

TV Sunday

TV stars don't die or even fade away. They come back as parents. This year, some of TV's most famous faces returned to weekly TV as moms and dads — and a teacher. Michael Giltz welcomes back some ...

DABNEY COLEMAN

Age: 69

Hometown: Austin, Texas

Most famous for: nasty TV personality Bill Bittering on "Buffalo Bill," the classic short-lived NBC sitcom costarring Joanna Cassidy and Geena Davis.

Character: lawyer/businessman Burton Fallin on CBS's "The Guardian" at 9 on Tuesday.

"I always wanted to do a show about the American businessman," says Coleman, "because I don't think it's been portrayed on the big or small screen in a realistic manner with the exception of maybe something like 'The Best Years of Our Lives.' There we saw a successful businessperson who was not necessarily a money-grabbing, self-serving, immoral, unethical human being.

"This is exactly what the doctor ordered in that respect. I had the idea 15 years ago and 'The Guardian' is the fulfillment of that."

Big Surprise: Coleman auditioned for the role of the Professor on "Gilligan's Island" and he originally turned down a role on "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" because they asked him to shave his moustache (another character was already wearing one).

"That was the look I wanted, so I told them no," says Coleman. "It was just a six episode deal and my agent said it wouldn't make or break me.

"They called back the next morning and said they wanted me and I could keep the moustache. Those six episodes turned into two years and of course it really did make my career."

Show's status: "The Guardian" is hammocked between two big CBS hits: "JAG" and "Judging Amy." But give the show its due: it is bona fide hit in the toughest time slot on TV, thanks to competitors like "Frasier," "NYPD Blue," "Smallville" and "24."



OLD FRIENDS



CLORIS LEACHMAN

Age: 75

Hometown: Des Moines, Iowa

Most famous for: Phyllis Lindstrom, the pushy neighbor on "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" with long-suffering husband, Lars. She started scoring Emmys left and right.

Leachman now has six statues and a record: more Emmys in different categories than any other person.

New character: Dot Richmond, the fairly understanding mother on "The Ellen Show," Fridays at 8:30.

"People say, 'Is there any of you in this character?' They get me, pretty well, and then some. I'm left-handed and right-brained," laughs Leachman, "so you can see I function differently from most people. They sure caught something that's recognizable to me."

Big Surprise: Leachman posed nude — covered by body paint a la Demi Moore in Vanity Fair — for Alternative Medicine Digest in 1997.

"As a consumer," says Leachman, "as a person who would buy a magazine, I thought 'Who wants to see an old lady on the cover of a health magazine?' I wouldn't buy it. So with that, my mind started thinking in terms of marketing."



Show's status: "The Ellen Show" is starting to find its rhythm — not that viewers are noticing yet.

"I think they're going to put us on Monday in December, a trial sample," says Leachman.

Ellen DeGeneres was so triumphantly good hosting the Emmys that CBS has picked up the struggling sitcom for a full season and begun airing ads describing it as a new "Green Acres." A better comparison? "The Andy Griffith Show."

JOHN SCHNEIDER

Age: 47

Hometown: Mount Kisco, New York

Most famous for: good ol' boy Bo Duke on "The Dukes of Hazzard."

New character: Jonathan Kent, adoptive father of superhero-in-training Clark on "Smallville," Tuesdays at 9.

Big Surprise: Those Duke boys made beautiful music together. Tom Wopat starred on Broadway in the musical "Annie Get Your Gun" and joins the soap "All My Children" for a month to play a singer (and promote his new CD, "The Still of the Night.")

Schneider has enjoyed his own substantial career as a country artist, including hits like "You're the Last Thing I Needed Tonight" and "It's a Short Walk From Heaven to Hell."

Show's status: "Smallville" is a smash hit by WB standards, enjoying the biggest debut in their history and holding on to a good chunk of that audience in future episodes — all while facing down "Frasier," "NYPD Blue" and the others on Tuesdays at 9.



JERI RYAN

Age: 33

Hometown: Munich, Germany, but she grew up in Kentucky.

Most famous for: Seven of Nine on "Star Trek: Voyager," the first bit of sexual oompf in the long-running franchise (assuming you don't find pointy ears a turn-on).

New character: Ronnie Cooke, a high-powered attorney who throws it all away to tackle the challenge of teaching kids Shakespeare on "Boston Public," Mondays at 8.

"It's so much fun to play ... number one, a human," laughs Ryan. "Ronnie has a sense of humor and she has sexuality and she's intelligent and she's strong and she's a bit of a firecracker."

Big Surprise: "I was not one of those gorgeous, glowing sexy pregnant women," insists Ryan, who found being pregnant easier than sending her son off to first grade.

"I'm a crybaby anyway," says Ryan. "It was entirely more traumatic for me than it was for him. But he's doing incredibly well. He makes friends and adjusts easily."

Show's status: Better than ever. "Boston Public" is pulling in bigger numbers in its second season, giving Fox a much-needed dramatic boost as old-timers "Ally McBeal" and "The X-Files" are on a downward slope.

"It's like I'm on vacation," says Ryan. "This is the most fun I've ever had. Really."