



## The Heat on Heaton

WHEN THE CULTURE WARS TURNED NASTY, PATRICIA HEATON RUBBED HOLLYWOOD THE WRONG WAY. SHE'S HOPING HER NEW SITCOM, *BACK TO YOU*, REDUCES THE FRICTION.

BY STRAWBERRY SAROYAN. PHOTOGRAPHED BY EMILY SHUR

Patricia Heaton looks like an overage choirgirl sneaking a cigarette. Dressed in a plaid Peter Pan-collared minidress and silver platforms with cork heels, a tiny diamond cross around her neck, she asks me not to include her nicotine fit in this article. Why? “Oh, because I get so much—”...she refrains from using the S-word. “You can’t imagine.”

Actually, I can imagine. Heaton, 49, and I are ostensibly meeting on this balmy L.A. morning at her production company’s offices to discuss her new Fox sitcom, *Back to You*. It’s a classic joke/setup/joke show with a dream team of old hands: Kelsey Grammer costars, and the show was created by *Frasier* alums Steven Levitan and Christopher Lloyd; Heaton plays a newscaster who was once involved with Grammer’s fellow on-air reporter. It was picked up by Fox before they saw the pilot and has been hailed as the last great hope for the multicamera, live-audience format. Considering the past year of Heaton’s life, the show could be her last great hope as an actress too. “As a woman my age, this will probably be the final opportunity to

play the lead female on a series,” she says, and it’s a fair point in a town where the expiration date for actresses is as fixed as it is for a carton of milk. But age isn’t the only specter hovering over Heaton’s career. The actress recently has been embroiled in political and religious controversies of such intensity that, she will admit, she questioned whether she’d work again.

In 2006, Heaton had been Hollywood’s reigning sweet-heart-of-a-certain-age for close to a decade, known for her acting (honed on New York stages) and her way with real women’s woes, most famously in her portrayal of hotheaded Debra Barone, the wife and mother on *Everybody Loves Raymond*. That wasn’t her first break in Hollywood—she’d appeared on *Thirty-something* and on the short-lived sitcoms *Room for Two*, with Linda Lavin, and *Women of the House*, with Delta Burke—but during *Raymond*’s nine-year run, Heaton won two Emmys and helped draw the show’s nearly 20 million loyal viewers.

Heaton had never been coy about her conservative and Christian beliefs. She was flamboyant enough to announce to Bill O’Reilly a few years back, “[I]t will not be Barbra Streisand

I'm standing in front of when I have to make an accounting of my life." She's in her ninth year as the honorary chair of Feminists for Life, the pro-life organization she says earns its name by fighting for social programs to help women who take their pregnancies to term. Heaton talks about limbo like it's a cute little neighborhood she visited while growing up in suburban Cleveland: "Limbo's gone—I'm not sure you're aware of that," she says, referring to Pope Benedict's April pronouncement that unbaptized children have a good shot of making it to heaven rather than being stuck in the less desirable gateway community. Her husband and the father of her four sons is fellow Christian actor/producer David Hunt, who after screening his documentary about small-town beauty pageants at their home one night reportedly implored the audience of friends and entertainment-industry types to pray for a distribution deal. In L.A., such talk makes you almost as creepy as Mel on a bender. But when Heaton and I first met a little more than a year ago, she dismissed the idea that her openness about her views could hurt her career.

"The bottom line is money," she told me. "If you're a moneymaker, people don't want to offend you." Heaton didn't break a sweat even when she heard what her close friend, screenwriter Andrea King, told me: that when the two women were shopping a project, a production executive told King, "Forget it—there's no way my bosses would work with Patricia Heaton. They are major Democrats and majorly pro-choice."

That was before Heaton bumped up against another television icon, Parkinson's disease sufferer Michael J. Fox, in 2006. Remember the ad that ran during the World Series that featured Heaton, along with *The Passion of the Christ* star Jim Caviezel, inveighing against a Missouri bill that would make stem-cell research a state constitutional right? The spot was in response to one in which a visibly quivering Fox argued for the bill, and Heaton—claiming it would exploit women looking to sell their eggs—was quickly lumped together with Rush Limbaugh, who said Fox was "either off his medication or acting" for the camera. This came soon after the controversial ABC miniseries *The Path to 9/11*, in which Heaton played a small part but was singled out in some media coverage as one of the anti-Clinton Christians who spearheaded the show. Everyone from bloggers to a suddenly media-friendly woman who lives down Heaton's street was calling for the professional equivalent of her beheading. "I guess those Albertsons commercials were still running," Heaton says, referring to a TV campaign she'd done for the supermarket chain since 2003. "They were saying they should cancel my contract." That year, her untitled ABC pilot—a half-hour comedy in which she starred as a widow bonding with a Vegas showgirl played by Jenny McCarthy—wasn't picked up. She appeared in soft-lens women's fare like TNT's *The Engagement Ring*, which was coproduced by and costarred her and husband Hunt, and hosted a straight-to-DVD Christian comedy concert called *Thou Shalt Laugh*. When she returned to the theater for the first time in 16 years in Theresa Rebeck's *The Scene*, a virtual angry mob on a theater website called for a boycott. The end looked near.

**THAT HOLLYWOOD IS A DEN OF LIBERALS** isn't a cliché for nothing. When I interviewed Heaton the first time, she admitted she "didn't know a single" celebrity who shared her pro-life position, and conservatism in general is nearly as unpopular. Charlton Heston and Tom Selleck are regularly trotted out as poster boys for the right to bear arms, and Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bruce Willis give the GOP a little glamour, but presidential-election seasons emphasize that Heaton dwells

on the wrong side of the political tracks. In 2004, Democrats received 70 percent of the town's political donations, and this time around Steven Spielberg, Tom Hanks, Jennifer Aniston, Will Smith, and Jodie Foster are just a few of the A-listers who've donated to Democratic candidates. On the Republican side? Melissa Gilbert, Tony Sirico (Paulie Walnuts on *The Sopranos*), Adam Sandler, and Ben Stein—and that's about it.

"When it comes up that Patty is a Republican and a Christian, people are, like, thunderstruck—I might as well have said that she was a hermaphrodite," says Heaton's friend Megan Mullally, of *Will & Grace* fame. "In our world, it's staggering. The only other taboo is if you haven't had plastic surgery. People look at you as if you've lost your mind." Heaton says that while she endured barbs in the past ("I'm hating you right now," a coworker spit when she once wore a Bush/Quayle button on set), the social fallout this year at times has been excruciating. "Somebody came up to me at a cocktail party, and I think he'd had a little too much to drink. He kind of started out by saying, 'You're so wonderful; how can you be pro-life?' Then he launched into—he basically ripped me a new one about it." Heaton still looks stunned. "My husband had to step in and start defending me. I was like, 'I'm here with the drink and the cocktail dress. God, come on.'"

But can Christian and conservative advocacy really kill a career? "There's a quiet undercurrent of, 'Eeww,'" says Grammer when asked about "coming out" as a Republican several years ago. And Grammer, who is also a Christian, says he's had it easier than Heaton. "I have not heard, 'Everybody thinks he's a nut or a loon.' I *have* heard that about Patricia." Producer Doug Urbanski, another Catholic conservative who says he was "outed" in Hollywood after his film *The Contender* came out in 2000, describes it this way: "I really went into a surreal world. There were public things written about me that weren't true. There were people in Hollywood who said, 'Oh, we've got to get rid of this guy.' I got a little bit weirded out for a few weeks." When his telephone started ringing again, he says, he breathed a sigh of relief, and he has since counseled others through the disorienting experience.

As for Heaton, by the time *Back to You* came along, she told critics at a press event over the summer, "It was not only the funniest script I had been offered but the only one." When I ask

## THE FAME GAME



### EVERYBODY LOVES RAYMOND

"There's a part of me that loves getting my picture taken, getting free stuff, and having people get me water," Heaton says. "But Christianity is about dying to yourself. This business is all about worshipping yourself. I struggle with that."



### BACK TO YOU

Since shooting was going so well and she loved her new castmates, Heaton figured, "Either I did something really good in my past life or I'm getting cancer in two weeks."



whether her publicized views were responsible for the drought in work, she demurs and instead blames the latest shift in a fickle industry, and she is humorous about her travails: "My husband and I were like, 'Should we just sell this house and move to Ohio, because nobody's doing multicamera? I'm never going to work again.' And we go through money like you would not believe," she says, laughing. But when I mention how the Dixie Chicks were shut out of performing after offending the other side of the political spectrum, Heaton's cool facade crumbles. "Can I tell you? I thought about them all the time," she says of Natalie Maines et al.

Some liberals, however, scoff at such tales of political isolation. The idea that Republicans' professional lives would be affected solely by their political beliefs is "just not the way



"WHEN IT COMES UP THAT PATTY IS A REPUBLICAN AND A CHRISTIAN, PEOPLE ARE THUNDERSTRUCK—I MIGHT AS WELL HAVE SAID THAT SHE WAS A HERMAPHRODITE."

Hollywood works," says Donna Bojarsky, a public policy consultant who has worked with Richard Dreyfuss on his politics and philanthropy for a decade. Bojarsky admits that if you're a director, for example, "and there are two actresses up for a part, and you were impressed sitting next to one of them at a Dianne Feinstein fundraiser the night before, it might not be a bad thing"—but that's about the extent of it.

Of course, trying to draw a line between social and professional ostracism in Hollywood is probably a hopeless task. However unpopular her views, the truth is Heaton seems to have scaled to the top of her profession on talent and personality. "You're the only Republican anybody in this town likes," Heaton says. *The West Wing* actress Janel Moloney told her at an Emmy Awards telecast. In person, she's a winning amalgam of the wisecracking mother she portrayed on *Raymond* and the go-getter career woman of her new series. (At one point, in the middle of discussing eternity, she responds to my incredulous reaction to her age: "I am [well-preserved], thanks to my many medical friends in Beverly Hills!") Friends say she's bawdy and charmingly no-bullshit—far from the goody-two-shoes that people assume—not only smoking but drinking and swearing and, as 20-year pal Tony Shalhoub jokes, "Doing all three at the same time."

Ray Romano, who was instrumental in casting Heaton because, he has said, she was the actress best able to telegraph visceral rage, tells me with tongue only halfway in cheek, "We never had any problem as long as she's not trying to cram [her beliefs] down my throat. We got along on a different level than that. I still feel like she's like my wife. She kind of puts up with me for the money." He adds more sincerely, "We've bonded over family and kids."

Shalhoub, who disagrees with her on many issues as well, says, "Sure, there are those points where we say, 'Well, you know how I feel about that.' That's shorthand for, 'Let's not look under that rock right now because there's no profit in it.' But she's loyal and she's honest and she's trustworthy." Only Heaton's longtime friend Jane Kaczmarek, who initially extols Heaton's commitment to act on behalf of her beliefs, displays

any awkwardness about the political divide between the two women. When I describe the incident concerning the dueling commercials with Fox, Kaczmarek sighs. "Part of me admires her for having gumption, but I just wish she was more generous in her devotion to take care of children who are already born who really need to be taken care of." She breaks into a crackling laugh. "Does that sound nice?"

**SOMETIMES HEATON CAN SOUND SURPRISINGLY** naive about the fallout from her activism. About the Missouri controversy, for instance, she explains, "A friend called me up and said he was doing this 30-second commercial. I was like, 'Why would I do something about this thing in Missouri?'" Her friend replied that he felt he had to take action. "Of course, that totally tapped into my Catholic guilt." She laughs. "I was like, 'Well, thanks for sharing that with me because now I have to do something about it.'" She says she thought the ad was just a prototype, but I can't help noting this all sounds a bit familiar. I remind her of a similar controversy over her speaking out about Terri Schiavo—Heaton sided with the parents. She told me she did just one interview "with a friend of mine" at *Entertainment Tonight*, which felt "kind of like how you and I are talking," and expressed shock at how dramatic the promos were. But come on, I counter, you understand how the media works. "I know," she concedes. "I should have looked at this and said, 'I don't have control over what the final thing is going to be and what they're going to do with it.'"

She also admits to a provocateur's delight in stirring things up. At our first meeting she said, "My personality just enjoys a little bit of drama and controversy, so it's not like I have pure motives. I do believe everything I say, but there's also a fun 'Let's do that and see what happens' element to it." A year later, though, she is more circumspect: "I don't really enjoy that kind of attention. Not really."

It's clear, for example, that she feels awful about being pitted against someone as "nice" as Michael J. Fox. After the flap, she says she e-mailed him, "I just want you to know I'm not out to get you," and Fox replied with a cell phone message saying, "Don't worry about it. We agree to disagree." (When reached for comment, Fox is conciliatory. "I felt really bad for her. What was unfair about it was that I think a lot of people were reacting to the treatment I was getting from the right and were using her [as a target].... She's entitled to weigh in on the public conversation as much as anyone else.") Heaton says she can't help but be forthright: "When people ask me a certain question, I have to answer them honestly. And that puts me in the spotlight." She adds that her need to speak out has become more urgent in recent years because of her strong beliefs. Lately, she has considered advocating on behalf of Down's syndrome and cerebral palsy sufferers, whom she fears may meet a fate (improbably) like Schiavo's. "We're talking about protecting voiceless or weak people," she says. "And what your society's about can really be seen in the condition of its weakest members."

Heaton's core beliefs can be traced to her Catholic Midwestern upbringing. The fourth of five children born to *Cleveland Plain Dealer* sportswriter Chuck Heaton and his wife, Pat, the actress described her Bay Village, Ohio, childhood as "like Andy Griffith's fictional Mayberry" in her 2002 memoir, *Motherhood and Hollywood: How to Get a Job Like Mine*. In the book, she made light—relatively—of her mother's death of a brain aneurysm when she was 12, but today she admits it is the event upon which the axis of her life still spins. "To me, it was what C. S. Lewis calls a severe mercy." (CONTINUED ON page 369)

sal. And kind of important, since it's being written about all over the place in terms of its effect on romantic comedies. So we have guy-driven romantic comedies. We have, hopefully, the ability for girl-driven romantic comedies. But anyway, anybody have any thoughts about the girls' side of the coin in *Knocked Up*?

**PEIRCE:** I just love when she's having that mood swing. [Laughter] That is hilarious.

**KHOURI:** The whole time I was thinking, She could do better.

**NAGLE:** I totally believed that she would have sex with him.

**OBST:** Jesus, Margaret, that *wasn't* what I was looking for. [Laughter]

**NAGLE:** I did! I did! He was furry and sweet.

**KHOURI:** I had a rough time with it.

**OBST:** Thank you, Callie.

**LANGLEY:** But for me the comedic premise was what if *this* guy got *this* girl pregnant, what if? And, to be honest, a lot of the attempt at heart and character—

**OBST:** Came from you. We knew it. [Laughter]

**LANGLEY:** It wasn't there in the original inception. I'm not going to take anything from Judd [Apatow, the film's writer and director]; he deserves all the credit. But an observational gender comedy was not the original intention of the movie. It was, What if this goofball guy got this really hot piece of ass pregnant?

**KHOURI:** I thought, *Well, it's a movie. All right.* I mean, I've seen stranger things happen in this town. [Laughter] Fat, ugly guys get laid by beautiful women every day of the week.

**EPHRON:** Looks and brains, we're willing to give them both up. [Laughter]

**KHOURI:** There's one more thing that we haven't talked about today. I just did a movie [*Mad Money*] with three female leads: Diane Keaton, Queen Latifah, and Katie Holmes. We were able to get this movie made independently, but we weren't able to get it made with that cast at a studio.

**OBST:** Tell us about this.

**KHOURI:** We were trying to get it made for years. We just kept going, "Okay, so which women can get a movie made at a studio? Who are the movie stars? Who are the women that can get a picture green-lit at a studio if it's just women?"

**ZISKIN:** There's one.

**KHOURI:** Who?

**ZISKIN:** Julia Roberts.

**OBST:** There are more than that.

**KHOURI:** Reese Witherspoon.

**OBST:** Jen [Aniston] and Kate Hudson. Reese, Jen, and Kate could together.

**KONRAD:** When we made *Walk the Line*, nobody wanted to make the movie, and we had Reese and Joaquin [Phoenix]!

**KHOURI:** It's really weird out there right now.

**OBST:** But Callie speaks to something important, which I think we're discovering: There's more than one way to skin a cat. And if you can't take one path, we're learning to take another path. And that's a very good path for chicks like us to learn, too. If the studio won't do it, we're learning to do it independently. ●

## THE HEAT ON HEATON

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It's given me such perspective that she was taken so quickly. You think, what is life about if it can go at any moment? Is it to have a big TV show? As a Christian, you believe you are here to serve God. It's like that Bob Dylan song says, you have to serve somebody." In its wake, Heaton went through a period of looking for answers—including a stint experimenting with cocaine, which, she says, "doesn't help—although it does for a minute!"—and a period of questioning her faith and trying Calvinist services and more New Agey ideas on for size. Then she had her first child. Hunt, who describes his younger self as "so far left I would have seen Hillary Clinton as Falwell," tells me, "My views changed when I saw the first ultrasound—when I saw my son, Sam. I think it was at that point that things started to coalesce for Patty also. I think a lot of that Catholic stuff struck her as mumbo-jumbo initially. But when I saw the actual ultrasound picture, I didn't know quite what to do with myself." It was a reaffirmation of her faith, but Heaton's having children—starting in the early 1990s—also roughly coincided with her move to Hollywood. Enter the odd amalgam that is Heaton today: left-coast celebrity with Red State values. "Drag someone out of Appalachia and anything goes," says Janet Charlton, a local gossip figure and one of those who called for boycotting Albertsons in the wake of the stem cell ad. "But she's rich and famous [so her views are] shocking."

Shalhoub has a more nuanced reading of Heaton's point of view. "I think, at her core, she is a conflicted person. And I think what happens often, when people gravitate toward religion and hold on to religion in the way she does, is it provides a certain kind of faith and certainty which they don't necessarily possess. *Because* of their complexity." Heaton, when I ask how she thinks she's perceived, replies, "I think to my conservative friends who are outside the industry, I probably seem more like a liberal. To my liberal friends in this town, I seem like a big conservative." She laughs with a bit of resignation. "So, depending on who I'm taking to, people have different views of what my opinions are."

Perhaps the reason Heaton appeals to some liberals is not only that she seems surprisingly like them but that, in the struggle between her beliefs and her actions, she is ideologically more like them than public statements would suggest. For instance, she has bought ultrasound machines for pregnancy centers in L.A. (showing women the beating heart of their fetus is a tactic of anti-abortionists), but Heaton admits she understands how, under certain circumstances, a woman might arrive at the decision to have an abortion. "I was fortunate never to get pregnant outside of my marriage. I just got lucky," she says. And for those who aren't so lucky? "Listen, if I was 23 and just got pregnant with someone I wasn't really committed to as a life partner—that panic could have sent me to an abortion clinic. But...I...I would never want that." Her eyes well up and she looks away. "I

think about this all the time. If I had aborted a child, I probably would have eventually killed myself. Because I couldn't carry the weight of having done that to—of ending another human being's life." (Later, she says she didn't mean it. "I would hate for someone to feel like that's the way to handle things.") She also takes an odd sort of solace in her belief that *Roe v. Wade* won't be overturned: "It would be great if [abortion] were limited, but it's never going to be outlawed."

Similarly, on the subject of this year's presidential election, she expresses the most enthusiasm about Democratic candidates, despite previously having voted pro-life. "I would be so excited if Hillary Clinton was the nominee because I will be alive when the first woman runs for president," she tells me. "But the other big contender is Barack Obama, which is also exciting because that's a black man running for president." Of Republicans, she only replies, "Another actor!" when I bring up Fred Thompson's name, and says of Mitt Romney: "I love all the questions about Mormonism. Now all the candidates are having to talk about their religious beliefs, and I find that kind of great."

**HEATON CLEARLY HAS BEEN** chastened by the events of her *annus horribilis*—and is hopeful about her latest professional chance. It's a good chance, too: *Back to You* is tight and funny, and you believe that Heaton and Grammer are can't-live-with-'em/can't-live-without-'em colleagues with a decade-old spark. Grammer, who says he'd heard Heaton had been receiving death threats, explains why he told the producers he wouldn't do the series unless Heaton came on board: After a chance meeting with her in an elevator five years ago, he walked away thinking, "She is more magnetic, energized; there's a kind of sensuality about her that I didn't expect." That playfulness is on display in the show.

Heaton isn't taking her luck for granted, however, and admits she's rethinking speaking out at all. "I feel like part of my duty to the many hundreds of people who are involved in *Back to You* is to give it an opportunity to succeed without any distraction about any views I might have," she says. Lloyd, *Back to You*'s co-creator, says he would have hired Heaton anyway but admits, "If she were somebody who was out on the battlefield with a bullhorn and was determined to be defiant with her views, then maybe you think, 'Is that going to alienate a segment of our audience?' But my understanding is that she intends to not be so public with them."

Hunt's final words to me seem apt. In a country where Christians are seen by some, in his estimation, as "just the other side of gerbils" and a town where conservatives can find themselves out in the cold personally and politically, talent trumps all. "A friend of mine once said if Hitler came back and had a good screenplay under his arm, Hollywood would say, 'Hey, this is great, we want to make it,'" he tells me. "People have short memories. If there was a problem." He pauses—then adds, "I'm being facetious." ●