

Ann Jillian hits prime time

STAR SPEAK



FRANK SANELLO

Ann Jillian returns to prime time later this season in an NBC sitcom called, appropriately, "Ann Jillian." She plays a recently widowed mother of a teen-age daughter who moves from New York to the San Francisco Bay area after the death of her husband.

Also due later this year on NBC is "Little White Lies," a frothy TV movie in which Jillian stars as a police-woman who falls in love while on vacation in Rome.

Jillian began in show business at age 6, appearing in TV commercials. At 10, she played Little Bo Peep in the Disney film "Babes in Toyland." A year later, she was the precocious child star in the film version of "Gypsy."

Her Broadway debut took place in 1979 in the vaudeville spoof "Sugar Babies," with Mickey Rooney and Ann Miller.

Moving back to her hometown of Los Angeles, Jillian landed a supporting role in the TV sitcom "It's a Living," followed by the title role in another comedy series, "Jennifer Slept Here."

In 1987, she played herself in "The Ann Jillian Story" on NBC, which dramatized her battle with breast cancer. The film was the highest-rated TV movie of the season.

Q. Your TV movies invariably get monster ratings. Why has it taken the network so long to offer you a regular series?

A. It was my own choice, actually. Mr. (Brandon) Tartikoff (the NBC chief) has always been after me to do a series, but it was just a question of timing and finding the right thing to be in. Mr. Tartikoff came up with the idea of my playing a widow with a teen-age daughter. He told me he thought I look good with kids.

Q. Why don't you have any children?

A. My husband has a daughter from a previous marriage. We've been talking about adopting a child for a long time, because we do love children. And, at this point in our lives, we're settled and secure and very well-equipped to give another little human being a shot at life.

Q. Let me ask you an indelicate question. Did the radiation therapy you had for breast cancer make it impossible to have a child? And is that why you're thinking of adopting?

A. I never had radiation therapy. And I've decided not to talk about my breast cancer anymore. That's a part of my life that's over with, and it's time to go on to other things. Next question...

Q. So, there won't be a sequel to your TV movie "The Ann Jillian Story," about life after surviving a double mastectomy?

A. No sequel. We did our thing. We hope we helped a lot of people on a personal level, and we're still available to organizations that want us to speak about the subject, but I don't want to deal with it dramatically again.

Q. It must have taken a lot of courage to entertain the troops in Beirut with Bob Hope in 1983 after the Marine compound had been bombed there.

A. I was scared, you betcha. I remember my husband asking me if I wanted to go on tour with Bob, and I said, "Sure, just bring along my makeup and hairdresser." Then he said, "It's in Beirut!" I said, "Are you kidding!?" But then I realized Bob had performed in many dangerous places, so he must have a charmed life. I just stuck close to him.



Ann Jillian

Q. You've been acting professionally since you were 6. Were you robbed of a normal childhood?

'I play a widow with a teen-age daughter (in my new TV series).'

— Ann Jillian

A. I loved it. I was getting paid for it. It was all pretending, and every kid pretends anyway. It's second nature. I had a really full life as a child. Maybe because I had a real strong family background. My parents made sure I had a regular life. It was a charmed life.

Q. Your forthcoming TV movie "Little White Lies" takes place in Rome. Did you have time to be a tourist while you were shooting there?

A. Actually, we had gone on vacation to Rome before the movie started shooting, so I ended up suggesting great places to shoot in the city. So much of the city is under construction

and being restored. I can just imagine Americans going their and complaining that everything's covered with scaffolding. The city is remarkable. Everywhere you go, there are major art pieces right in the street. We were eating at one outdoor cafe, and next to us was this huge Egyptian obelisk from 200 B.C. You just don't get that kind of "atmosphere" on Sunset Boulevard in LA.

Q. According to the credits, your husband makes his acting debut in "Little White Lies."

A. Yes, he has a little part. The script called for somebody to play "a loud American," and they couldn't find an American that quickly in Rome, and they needed one the next day. The director said to him, "No offense, but would you mind playing a loud American?" I swear I was like a stage mother. My heart was pounding for him while he was on camera. I was like Mama Rose from "Gypsy."
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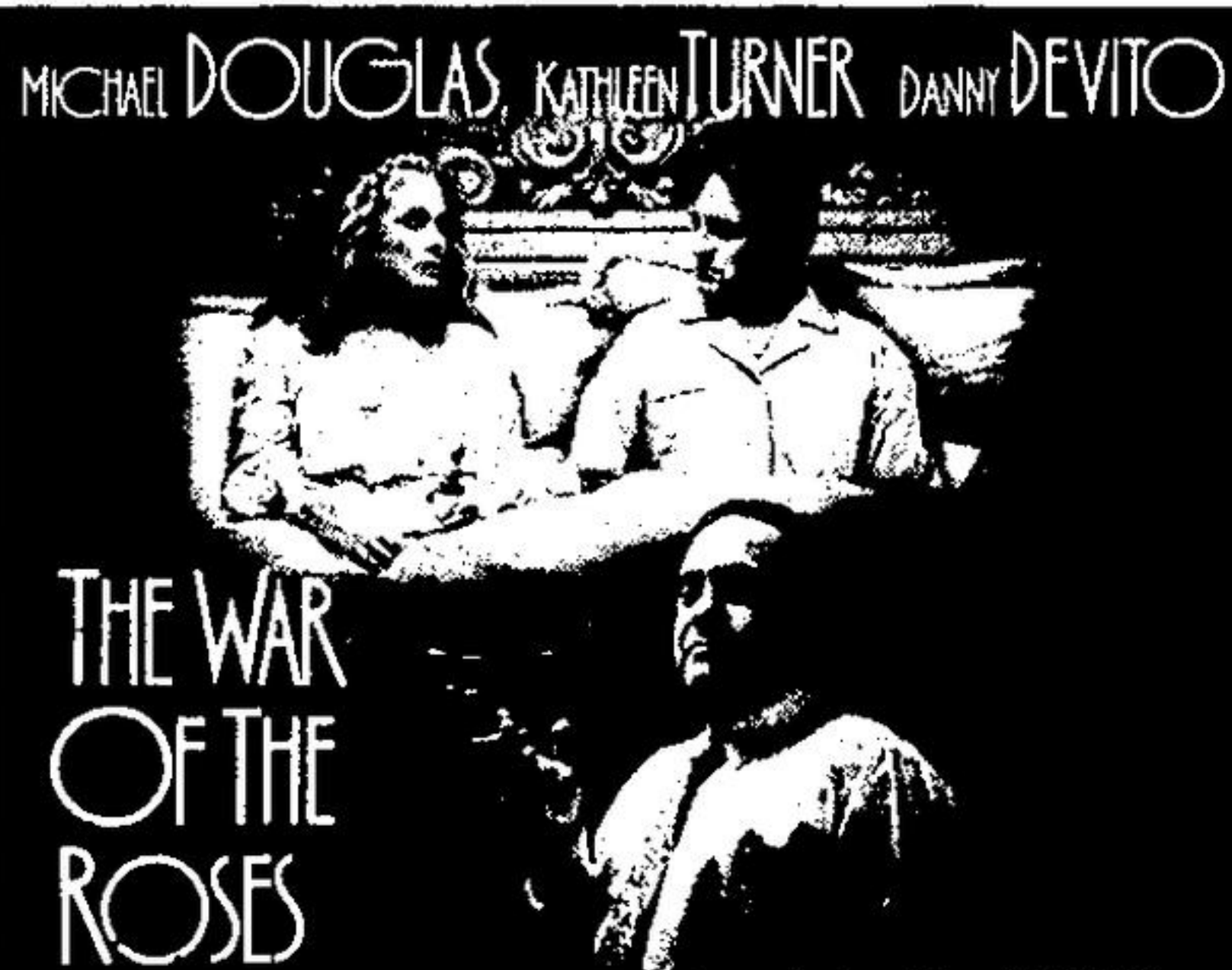
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