

TV Sunday

When 'Will & Grace' premiered three years ago, the idea of a gay sitcom carried the potential for real danger. Remember Ellen? Now, 'Will & Grace' is on the verge of sweeping the Emmys — and has a new home in 'Seinfeld's' old-time slot. Suddenly, a bright and hip little comedy is batting clean-up. Talk about performance anxiety.

By MICHAEL GILTZ

When the cast of "Will & Grace" got together two weeks ago, the scripts for the first show of their new season had some unusual stage directions. "The writers put in things like, 'The character enters in a very Emmy-nominated fashion' or 'Jack speaks in a very Emmy-nominated manner,'" says actor Eric McCormack, who plays Will Truman.

It was a silly, happy way to acknowledge the sitcom's arrival. After being overlooked by the Emmys its first season (as most new shows are), "Will & Grace" received 11 nominations, including acting nods for all four leads and Best Comedy.

The recognition couldn't have come at a better time. NBC is moving "Will & Grace" to Thursdays at 9 p.m., the centerpiece timeslot on the network's biggest night.

"Will & Grace" can't just be good. It's now expected to be the gold standard of comedy — just as "Cheers," "Seinfeld," and "Frasier" were before it.

Is it up to all this?

It didn't seem likely during the show's first season. The outrageous supporting players Jack and Karen threatened to overwhelm the leads — or at least overstay their welcome.

But the show's creators — Max Mutchnick and David Kohan — found their footing last year. They turned Jack and Karen from one-note scene-stealers into genuinely compelling characters.

They also expanded the show's universe with sharp new characters like Karen's maid Rosario (Shelley Morrison), Will's new boss (Gregory Hines) and recurring guest stars like Joan Collins, Debra Messing and Sydney Pollack.

THE ODD COUPLE

Got it licked: Eric McCormack — who plays TV's first lead male who is openly gay — and co-star Debra Messing were fully prepared for mainstream America to reject "Will and Grace."

In a behind-the-scenes move that is the best guarantee for the show's future, Mutchnick and Kohan just acknowledged they are delaying the launch of a new sitcom in order to stay with "Will & Grace" through its frightening move to Thursdays. (Originally, the two were expected to depart day-to-day dealings on "Will & Grace" during the middle of this season.)

Mutchnick and Kohan met in the drama department of Beverly Hills High.

Mutchnick always got supporting roles, but Kohan snagged the lead of "West Side Story" over classmate Nicolas Cage (who they say was so confident that he left the

school). They tell that story in tandem, finishing each other's sentences and building to the climax with practiced ease.

Mutchnick (the gay one), is a little more aggressive in conversation. "I'm the one that sounds like Bea Arthur," he jokes.

Kohan (the straight one) is a little more laid-back, tossing in deadpan one-liners almost as an afterthought.

And did they mention their series got 11 Emmy nominations? Kohan says no one on the show was banking on a shower of hon-

ors. "Because of last year," he says, "we expected very little. So it was a very pleasant surprise. We didn't discuss it very often. But when we did, we could come up with a bunch of shows that could have taken up the five nominations."

Both he and Mutchnick begin tossing out names: "Malcolm in the Middle," "Sports Night," "Everybody Loves Raymond," "Friends," "Ally McBeal."

Since most of these weren't nominated but easily could have been, it's not hard to believe Kohan when he says, "We didn't have high expectations."

McCormack certainly tried to act

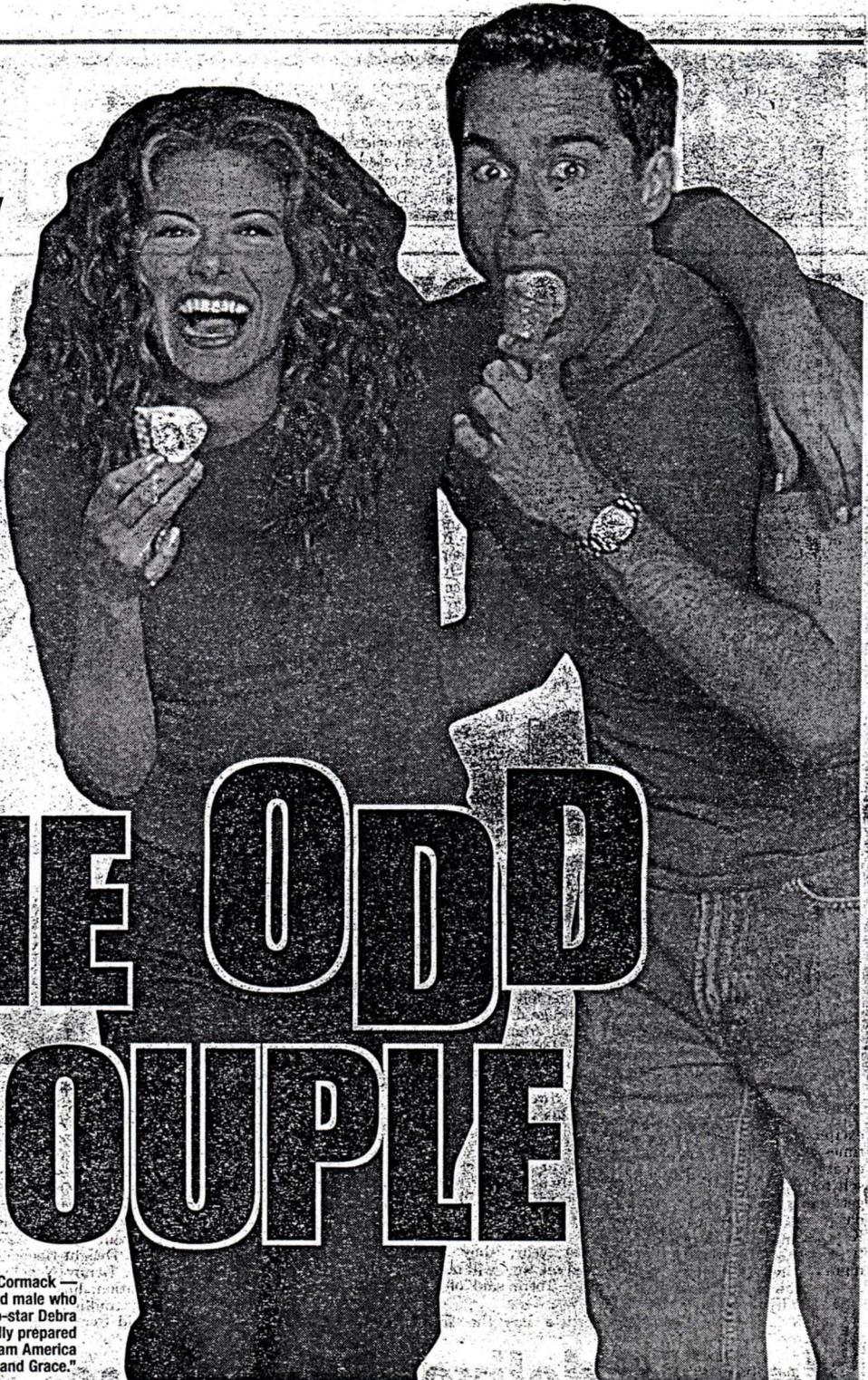
as if he didn't have any expectations either.

He was at home in bed, but didn't set any alarms. "I thought I'd sleep in and if we got nominated, the phone would start ringing," he says. "But who was I kidding? I was awake at 4 o'clock, staring at the ceiling."

"My wife and I immediately began drinking champagne, which turned out to be a bit of a problem, since I had to do all the press that morning. I'm talking to 'Entertainment Tonight' at noon and feeling very bubbly."

"By CNN at 1 p.m., I was hung-over."

No one's hung-over about the





Good golly, yes that is Molly Shannon with Messing and McCormack. The "Saturday Night Live" funny lady plays Val on the hot-as-lava comedy.

excitement generated by its new timeslot. But unlike other sitcom creators — most of whom would sell their mother for a chance to get a new show on NBC's Thursday's lineup — Mutchnick and Kohan are glad "Will & Grace" had two years under its belt on other nights.

One reason is the intense scrutiny every new show on Thursday can expect. Anything less than an instant classic — and of course most of the shows have been far from that — is pilloried. "It was good for us to sneak on," says Mutchnick. "We escaped some of the sensationalism and got to prove ourselves as a solid sitcom."

Indeed, it's easy to forget how potentially controversial the show was. It has the gloss and wit of a classic sitcom in the vein of "The Mary Tyler Moore Show."

But it also features the first lead male who is openly gay and racy lives that captured gay life. (A favorite was this description of a therapy group designed to "cure" gays: "It's for men who turn their backs on other men. And not in a good way.")

"We were fully prepared for it to be rejected by mainstream America," says actress Debra Messing,

who plays Grace. "But there wasn't a backlash, there wasn't a boycott. And we were prepared for it all."

"It's so encouraging on so many levels and not just in terms of our 9-to-5 jobs that we're having a blast doing. It's just a great, wonderful optimistic thing that so many people across the country accepted it."

As McCormack puts it: "If it was just a show with me and a puppet — or me and a dog — maybe it wouldn't seem so gratifying."

Just as gratifying is the fact that the creative team is intact for this crucial third season in the show's most pressure-filled timeslot yet.

"To have [director] Jimmy Burrows sign on for two more years," says McCormack, his happiness speaking for itself. "And we have all the same writers; I don't think we've lost anyone."

Best of all, Mutchnick and Kohan are staying put for now. They were supposed to begin their 4-year, \$16 million development deal with Warner Bros. after the

first 13 episodes of this season. But now that's changed.

"Right now," says Mutchnick, "our plan is to do a new sitcom for Warner Bros. in the fall of 2001. That will leave us here for this entire season."

Chide them for trying to do two shows at once or walking away from the chance to oversee a great

sitcom from beginning to end and their ambivalence about leaving is clear. Is there any chance they'd stay for all 7 or 8 years the show might last?

"It's not out of the question," says Kohan quietly. "It's not out of the question."

Adds Mutchnick, "It's hard for us to talk about because it's something we're grappling with at this very moment. We're trying to figure out how to handle all this. We feel so connected to this show."

Naturally, the actors are thrilled the creators of "Will & Grace" will be there with them every day during its most important season yet. "Believe me," laughs Messing, "I want to tie them to Stage 17 as long as I'm there."

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