of — a critical and commercial success simply stopping because its creator wanted to get while the going was good."

Virtually every other classic sitcom — *"I Love Lucy," "M*A*S*H," "Cheers," "Seinfeld,"* and certainly *"All in the Family"* — overstayed their welcome by years, tarnishing the great triumph they'd achieved by squeezing out a few more lucrative seasons.

The only other show to call it a day during its peak? *"The Mary Tyler Moore Show."* But again, if Moore had been more assertive,

that wouldn't have happened.

"It came as a surprise to me that Jim Brooks and the other writers wanted to go on to other projects," admits Moore, who said all of them — including herself — were young and wanted to see what was around the corner.

"But it was hard for me. I didn't want to let it go because I had allowed it to become my family, the family I'd felt I never had when I was growing up — the place where you feel comfortable."

I would have kept it on for another couple of years. But I was not in charge, or I had not allowed myself to become in charge enough to have those feelings and stand up for them."

Instead, she moved on and *"The Mary Tyler Moore Show"* remained one of those rare TV series that almost never had a weak episode, much less a weak year.

Moore triumphed in TV movies like *"Lincoln"* and *"First, You Cry,"* a film about breast cancer. She had memorable turns in feature films, playing an icily removed mother in *"Ordinary People"* and a wacky free spirit in *"Flirting with Disaster."*

But sprinkled throughout were unsatisfying attempts at other series. The '80s saw two sitcoms and a drama, *"New York News,"* (costarring Gregory Harrison) disappear quickly.

In the '70s, she even made two stints at a variety show. One

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The girls are back in town! *"The Mary Tyler Moore Show"* — with Mary Tyler Moore (left) as Mary Richards and Valerie Harper as Rhoda Morgenstern — was one of those rare TV series that almost never had a weak episode.

Next for Mary: give birth to 'Labor Pains'

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was a "Carol Burnett"-like sketch comedy called "Mary." It lasted three episodes. The other was a sitcom about people mounting a variety series, a show — within-a-show concept called "The Mary Tyler Moore Hour." It lasted three months. Surprisingly, Ellen DeGeneres will try the same idea with her next project.

"I wish her better luck than I had with mine," laughs Moore, who jokingly

She has another film in the can — "Labor Pains," costarring Rob Morrow — and is eyeing other projects. She's also taking great pleasure in her newfound professional confidence — something she's enjoyed in her personal life for years.

"After Grant Tinker and I divorced and I came to New York, I began to reassess my life. I began to see that not only could I handle life on my own but that I could also handle life married to a younger man, not to mention a man who would encourage



The way they were: Mary Tyler Moore insists there will not be another Mary and Rhoda TV series — just the TV movie.

calls the genre a "sitvar."

Though it didn't last long, the show did give career boosts to Michael Keaton, David Letterman and Doris Roberts, who now has a plum role on "Everybody Loves Raymond," one of Moore's favorite shows currently on the air.

"What I mostly like about it is the writing," says Moore. "It's fresh and it's honest."

"I also like Ray Romano in particular," she says. "And I think Patricia Heaton is outstanding! She is my kind of actress — she's real and she takes her time but she's also funny and inventive."

Unlike Moore, Heaton has yet to snare a much-deserved Emmy. But Moore isn't looking back on past successes.

me to do things independently."

The result is "Mary and Rhoda." If it's successful, Moore is toying with the idea of other TV movies continuing their story.

"But this will not be made into a series," insists Moore. "That was my original goal. But I found there were arbitrary negotiations and negative aspects to putting this together that I would not want to live with on a weekly basis."

And from the tone in her voice, you believe her.

From now on, whether Moore succeeds or fails, you know one thing: she's going to be in charge and the success or failure will be hers alone. And all the sweeter for it.