

4/26/04

NYP TV WEEK

● REALLY BIG SHOW

Plainsong

Small town helps teen



America Ferrera and Rachel Griffiths play a homeless girl and the teacher who comes to her aid in "Plainsong."

By MICHAEL GILTZ

HALLMARK Hall of Fame follows up its critically acclaimed drama "The Blackwater Lightship" with another quiet gem.

"Plainsong" stars Aidan Quinn as Tom Guthrie, a school teacher in Colorado who is dealing with a clinically depressed wife who leaves him to raise their two young sons. Based on the bestselling novel by Kent Haruf, the film, airing this Sunday night on CBS, revolves around a host of small-town inhabitants who are brought together by a homeless pregnant teenager.

Many of the characters lead lives of quiet desperation. Tom, for one, keeps a stable home for the boys while dealing with an abusive student and — just as his marriage dissolves — the unexpected attentions of no-nonsense fellow teacher Maggie Jones, played the versatile Rachel Griffiths, the mercurial Brenda of HBO's "Six Feet Under."

"Tom's a wounded soul," says Quinn, "he's a lonely, exasperated, good-hearted schmuck who needs to learn to enjoy himself and — as the stewardess says — take the oxygen mask and put it on himself first before he tries to take care of anyone else."

Quinn was also interested in playing Tom because of where he was from. "Rural people are so unrepresented in the media," says the 45-year-old actor. "It's nice to get that kind of story out."

For America Ferrera, who plays Victoria Roubideaux, a pregnant teenager for whom Maggie finds a place to live after

the girl's mother kicks her out, doing "Plainsong" is a chance to prove her acclaimed debut in 2002's "Real Women Have Curves" wasn't a fluke.

That challenge came in the scene where Victoria gives birth. "I wanted to make that as real as possible and I spent the most time trying to make that authentic," says Ferrera, who turned 20 on April 18. "I watched a lot of birthing videos, which were painful to watch." The preparation was sobering in more personal ways. "I told my mom she never has to worry about me getting pregnant," says Ferrera.

Having a family is the furthest thing from Ferrera's mind these days. She's pursuing a degree in international relations at USC in Los Angeles and filming an upcoming Warner Bros. project based on the best-selling young adult novel "The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants."

Both Quinn and Ferrera took time to praise the chameleon-like Griffiths. Ferrera found her ability to perform from instinct inspiring and Quinn admired her ease with the camera.

"She has a facility of turning on when the camera's on and sashaying with a charisma that is hard to describe but is instantaneous," says Quinn. "When you have a lot of experience on television and shoot six or seven pages a day, you get very familiar with the language of the camera. I find some really good actors that work in television series are very good at combining the technical aspects with the other stuff."

With "Plainsong," Quinn adds another prestigious film to his impressive list of TV credits. He first impressed audiences

with his sensitive portrayal of a gay man who is diagnosed with AIDS in the pioneering 1985 TV movie "An Early Frost" with Gena Rowlands and Ben Gazzara. Last year, he played notorious traitor Benedict Arnold in a TV biopic. On film, Quinn's subtle acting style was seen to great effect in 1994's "Legends of the Fall" with Brad Pitt. Even after a 20-year career, Quinn insists he has lots to learn.

"You're always confronting things that are scary and finding the courage to make a fool of yourself in front of a hundred people. That's what I do for a living," he says. "And for someone that has a lot of pride and a lot of dignity — or thinks that they do — it's very hard to be a blubbing fool in front of a hundred working-class people. But that's my job."

Quinn, who spends much of his time in upstate New York with his wife and two daughters, has a sudden rush of high profile projects coming up, including HBO's "Empire Falls" with Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, and the feature film "Cavedweller," director Lisa Cholodenko's followup to "Laurel Canyon."

"Before I did 'Plainsong,' I hadn't done a film in eight months," says Quinn. "Then I did six in a year, so it's just crazy. I had been doing theater, so I wasn't just sitting around. I'm not one of the top five of actors in America who can pick and choose from the creme de la creme of work. Not to be cynical, but I'm somewhere on the continuum of what Robert Mitchum said, 'I take the thing that's least embarrassing that I'm offered.'"

Plainsong
Sunday, 9 p.m., CBS