

FUNNY LIKE A GUY. - EBSCO

ANNALS OF COMEDY

FUNNY LIKE A GUY

Anna Faris and Hollywood's woman problem

Anna Faris clutched her stomach with both hands. The actress was in a West Hollywood editing room to give notes on her new film, "What's Your Number?," but she hadn't said much. "Is there anything you're cringing at?" the director, Mark Mylod, asked solicitously.

"My face!" she wailed, and Mylod broke into laughter.

The mechanism that makes Faris Hollywood's most original comic actress--a face as diagnostic as a polygraph pen--starts to quiver whenever she sees herself act or feels an ambient skepticism. So she works to diminish self-consciousness: she doesn't watch her performance after a take or read her reviews, stays in at night for weeks on end, and, when she does go out, seeks anonymity behind one of her forty-nine pairs of sunglasses. It's a curiously private thing she does, mixing a jigger of Judy Holliday, a dash of Goldie Hawn, and a pinch of Sid Vicious to brew a winsome bubblehead.

Then, of course, it becomes intensely public. "What's Your Number?" doesn't open until September, but it's already ringed by skeptics. The film is an R-rated comedy that's "female-driven," meaning that it's told from a woman's point of view, and that's always been a tough sell. Studio executives believe that male moviegoers would rather prep for a colonoscopy than experience a woman's point of view, particularly if that woman drinks or swears or has a great job or an orgasm. "In my experience, girls' revealing themselves as candid and raunchy doesn't appeal to guys at all," Stacey Snider, a partner in and the C.E.O. of DreamWorks Studios, says. "And girls aren't that into it, either." When such a film does get made--a "The Sweetest Thing" or "Spring Breakdown"--studios eye its receipts to gauge whether the trenches in the gender war have moved. If, as expected, they haven't, the transgressors are roundly punished.

The question driving "What's Your Number?" is not the usual romantic comedy teaser of "Will girl get boy?" but, rather, "Did girl get so many boys she won't get her man?" Ally Darling (Faris), a hard-partying thirty-something who's just lost her job, reads in Marie Claire that if a woman sleeps with more than twenty men she'll never get married. As her number is exactly twenty, she decides to forswear sex and revisit her old lovers to see if any of them is Mr. Right--even as she's increasingly drawn to Colin, the Lothario across the hall. Hutch Parker, the chairman of New Regency, the studio that's backing the film, told me, "Anna's betting that there's another way to get on the list of leading comediennes than to be America's sweetheart--and we're betting that she's right."

As it happens, bets on bawdy female-driven comedies are being placed across the board: "No Strings Attached" became a modest hit in January, "Bridesmaids" débuts in May, and "Bad Teacher" comes out in June. The co-chairman of Sony Pictures Entertainment, Amy Pascal, who green-lit "Bad Teacher"--which stars Cameron Diaz as a pot-smoking, student-cursing educator--views it as a litmus test: "It's a comedy about a woman who behaves badly, who's slackerish and unapologetically cynical in the exact way that audiences loved seeing Bill Murray. Will people come see a woman in the same role?" What's at stake is not merely a tenable marketplace for "hard" female comedies but a fresh vantage on romance and,

perhaps, a fresh way of seeing men and women.

In the editing room, Faris and Mylod watched a scene where Ally leaves a wedding to run to her man, after finally telling off her starchy mother (Blythe Danner): "I'm a jobless whore who's slept with twenty guys, and I want to be with somebody who appreciates that about me!" Faris observed that her agent, Ken Kaplan, "thinks that line's going to rub older women the wrong way."

"It gets laughs," Mylod replied. They watched it again with an audio overlay from the crowd at a test screening: yep, laughs. "Younger women lap up the nudity and the sexual humor," the director said. "Women over twenty-five--some are worried by it. But this is a raunchy film, right?"

Faris bit her lip. "Ye-es," she said. Then she went on to suggest dubbing in curses for those moments in her run to love when she trips over her gown and topples from a boulder. When she recorded them, the following day--a muttered "Stpdkng dress!" and a "Holy shit!"--she sounded at once furious, determined, and hopeful.

Offscreen, Faris often behaves like a romantic-comedy heroine, all stumbles and self-deprecation. She even talks about quitting acting to make goat cheese, just because she likes goats. Onscreen, she's fearless. Her two-time co-star Ryan Reynolds compares her to "a fluffy bunny rabbit wearing lingerie and carrying a blood-soaked Bowie knife." Faris draws your attention like a baby crawling through a cocktail party--because she's wide-eyed and vulnerable, and because you know something's going to go alarmingly wrong. In the 2005 film "Just Friends," she played a self-indulgent pop star named Samantha James, a character loosely based on Britney Spears. In one largely improvised scene, she meets her co-star Ryan Reynolds's nerdy friends Clark and Darla, from high school, and learns that they're now married. Wearing sunglasses and absurd white earmuffs, Faris exclaims, "Oh, my God--that is so cute! I just want to eat you both up!" Then she barks like a rabid dog, snarls at Clark, gives Darla a lingering kiss, and murmurs "Dar-la!" in a throaty vibrato.

"Anna's hilarious just getting ready for a scene," Seth Rogen, the star of the dark comedy "Observe and Report," from 2009, in which Faris played a vapid, slutty makeup saleswoman, says. "I couldn't even look at her when she was preparing her disgusted 'I just ate something bad' face, or her 'I'm going to throw up all over you' face, because I'd start laughing so hard I couldn't act." Jody Hill, the film's writer-director, told me, "All the other women are more 'Dick Van Dyke Show,' more light and sweet, like Sandra Bullock. Anna's more Lucille Ball--she's funny like a guy would be funny."

In a career that began in the horror-spoof "Scary Movie" franchise, Faris has played characters named Cindy, Kelly, Shelley, Cassie, Brandi, Polly, and Wendy. Though she had arresting cameos in "Lost in Translation" and "Brokeback Mountain," her more usual task, in fare like "The Hot Chick," has been to perform CPR on such dialogue as "It's not every day that your best friend grows a penis"--to be a one-woman rescue team for films that aimed low and crashed before they got there.

Faris's trademark is the power-through: after her character has done something incredibly stupid or embarrassing, she doubles down, gamely swinging a fist to rally a doomed effort. In "What's Your Number?" Ally plays darts with a British lover who believes she's British, too, and, as her accent slips, drink by drink, from plummy Oxbridge to wobbly Cockney--"Bloody 'ell, I'm rubbish at this!"--her voice cracks and her eyes go round, but, even as her delivery yaws toward Borat, she soldiers on.

That voice is a nifty tool. Abby Elliott's impersonation of Faris on "Saturday Night Live" nails the way she purrs her vowels and drags the beat--"my miiso sooup"--but it misses the actress's warmth and self-amusement, her awareness that she's toying with the vocabulary of helplessness. In Faris's breakout film, "The House Bunny," in 2008, she played Shelley, a Playboy Bunny who takes charge of a nerdy sorority. Teen-age girls relish the film's empowering if somewhat head-scratching message--love yourself for who you are, but get a great makeover--and they especially relish the way Shelley commits people's names to memory by intoning them in a growly demon voice: " LILY . . . HARMONY . . ." Her young fans often

perform the voice for Faris when they meet her, because co-opting a totem of the male oppressor turns out to be really liberating--or maybe just really funny.

The makers of "What's Your Number?" were anxious about the number itself. "We thought, Would twenty guys be too many for the audience to relate to her?" New Regency's Hutch Parker says. "But if you take the number down--and we thought about fifteen, or even twelve--it makes the film less bold. And the number needed to be high enough to be a sufficient source of concern for Ally."

"I voted for a lower number, like one," Tom Rothman, the co-chairman of Fox Filmed Entertainment, which distributes New Regency's films, said. He was joking, mostly. But he went on to say that "there's an innocent quality to Anna's sexuality, and an inherent kindness to her, that makes it possible to make a movie about sex and have it feel like she's still a sweetheart." Faris's bet that she can succeed without becoming America's sweetheart is strongly hedged, in Rothman's view, by the fact that she already is.

Faris and Mylod saw Ally as a wayward bohemian who would have tousled hair, wear the kind of jeans and "Magnum P.I." T-shirts that Faris wears, and be noticeably heavier than a fashion model. New Regency wanted Ally to be blond and trim and teeter around in high heels, as Faris had in "The House Bunny"--to embody the look for which the company was paying her \$1.75 million. (Parker argues that the grungy-bohemian idea was a cliché, and that "it felt like it would be too easy to write Ally off as a screwup if everything about her is a mess--if she's just the female equivalent of a man-child.") "A month before the shoot," Faris said, "they got me a gym membership and a trainer, which is standard." She added, deadpan, that after she lost five pounds "they sent me a bouquet--and said, 'Don't eat it.' " During the filming, she subsisted on turkey slices and carrot sticks. "I felt they might have pulled the movie if we fought any further," she said. "But it still bothers me: why would Ally be unemployed and wearing Prada shoes?"

Being funny is the first criterion for comic actors, and somewhere down the list for comic actresses. A leading agent told me, "What Anna has going for her, to be crass, is that guys want to nail her." During the filming, Faris recalled, "some studio exec basically said, 'Get some tits in the movie.' So we did a reshoot where I go in to save Colin from this naked woman, the morning after"--Ally pretends to be Colin's enraged girlfriend--"and it was so obvious it was a tit shot that when she got up in my face I said 'Tits!' just to make it clear what we were doing."

In the screening room, Faris and Mylod watched the film's last scene, where Ally and her new boyfriend listen to a voice mail from the one lover she hadn't tracked down, who reports that they never actually slept together--putting her back under the magic number. "I spanked you, I finger-banged you," he says, but then "you passed out in the shower." The studio felt that "finger-banged" was too bald, so Faris suggested that they get "someone with a really funny voice, someone like Aziz"--the comedian Aziz Ansari--"to dub the message, and then we can put 'finger-banged' back in." "Absolutely!" Mylod said, and Faris gave him a gentle smile, knowing that it probably wouldn't happen. She's an executive producer of the film, she helped select Mylod as the director from New Regency's list of candidates, and she persuaded the studio to spend twenty-four million dollars building the film around her--but her power over its final shape was minimal. "I feel like a racehorse," Faris told me. "The owners and jockeys stay over on the West Side, making the decisions, and we stay over here in our little stables in Hollywood, getting all doped up and ready to run."

In the parking lot afterward, Faris stood by her Mini Cooper convertible and said she'd been preparing for the inevitable question when she begins to publicize the film: So, Anna, what's your number? (Her name is pronounced "Ahn-a," not "An-a," but Faris is too polite to correct anyone.) "Here's my answer," she said, preparing a sincere face: "It's five . . . hundred thousand." Watching me, she said, "Maybe it's better as 'Five'--a longer beat, a sudden realization--" ' hundred thousand.' Better?"

Better.

After a moment, she added, "The truth is--and it's kind of embarrassing, because I'm thirty-four, but I've been married twice, so I've been out of

commission for a while--the real number is five." She was holding her stomach again, but smiling: America's sweetheart, after all.

The Bechdel Test, established in 1985 by the cartoonist Alison Bechdel and her friend Liz Wallace, is a way of examining movies for gender bias. The test poses three questions: Does a movie contain two or more female characters who have names? Do those characters talk to each other? And, if so, do they discuss something other than a man? You wouldn't expect "The A-Team" or "The Expendables" to pass this exam (and they don't), but an astonishing number of lighter entertainments also fail, including "The 40-Year-Old Virgin," "The Proposal," "The Hangover," "The Truman Show," "The Wedding Singer," "The Princess Bride," "The Big Lebowski," and "Marley & Me." The test points to a crucial imbalance in studio comedies: distinctive secondary roles for women barely exist. For men, these roles can be a stepping stone to stardom: think of Owen Wilson in "Meet the Parents" and Kevin James in "Hitch" (neither of which passes the test, either).

On the other hand, such relatively unraunchy female-driven comedies as "Juno," "Mean Girls," "The House Bunny," "Julie & Julia," "Something's Gotta Give," "It's Complicated," and "Easy A" have all done well at the box office. So why haven't more of them been made? The answer is that studios, as they release fewer films, are increasingly focussed on trying to develop franchises, like "The Pirates of the Caribbean" and "Twilight"--repeatable, enormously lucrative blockbusters. Female-driven movies aren't usually blockbusters, and studio heads don't see them as repeatable. "Studio executives think these movies' success is a one-off every time," Nancy Meyers, who wrote and directed "Something's Gotta Give" and "It's Complicated," observes. "They'll say, 'One of the big reasons that worked was because Jack was in it,' or 'We hadn't had a comedy for older women in forever.' "

Amy Pascal, who as Sony's cochairman put four of the above films into production, points out, "You're talking about a dozen or so female-driven comedies that got made over a dozen years, a period when hundreds of male-driven comedies got made. And every one of those female-driven comedies was written or directed or produced by a woman. It's a numbers game--it's about there being enough women writers and enough women with the power to get movies made." A recent study of Hollywood movies found that women constituted only seventeen per cent of their writers, directors, and producers. (The study excluded R-rated films, which are even more of a boys' club.)

Men predominate in Hollywood, and men just don't write much for women. Judd Apatow, the writer-director of such films as "The 40-Year-Old Virgin" and "Knocked Up," presides over a largely male group of writers and directors, known to some as Apatown. Apatow has written strong female roles, but he says, "The reality is, I'm a dude and I understand the dude thing, so I lean men just the way Spike Lee leans African-American."

Studios also believe that making comedies for women flouts the almighty Laws of Date Night, which hold as follows:

-- Men rule. Men decide which movie a couple will see on a given weekend, and any hint that a film involves fashion, pedicures, or female troubles is "man-poison." The producer Michael Shamberg says, "It's just much easier to put Russell Brand and Jonah Hill together than Kristen Wiig and Amy Poehler, even though they're equally funny. If you make a guys' comedy, you can get girls, but if you make a girls' comedy the guys will go 'That's just chick stuff.' " The most female-repelling genre is science fiction, but women fear it much less than men do chick flicks.

--Men are simple. Don't confuse them. "Both men and women can relate to Kevin James in 'Paul Blart: Mall Cop,' who's the little guy being shat upon," a prominent producer says. "If that character is played by Tina Fey, it wouldn't work, for the same reason that men can't relate to Renée Zellweger in 'Bridget Jones.' Men just don't understand the nuances of female dynamics." Male moviegoers care chiefly about the male star and his buddies. "Often, the woman is in a movie just to make sure the audience knows the guy isn't gay," the actress Catherine O'Hara says. And Helen Hunt observes, "If I really looked at how many comedies are driven by thirty-year-old men, with the necessary homophobic joke where they almost hold hands and then scream and run away, I'd probably just take my ball and go home."

--If a woman is the star, it better be a romantic comedy. In most films, the man is cast first. If you cast the woman first--unless she is Angelina

Jolie--you are probably making a rom com, and rom coms are man-poison to established actors. So you will likely end up with a lesser-known Irish guy as your leading man. Witness "My Best Friend's Wedding," starring Julia Roberts and Dermot Mulroney; "The Back-Up Plan," starring Jennifer Lopez and Alex O'Loughlin; "Bridesmaids," starring Kristen Wiig and Chris O'Dowd; and the forthcoming action comedy "One for the Money," starring Katherine Heigl and Jason O'Mara.

--Women don't have to be funny. Preston Sturges's first rule of the box office, "A pretty girl is better than an ugly one," is even truer today than when he decreed it, seventy years ago. As Seth Rogen acknowledges, "If 'Pineapple Express' "--a druggy comedy he starred in with James Franco--"had been about two girls, they wouldn't have made it. And if I were a woman I wouldn't have a career."

--Also, women aren't funny. David Zucker, the director of "Airplane" and "Naked Gun," says that the recipe for classic comedy is to pair a dumb, thin guy with a smarter fat guy: Laurel and Hardy, Norton and Kramden, Rubble and Flintstone. "That wouldn't work with two women, because . . ." he trailed off, then suggested, "Maybe women have a built-in dignity, and if a woman slips on a banana peel . . ." After a moment, he concluded, "You know, maybe it's just that I've never tried it."

--Really, they're not. The director Keenen Ivory Wayans says that vanity impedes most actresses' efforts at humor. Referring to the scene in "Old School" of Will Ferrell streaking, he said, "If Will Ferrell was a girl, and she's got a belly and a hairy back, she's not running down the street naked."

The result of these axioms is that when a female-driven comedy does get made it's very often "for a price"-- usually twenty-five million dollars or less--so that it can recoup its costs from a potential audience that is largely female. "Bad Teacher" cost just eighteen million dollars, and "The Kids Are All Right" a mere four million. "Let's be honest," one top studio executive said. "The decision to make movies is mostly made by men, and if men don't have to make movies about women they won't."

In 2007, Faris shot "Take Me Home Tonight," about twenty-somethings pinballing around on one crazy summer night in the nineteen-eighties. She played the aimless twin sister of the even more aimless Topher Grace, whose character finally pursues his longtime crush (Teresa Palmer) with the help of a Mercedes-stealing Sancho Panza (Dan Fogler). The film moldered on the shelf--among other issues, it showed too much cocaine use for Universal Studios' taste--and was eventually sold off to Relativity Media, which released it only this March. One afternoon in January, Faris and her three co-stars met at a warehouse in East Los Angeles to shoot a promotional music video. There was a good-soldierly air to the enterprise, which was budgeted at just twenty thousand dollars: actors in a long-delayed film, who had long since moved on--Faris up; the others mostly down--relying on a promotional form that has long lacked a natural outlet. (When the film came out, it also proved to lack an audience.)

The conceit of the video was that the actors visit a dance club on Eighties Night and invoke thirty-nine films from the era, all to a cover version of the 1982 hit "Don't You Want Me." Faris would be calling back many of the period's memorable female roles--a bittersweet exercise, as women's roles have devolved, and she's had a hard time finding a part as spiky as Sigourney Weaver's in "Working Girl," let alone one as nuanced as Melanie Griffith's. With a squadron of extras dancing behind her amid plumes of murk from a fog machine, Faris evoked Sally Field in "Norma Rae" by holding a "Union" sign high and staring at the camera with such do-gooder intensity that Topher Grace and Dan Fogler cracked up. "Whoa, that was good," Fogler said.

Just before the group filmed a "Dirty Dancing" bit, Grace unexpectedly dropped to the floor and told Faris, "Count my pushups." After a startled blink, she counted rapturously to twenty-five as the extras hollered, then left off as Grace continued to fifty, working his biceps to a Swayze-esque stoutness. "That was weird, wasn't it?" she murmured. "But I've learned that it's just easier, with that kind of thing, to go along." She added that acting in front of all the female extras was "strangely exhausting. You can feel the eyes, all the people wanting to do what you do." But she was terrific as Jennifer Grey, strutting and moueing until the director called "Cut!"--when her shoulders drooped and her feet toed in. She could dance only in character.

Afterward, Faris remarked that the scenes where she danced as herself alongside the absurdly photogenic Teresa Palmer made her skin crawl. "I never thought of myself as a great beauty," she told me. "A Trader Joe's employee once gave me a 7, not knowing I overheard him." And? "That seemed a little high." She'd always liked being thin and slinky, but it also made her insecure. For "The House Bunny," she made herself centerfold-ready by injecting collagen in her lips--which she regrets, because the supposedly temporary poutiness hasn't entirely gone away--and getting an ingeniously padded bra. She said, "It was so fun to feel over-the-top ridiculous and sexy" that after the shoot she got breast implants to extend the feeling. "It wasn't a career thing--it was a divorce thing." She had recently split up with the actor Ben Indra, whom she married in 2005, and, she said, "I liked the idea of feeling more womanly." She's also had Botox to placate some wrinkles, and has long dyed her hair blond. When asked its original color, she squinted nostalgically, then said, "Ashy, like a mouse. Whatever it is, I haven't seen it in a long time."

Faris met her current husband, Chris Pratt, when he played her feckless boyfriend in "Take Me Home Tonight." For a time, in the best rom-com tradition, she served as his wingman in bars, though she says that Pratt, who has a wrestler's build and a camp counsellor's smile, hardly needed her help. When they began dating, he gave her a tour of his apartment, and she almost broke into tears when she saw that he had a giant African stick bug framed on his wall. He worried that it was a deal-breaker, but it turned out that she, too, collected peculiar insects. Their bedroom is now lined with giant bugs.

The couple live in a secluded canyon in the Hollywood Hills, in a three-bedroom ranch house. When Faris was showing me the grounds--the bocce court midway up the hill, the aerie up top where she'd like to put a small chalet reachable by gondola--she paused to examine some scat coiled beside the pool. "Bobcat? Coyote?" she wondered. "I'll have to have Chris test it with his blood kit." She had recently ordered her husband a kit so that he could ascertain his blood type and follow the "Eat Right 4 Your Type" diet. Out back, there was a Styrofoam buck deer that Pratt uses for target practice, firing his compound bow from the pool.

Pratt says that Faris "is sort of peculiar, strange, even--but in the best way." She calls 1-800 "How Am I Driving?" numbers to praise truckers ("Truck L359 is doing great work--he let me in!"), and on a recent Virgin America flight she served peanuts to the passengers just for fun. She likes slyly weaving knots into the fabric of possibility. When she went on "Ellen," in December, to promote her role in "Yogi Bear," she recounted an embarrassing incident in which she'd sexted her father--instead of her husband--to say "I can't wait to see you in bed tonight." When the studio audience went "Oooh!," Faris blushed so naturally you'd never have guessed that she'd made the whole thing up.

When Pratt tidies the house, he often finds discarded scripts with cover notes offering his wife a million dollars--which to Pratt, a regular on the NBC sitcom "Parks and Recreation," seems like a lot of money. Faris calls such parts "the girl," or "bounce-card roles," after the reflective sheet that softens the light around an actor, because the whole job is to giggle, simper, and coo. She told me, "I feel I did that in 'My Super Ex-Girlfriend' "--a 2006 film in which her role consisted of allowing Luke Wilson to admire her ass and then turning with melting eyes as he ran off to have sex with Uma Thurman. "I hated being on that movie so much I was glad when it bombed," she said. "These roles are destroying a generation of boys, who think we'll forgive any kind of asshole behavior."

Faris turned down the lead opposite Ryan Reynolds in "Just Friends," a bounce-card role ultimately played by Amy Smart, to take the part of Samantha James. She explains, "As the lead in romantic comedies, you have to make the women love you and the guys fall in love with you. It forces your choices to be cutesy and safe, which is why women are always falling down, rather than grabbing their tits and saying 'Fuck you, bitches!'"

Still, playing the lead in a rom com is the customary path to stardom for an actress. Faris's agent, Ken Kaplan, told me, "I'm always leery when people want to go 'out of the box' with Anna, and have her play a cop or an international spy, because the goal is to keep slowly expanding the wheelhouse of funny, less than perfect characters. She gets really mad when I say that." Stars can attract other stars and a well-known director to a film, and, crucially, they can get more ambitious or expensive movies made, because they have clout abroad: the international market is now where

studios turn, as DVD sales falter, to backstop their investment. One studio head observes, "Everyone loves Anna, but the international on her is so weak. You spend more to get Reese"--Witherspoon--"but if a comedy does fifty million here with Anna, and twenty-five million abroad, the same movie with Reese could do fifty million abroad."

Faris fought for the lead role in "Bad Teacher," but lost it to Cameron Diaz--whom she often smiles at, shyly, at the Beverly Hills hair salon Byron & Tracey but hasn't quite worked up the courage to say hello to. "I'm at a strange level," Faris concludes. "I'm not Reese and I'm not Cameron, but I'm a little too big to just plug in opposite Vince Vaughn for five scenes." Where is she in the line to read a given script? "Six, maybe seven?" she said. "Ahead of me there's Reese, Cameron, Natalie Portman, Kate Hudson, Katherine Heigl, and Anne Hathaway." And what's the name of that list? "Women I hope get pregnant."

Over lunch at the Chateau Marmont, Faris was drinking Pinot Grigio with her mother and father, who were visiting from Edmonds, Washington, a small city near Seattle. Unusually, for a prominent actor, she is neither estranged from nor in creepy thrall to her parents. She often flies home to see Jack, a sociologist who runs a medical institute, and Karen, a former teacher's aide, and they dote on her.

The conversation turned to "The House Bunny," and I mentioned that the film's director, Fred Wolf, had raved about Faris as a protean talent, supportive producer, and on-set leader. Faris began working up her deflect-the-compliment face. She said that one of the actresses was always late--Faris is unfailingly prompt--"and one day I really lost my temper and yelled at her, and she was totally shocked. And then I felt guilty, and I apologized."

"But you were right!" Karen Faris said.

"I wasn't right to get that crazy," Faris said. "It was late in the shoot, and I was hungry."

"But everyone says you're always so kind and thoughtful on the set," Karen said. "David Zucker"--who directed Faris in "Scary Movie" 3 and 4--"sent you a card saying you were a director's dream."

"That's because I was willing to get hit in the head a million times," Faris said. In the course of the four films, her character, Cindy, gets choked, kicked, run over, pegged in the head with a football, told she has "orangutan titties," called a "fuckin' tease" by a parrot, and hosed into a wall by gallons of semen, among many other indignities. She told me, "It started to break me a little, all the physical stuff I had to have done to me."

"Yeah, why did you accept that?" Karen asked. Jack Faris grinned at his wife's fluid transition to offense.

"Because you taught me not to be a baby," Faris said. "I blame you! I wanted to be one of the guys!"

"That's right!" Karen said.

Earlier, she had told me, "I remember saying to Anna, 'You have a cute figure, but you don't have to show it off. And, if you use your period as an excuse, that shows weakness. Be tough.' " Every month or so, Faris sends her mother a vintage postcard of a buxom starlet emerging from a waterfall, or unzipping her top, with an impish note on the back: "Hey Mom--trying to make it as an actress in LA--met this great photographer, and he says I'm going to be a star!" "It gives me such joy," Faris told me, "because I know how mortified my mom is going to be that the postman has seen them."

Growing up in Baltimore and, later, in Edmonds, Faris was tiny and intense. "I'd dress up in four of my mom's bathrobes and play Queen Victoria, or the mean boarding-school mistress, making my six-year-old cousins cry by locking them in a closet without food and water. I didn't know how to

break out of character." She wore purple gloves for a three-month period when she was eight or so, lest she leave fingerprints and be framed for murder by parties unknown.

Faris's older brother, Bob, says that his sister would do a lot of "almost Andy Kaufman-style interview shows, playing around with my parents' video camera, where the interviewer is so stiff it creates a sense of disaster." But he notes that her playfulness vanished whenever he'd make an obnoxious remark about female limitations: "Anna's default move was to kick me in the shins."

Faris told me, "I felt like I was born with a disadvantage--not only female but small, and not particularly athletic. If there is a God, it's so confounding why he made a physically weaker gender, but one that was just as smart. Couldn't we just be dumb, and weak, and happy?" She smiled. "Such were the thoughts of a fourteen-year-old girl."

Faris was an average student and not very popular; she was, her father says, "not particularly great at anything else--there was nothing like her devotion to acting." She took acting classes at the age of six, and landed a professional role at nine, playing young Clara in Arthur Miller's "Danger: Memory!," at the Seattle Repertory Theatre.

After graduating from the University of Washington, in 1999, Faris planned to go to London and work in advertising. That spring, though, she was cast as a cheerleader in a dreadful locally made horror film, entitled "Lover's Lane." Somewhat on a lark, she flew to Los Angeles in June to meet with the talent manager Doug Wald. She wore her favorite outfit: plastic platform boots, a long black Goth-style skirt, and a purple tank top: "It felt like it straddled angry and sexy, and it was also still Seattle and not-having-sold-out-yet." She arrived with a smudge on her cheek, and at one point, leaning over in the tank top, she inadvertently flashed Wald, but her artlessness was so winning that he signed her on the spot. He got Faris an audition for "Scary Movie," and she landed the role of the virginal Cindy, which paid her the Screen Actors Guild minimum, sixty-five thousand dollars; the film's director, Keenen Ivory Wayans, says, "It was perfect casting, because Anna was new to the world, full of love and delight, but not sexually advanced."

The film made \$278 million, worldwide, but Cindy was barely a role. When David Zucker directed Faris, he told her that her character's full range of responses consisted of four looks: wide-eyed astonishment; "Who farted?" puzzlement; "the Landry," a wince as she turned her head away, in the manner of the Cowboys' coach Tom Landry after his team gave up a winning touchdown; and a breathy, nervous laugh. Zucker would call out "No. 2!" and off the scene would go. "The movies were tough to overcome, career-wise," Faris says. "People in the industry didn't see them--and why would you see stuff made for fourteen-year-old boys?"

Faris knew that she was too animated to be cast in Lars von Trier films, and that she had trouble crying or showing anger. Yet she continued to envision herself as a dramatic actress. (Years later, she attached herself for a time to a script about the porn star Linda Lovelace, thinking, This'll show them that I can do dramatic--I'm going to have sex with dogs!) She auditioned for the role of Claire on the HBO series "Six Feet Under" by reading a scene where Claire is high on crystal meth and learns that her father has just been killed. The show's creator, Alan Ball, cracked up. "He said, 'Oh, you are funny!' " Faris recalls. "I was so confused. I was clearly trying so hard not to be funny." She began to realize that the earnestness of her struggle to get in character came through as the character and was therefore entertaining.

In 2003, she got the plum part of Kelly, a bubbly movie star, in Sofia Coppola's "Lost in Translation." She sang "Nobody Does It Better" loudly and off key and prattled on about her power cleanse, utterly convinced of her own awesomeness. (After Kelly is told that she looks anorexic, Faris improvised an appreciative "Thank you! I know!") Coppola says that the film's star, Bill Murray, "loved Anna--he kept saying, 'Why don't I have more scenes with her?' " Yet Faris continued to get primarily offers for roles in which her character's big moment was slowly unbuttoning her shirt. She points out that Kelly "wasn't very likable, which is a sticking point for women, and she was loud, and there aren't many roles for loud women."

Faris's field notes from her travels around Hollywood have helped her play celebrities like Kelly and Samantha James, but she can also draw on her own brush with narcissism. "I was completely intoxicated after 'Scary Movie,' " she said. "Everywhere I went, I was waiting for somebody to recognize me. Once, when I was home, I got wasted at a bowling alley with my cousins--we all got a little ruckus-y--and the bartender cut me off. I marched over and said, 'Do you know who I am?' They told me to get the fuck out, and I haven't been able to crawl back there since." She shivered in mortification, then burst out, "And I hate bowling!"

The bias against funny women in film doesn't apply to network television, where comedic actresses of all shapes and sizes abound: think of Roseanne, Fran Drescher, Wanda Sykes, Melissa McCarthy, Jane Lynch, and Betty White. Though tubby guys still score implausibly hot wives on shows like "According to Jim" and "Modern Family," television is by far the more equitable medium. In part, this is surely attributable to the difference in age and interests between the most fervent moviegoers (seventeen-to-twenty-year-old men) and the biggest watchers of prime-time network TV (retirement-age women). More speculatively, the director Nancy Meyers wonders, "Is it safer, somehow, seeing less than perfect-looking women on a smaller screen?"

When "Sex and the City" debuted, on HBO, in 1998, it seemed progressive. (Women having sex! Without much remorse!) But the show translated seamlessly to the hit 2008 film because it happened to showcase most of the standard female movie roles. There was the man-eater (Samantha), the humorless nag (Miranda), the naïf who just wants a hubby (Charlotte), and the modern gal who tries to balance career and love (Carrie). The Charlotte role, which harkens back to Jean Arthur and Doris Day, gave Sandra Bullock her start; the Miranda role is owned by Katherine Heigl. Amy Poehler says that the movie roles she's offered are essentially either Miranda or Samantha: "Do I want to be the scold who tells the guys to grow up and stop having fun, or do I want to be the fun nympho who gives the guy a hand job under the table?"

The other female archetypes are the sweetie who cries beautifully as she pines for the guy who ruined her career (Renée Zellweger), the guys' girl who loves ESPN (Cameron Diaz), the gawky brainiac (Tina Fey), and the dumb blonde (Anna Faris). Despite the diversity of stereotypes, none of these roles allow a woman to enjoy a career and a man simultaneously. "It's a relatability issue," Terry Press, a marketing consultant and former DreamWorks executive, says. "In 'The Devil Wears Prada,' Anne Hathaway gets the guy only when she gives up the high-powered job, and her boss, Meryl Streep, can be a big deal at the magazine, but then she can't be happy at home. And, like all women in movies, Meryl's character has to know how she's seen in the world. She has to understand that she comes off as a total bitch. She has to be punished."

Nicholas Stoller, the director of "Forgetting Sarah Marshall" and "Get Him to the Greek," says, "There's a misogyny in audiences, a much higher bar of required likability for women stars. You need to make the actress completely adorable, or else she'll be thought of as the straight man or the bummer--which is why I focus so carefully on trying to write fully fleshed-out roles for women in my movies." To make a woman adorable, one successful female screenwriter says, "you have to defeat her at the beginning. It's a conscious thing I do--abuse and break her, strip her of her dignity, and then she gets to live out our fantasies and have fun. It's as simple as making the girl cry, fifteen minutes into the movie." Relatability is based upon vulnerability, which creates likability. With male characters, smoking pot, getting drunk, and lying around watching porn is likable; with females, the same conduct is hateful. So funny women must not only be gorgeous; they must fall down and then sob, knowing it's all their fault.

Until the situation changes, Amy Poehler says, "my plan is to build giant TVs that look like movie screens and charge people to watch TV shows."

"The House Bunny" originated with an idea Faris had about a Bunny who gets kicked out of the Playboy Mansion because she won't sleep with the place's creepy old habitués; returns to her small, Christian home town; and becomes a meth addict. When she mentioned the notion to Karen McCullah Lutz and Kirsten (Kiwi) Smith, the writers of "Legally Blonde" and "10 Things I Hate About You," they responded with a more commercial suggestion: What if she became a sorority-house mom?

That sounded like something Faris could pitch. "The pitch meeting is my new audition," Faris told me. Most actors just tell a production company or a studio what would happen--"And this is where I tumble off the roof"--but Faris acts it all out, performing dialogue, selling the jokes, demonstrating her eagerness to work not as talent for hire but as a producer and star of material she loves. Judd Apatow observes, "The perfect script may never arrive on your desk, so you have to write or develop it yourself. Tina Fey wrote 'Mean Girls,' Jason Segel wrote 'Forgetting Sarah Marshall,' and Kristen Wiig co-wrote 'Bridesmaids' "--after Apatow told her that if she wrote a script for herself to star in he'd produce it. "Writing it yourself gets around the 'Let's just cast whoever's big internationally' problem--they have to cast you."

Of course, ideas for female-driven comedies are met with intense skepticism, and it's even more intense because Faris isn't aiming at the familiar Type A roles played by Jennifer Aniston and Katherine Heigl. She told me, "I'd like to explore Type D, the sloppy ones." After Faris was divorced, in 2008, she began pitching "The Divorce Project," about a newly free woman who can't get anyone to sleep with her. (Sample joke: Faris's character, in a bar, asks, "Does anybody have a roofie?") Faris said, "We kept hitting the same wall: is this girl going to turn people off?"

Faris, Lutz, and Smith pitched "The House Bunny" nineteen times before it found a home at Happy Madison, Adam Sandler's production company. Kiwi Smith says that Faris's punctuality was vital, because Sandler happened to be passing through the lobby, loved her synopsis, and then unexpectedly joined the meeting. "Anna in a miniskirt, there ten minutes ahead of time, polite and friendly--and let's not forget the miniskirt," Smith said. "The House Bunny" grossed seventy million dollars around the world, and established Faris as someone who could carry a film.

When Smith and Faris met not long ago at Vintage Enoteca, a Hollywood bistro, Smith remarked, "You had to compromise your original idea so radically, from meth addict to sweet sorority mom."

"My original idea would not have been made, or anyway not with me," Faris said calmly.

"But did you ever feel you'd sold out?"

"No, no!" Faris said. "But I do remember feeling hungry a lot because I had to wear such revealing outfits, because it was really important to the studio and to Happy Madison that I be Bunnyesque." Faris noted, however, that Shelley's costumes were "revealing but ridiculous--innocent pinks and blues, not red and black, which would be actually sexy. It's all very PG-13, because it had to be." Through some alchemy, the filmmakers turned Shelley's Bunnyhood into a model of chaste self-empowerment.

The Faris bit that the comedy community loves was much less oblique. It's the scene in "Observe and Report" where Faris's salesgirl character, Brandi, goes out with Seth Rogen's character, Ronnie, a security guard at her mall. She downs a few cocktails, five tequila shots, and a handful of clonazepam, and then the couple drive on Ronnie's motorbike to her house, where--in a characteristically vanity-free improv--Faris keeps her motorcycle helmet on as she staggers up the walk and vomits. As they're having sex, Ronnie notices that she has passed out, and pauses. And Brandi, her face caked with vomit, blearily says, "Why are you stopping, motherfucker?"

"I guarantee you that when they tested 'Observe and Report' people were horrified by that scene," Adam McKay, the director of "Talladega Nights" and "The Other Guys," says. "But Anna was totally balls-out committed to how ugly and trashy the character was, how dark--which is the difference between 'you smile at 'em' comedies and 'you laugh out loud' comedies."

Yet one studio head calls that scene "a disaster" for Faris, and another, Stacey Snider, of DreamWorks, says, "I've worked since I was sixteen, I've raised two daughters, I believe women can do everything, including expressing their sexuality in a raunchy way--and something in me says, 'Ooh, that's yucky.'" Even Mark Mylod, the director of "What's Your Number?," shied away; he watched most of Faris's films before the shoot, but skipped that one: "Part of my job was to fall in love with Ally Darling, and I didn't want that kind of image in my head as I prepared."

I asked Faris if she'd do the same scene again now, and she said, "I probably wouldn't have done it then if 'The House Bunny' had been out." (It had been shot but not yet released.) "That movie put a different stamp on my career--it made me think about how my fans want to see me."

When Faris and a screenwriter named Deanna Kizis worked on a new pitch recently, the question of audience expectations kept cropping up. Faris and her advisers had come up with an idea that Kizis had developed: Paige is a nurse whose new roommate, Ginny, becomes her best friend--but Ginny turns out to be a nut with an evil scheme. It would be a comedic version of the stalker-roommate film. In February, they'd take an elaborate, twenty-minute version of the story to the studios, with Kizis outlining the plot and Faris acting out the jokes and character moments--after their producer, Joe Roth, set the table by explaining that the film could be made for a price.

Faris and Kizis met for lunch in late January at Faris's canteen, the Chateau Marmont. Faris explained what to expect: "The studio note is always 'More physical comedy,' which means more falling down, which means unthreatening and adorable. In 'Dirty Rotten Scoundrels,' her entrance"--Glenn Headly's--"is a pratfall."

"She has to fall down first, and at the end she can be smart and crafty."

"And they love it if she's a Type A who can't find a guy."

Kizis mimicked the Type A type: " 'Oh, my God, what happened? I'm alone and rich and no one will fuck me!' "

Faris grinned. She clearly cherishes her screenwriter friends, and would like to expand the group by bringing in other actors, so they could take on Apatown. "Where's our community of women?" she asked me. "The problem is that we're all competing for so few roles, and the competitiveness creates an unfriendly atmosphere." Thus far, her unionizing effort consists of a comradely hike with Zooey Deschanel, but Faris hopes to rope in Kristen Wiig, Cameron Diaz, Drew Barrymore, Emma Stone, Amy Poehler, and Mindy Kaling. "We should be the ones building the films, and then plugging the men in at the end." She waved her fists and gave a deliberately faltering cheer: "Yay!"

Kizis began reading the pitch aloud, working up to the point where Ginny, the stalker, pretends that she shares Paige's enthusiasm for cooking and eighties movies. "Could it be something more specific?" Faris asked, deferentially. They kicked around a few possibilities, and finally decided that Ginny would tell Paige that she, too, loves high-desert country and doll-house crime scenes.

As Kizis made a note, Faris added, "And can they drink Nyquil together at night?"

"I knew you'd have jokes for the crazy," Kizis said. "Which brings up the question, again: which role do you want to play?"

"Ginny!" Faris said. "The crazy one, definitely." She frowned. "But all the guys on my team want me to play Paige, because she's the lead." She noted that Paige has the burden of winning over the audience--of being likable and relatable--which would constrain her as an actress.

"This is the hard thing about originating your own material," Kizis observed. "You get to decide."

"Euugh," Faris groaned, finding that she increasingly has to choose between being original and being a star. By mid-March, when Paramount agreed to develop the project, she had decided to play Paige.

New Regency fixed the last scene of "What's Your Number?" by following Faris's suggestion and having Aziz Ansari dub a new voice mail from the missing lover. Ansari riffed a few awkward scenarios that he and Ally Darling might have played out in lieu of intercourse, including "an awkward striptease with maracas" and a "shitty hand job." But "finger-banged" was left on the cutting-room floor. " 'Shitty hand job' seemed to do the same

work without calling a not very romantic image to mind," Mark Mylod said. A hand job would vaguely conjure up her unseen lover, while a finger bang might burst Ally's romantic bubble. "The whole process is desperately sexist," Mylod acknowledged. "But there it is."

Faris's next studio film will probably be "Gold Diggers," an idea she conceived with Kiwi Smith. In the project, budgeted at forty million dollars, Faris and Kate Hudson play sisters who extract cash and gifts from playboys in a glitzy world of private planes and Super Bowl parties; Faris is the dumb, thin one and Hudson the smarter, also thin one. Faris's advisers viewed the project as the next step: a bigger film with a co-star whose credibility abroad would help raise Faris's profile there. "Our answer to 'Wedding Crashers' was 'Gold Diggers,' " Faris says. "But the big hitch was, nobody's going to like those girls if they seem like sluts. So we copped out a little--Kate's character explains, 'It's not like we sleep with guys just so they give us things.' We realized we can't make an actual female 'Wedding Crashers,' because then it would be 'Call Girls.' "

"Gold Diggers" was to begin shooting last month, but production was postponed after Kate Hudson got pregnant. And this is part of the calculus, too. Faris and Pratt would like to start a family soon. Faris says, "I asked my agent, Kenny, 'Do I need to start vocalizing that to people, and what happens if I do? I don't want to jeopardize my career.' He didn't really know--there doesn't seem to be a playbook."

Over a late lunch at the Chateau Marmont, Faris brought up the date-rape scene in "Observe and Report" again, saying that she'd been troubled by her position on it. "I'd be selling myself out a little if I regretted doing it," she said. "So, yes, I would do it again--though I would wear the motorcycle helmet to make it clear what's really happening. But, yes! I am an actress; I aim to please." The winter sun dipped below the cypresses, and she ducked her head into her coat. "Pretty soon I'll be the mom or the aunt. In one movie I'm pitching now, I'm an aunt, and I'm not even a drunk aunt or a slutty aunt." Then she added, defiantly, "But I am a lousy aunt!"

PHOTO (COLOR): Faris with her husband, Chris Pratt. She's exploring ways to let women behave badly.

~~~~~

By Tad Friend