

## Southern Women: The New Design

By Jane B. Hill



**The designing women:** The finely crafted scripts keep them evolving away from stereotype and toward the richness of individuality.

Call it the New South. Blame it on the Arab oil embargo that drove corporations into the Sun Belt in search of cheaper energy. Blame it on Jimmy Carter and a White House that served grits and peanuts. Go back further and blame it on desegregation and well-brought-up southern boys and girls who got to college and became hippies and signed petitions to ban Confederate flags at football games. Whatever we blame, though, it's safe to say that the South is not the place it once was—even on TV.

Southerners have long agreed on the "Andy Griffith Show," still a favorite in syndication, as the classic television portrait of their region. But now there's a new contender, "Designing Women" (8:30 P.M. EST, Monday, CBS). Each week creator and writer Linda Bloodworth-Thomason and the four actresses who play the leads—the fortunately named Dixie Carter and Delta Burke, Annie Potts, and Jean Smart—bring to life the four women who work at Sugarbaker & Associates, an interior design firm in Atlanta.

Virginia Woolf once said that "in or

about December 1910" human nature changed. Maybe so, most places. But in the American South it took a little longer—about 50 years. The characters on "Designing Women" are proof that the South has finally, for better or worse, caught up with the world that Virginia Woolf observed.

Julia Sugarbaker (Carter) is a widow, the mother of a son in college, Reese Watson's lover (he is played by Hal Holbrook, Carter's real-life husband), and the boss of Sugarbaker's—if the company has one. Julia is the kind of woman who relishes the thought of breakfasting with the editor of a New York magazine that has poked fun at the South. In a dream sequence, FDR requests that she phone Adolph Hitler to put the fear of God in him. The call is broadcast over Armed Forces Radio to inspire our troops to make the last wholehearted effort that will defeat the forces of darkness forever. It works.

Julia's sister, Suzanne (Burke), is thrice divorced. She dates 80-year-old men whom she drops because they spend too

much time in intensive care. Wealthy—her alimony checks require an accountant of their own—and beautiful, at first glance she seems hopelessly shallow. The former Miss Whatever-You-Can-Name, she has beauty titles as numerous as her suitors, or as Mary Jo says to a lounge lizard who has led Suzanne on, "more titles than you have teeth." For Suzanne the law of the pageant is, or should be, the law of the land. Together, she and Julia embody the myth of southern womanhood that reporters labeled "the steel magnolia" as they observed Rosalyn Carter up close and personal.

Mary Jo Shively (Potts), less mythic than the Sugarbakers, is the most "normal" of the four principals. If this were the "Mary Tyler Moore Show" (to which the program owes much of its inspiration), Mary Jo would be Mary Richards, while Julia would be Lou Grant, and Suzanne, Sue Anne Nivens. Like Mary Richards, Mary Jo has been rejected by a doctor whose career she has financed. Excellent at many things and self-confident in none, Mary Jo is the woman who always seeks to please others without bending her firmly held convictions too far.

Charlene Frazier (Smart) is the Rhoda Morgenstern of the group. Rhoda's Jewishness becomes Charlene's hillbilly heritage. She seems ethnic is a way that the others don't. She talks openly of her Baptist church. She has a framed photo of Elvis on her dresser. She reads the *National Enquirer* and believes most of what she reads; she doubts the story about a woman who gives birth to her own prom date only because the prom is held in winter. The office manager, she's taking real estate classes at night. The others have houses; she has a condo.

Like most good comedies, "Designing Women" relies on rich characterization to produce its humor. While earlier comedies leaned heavily on family situations to reveal characters, "Designing Women" follows the contemporary trend of making the workplace into a surrogate home and colleagues into family. There's always an

element of contrivance about this, but the situations that grow out of daily life at Sugarbaker's usually work.

The other regular in the cast is the black delivery man, Anthony Bouvier (Meshach Taylor), an ex-con wrongly convicted. He and the designers call his jail time his "unfortunate incarceration." Just as the four women play against various stereotypes of the southern woman, Taylor plays off the image of the smooth-talking black man gone wrong that is a fixture of the contemporary mythology of the urban South.

When Anthony needs a "family" to impress the parents of a wealthy girlfriend, Julia, Suzanne, Mary Jo, and Charlene fill the need—despite Suzanne's observation that you just don't see four white women riding around with a black man unless they're in a Cadillac. When a thug comes to the office to beat him up, Charlene's clan of dozens has just arrived for a visit. Anthony claims them as his adoptive family and introduces every single one to the thug by name, despite having met them only minutes before. When Suzanne and Anthony bicker, snowbound in a crummy Tennessee motel room, it's not too hard to imagine them as an '80s version of Scarlett and Prissy.

**F**or it is, of course, Scarlett O'Hara who looms behind every line of this show. Scarlett is the consummate designing woman, the original southern belle, the image that every viewer will consciously or subconsciously filter this program through. Suzanne, her most obvious descendent, has the most trouble treating Anthony with respect. She feels that poor people should move to better neighborhoods if they really want her help.

But both of them share with the other leads a sense of irony about themselves. They all manipulate their stereotypes enough to turn every encounter, each situation, into the stuff of humor. At the same time, the finely crafted scripts keep all five of them evolving away from stereotype and toward the richness of individuality. The show's recurring thematic statement is the necessity for change within individuals and within society. This theme distinguishes "Designing Women" from the long, rich tradition of southern literature that glorifies the past and portrays the transition into the modern world as at worst painful, at best lamentable.

Many of the show's jokes come out of

what Julia calls Charlene's "unequaled ability to be fascinated by anything." Charlene is always telling a story or asking questions that lead to annoyingly minute observation of people and events. The other tease her, but they always listen and answer. The point is that one escapes the limitations of stereotype through knowledge and understanding, through the capacity for growth and change. Scarlett O'Hara is a smart woman, but she has only one design and spends her life trying to fit herself into that narrow space. These women are capable of continually redefining—re-designing—the space to fit them.

The war that holds sway over these people's imaginations is World War II, not the War Between the States. They were educated during the era when the civil rights movement forced all southerners to confront the stereotypes that had governed their lives for a century. And as Julia snidely informs the New York magazine editor, despite being born and educated in Atlanta—"the one that burned"—she and her peers can hold down jobs and find their way.

Part of that way involves preserving the best of the past and its traditions. Anthony's grandmother cooks a sweet potato pie that will "make you slap your mama," and Charlene prepares a real treat for their Christmas dinner: baked 'coon. When Mary Jo tries to distinguish southern style from what looks like the same Manhattan apartment featured under a different name in every single issue of *Architectural Digest*, she says that south-

ern style is that "unerring attention to detail, quality, and warmth, surrounding yourself with things that have been here for a while." Southern homes, she concludes, never look as if they've been done by decorators.

That definition also serves to explain why "Designing Women" works: the writers and actors are able to maintain the illusion that we have magically been given access to the lives of real people who have just this sort of style themselves.

When Howard the Nerd comes to beg Mary Jo to accompany him to his high-school reunion so that he can prove once and for all that he isn't *just* a nerd, by the grace of these women's style and class, he get four dates instead of one. All of them, Howard and his dates, learn an important lesson for southerners when they see the startled faces and the sudden envy of men who abused Howard throughout his youth. Southerners and nerds, they decide, can do just fine, even better, as long as "we know we're not what they think."

"Designing Women" is much more than most of us would think a sitcom could be. You won't find better writing or a better ensemble of actors on any half-hour of network television.

Grow up, Scarlett. Dewayne, Bubba, it's over. These are women living in tomorrow.

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## Kundera Without the Ideas

By Richard Marin

**M**ilan Kundera invited revision—plenty of it—when he admonished the ambitious adapters of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* to "eliminate, eliminate." It would seem a clear enough command, the authorial equivalent of the director's *cut*. His mistake, perhaps, was amending it. When asked by the men determined to make the film what to leave in, what was the heart of the novel, Kundera replied, "The love story, of course."

Converting a novel dense with ideas into a thing of silver and celluloid is no

mean feat. Twice, the most celebrated novel of ideas of the century, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, has been tried and has failed on the big screen. Dead earnest, sincere efforts both, but missing the humanity George Orwell *wrote* into the heart of his dystopian nightmare.

So, the love story? Of course?

How many of the 400,000 Americans who have purchased hard- and soft-cover translations of the émigré Czech's novel since it debuted in 1984 and actually *read* it would distill their tortured, mesmerized,

baffled, or enchanted encounters with that elusive, metaphysical, deeply political stretch of prose to "the love story?" If the answer is none, then why advise the movie makers to do it?

We'll never know. The producer and director of *Unbearable Lightness*, Saul Zaentz and Philip Kaufman, took Kundera's advice—to the letter. They shoved the politics, the ideas, the difficult parts of his story—which describes the spiritual collapse of Czechoslovakia after Russian tanks crushed the 1968 Prague Spring—into the backdrop. They reduced the moral scenario of the novel—the state's violation of private lives—into state-of-the-art rear-projection, magically superimposing our hero and heroine onto stock footage of the invasion. Up front is the love story, with all the novel's dangerous eroticism (Kundera updated Orwell's sex crimes) faithfully, often exquisitely, transposed into luscious flesh and bones. Far, far behind is the purpose, the reason for those lusty lovers and their emblematic passions: to spark a thought or two.

**T**he first two "chapters" (they are only two-and-a-half pages long) of Kundera's book are about Frederick Nietzsche, not Tomas, the brainy Lothario who recites the story's meandering monologue. Invoking Nietzsche's myth of "eternal return," the narrator sets up the book's oblique title, the gist of which is a paradox, a brain-teasing trope. If we only get one life to live, inquires Kundera, when can we possibly learn to live it? How can any action have meaning if it is just a blind first try, blundering history repeating itself? It can't. Hence lightness: the helpless reverie, giddy anomie of a man cut off from himself, his memory, his will, and—here's where the tanks roll in—his culture and his country.

Try getting *that* across in a screenplay. Kaufman and his collaborator Jean-Claude Carrière (who skillfully articulated so many of Spanish filmmaker Luis Buñuel's philosophical kinks) don't even try. They commence with the easiest part of Tomas to get a grip on: his epic womanizing.

"Take off your clothes," is Tomas's favorite refrain, to which he sometimes attaches the amusing kicker, "Don't worry, I'm a doctor." He is a doctor, a brain surgeon, considerably younger in the person of actor Daniel Day-Lewis than the middle-aged, once-married narrator in the book.

He is also, we are led to believe, a member of the intelligentsia. Not a card-carryer, perhaps, but empowered with observer status. He reads books, drinks in bohemian bistros. Amid freedom's brief bloom during the so-called Prague Spring, he wears a mask of arch cynicism, as if waiting for the walls to come tumbling down so he can say, "I told you so."

Torn between the exotic sexplay (lightness?) tirelessly indulged in by his long-time mistress Sabina (Lena Olin) and the animal devotion (heaviness?) offered by his wife Tereza (Juliet Binoche), Tomas chooses both. And neither. He wants one, can't live without the other, a Casanovan



**Tomas and Tereza:** Prague Spring is dutifully observed but robbed of meaning.

dualism that purports to make him sexually irresistible. Take off your clothes! Gladly, doctor! *Snap!* another pallid, wanton Czech mistress unsheathes the naughty secrets of her repressed, East European desire.

Day-Lewis (whose mannered élan served him better in *Room With a View* and *My Beautiful Laundrette*) strikes a handsome pose in the retro-intellectual look his costumers have conceived for him: skinny black suits, black turtleneck, black Ray Bans, a three-inch high eraser-head of jet-black hair. Undeniably cool he is, but it's impossible to see why women, especially the two important ones, are so magnetized by his supercilious, superficial attitude.

The two women are Day-Lewis's stark opposite: complicated, intriguing embodiments of feminine mystique. The most

memorable scene in the film is strictly *entre elles*. Tomas's wife and mistress have acquiesced to an amicable rivalry by the time Tereza, a photographer, arrives at her rival's studio, an erotic playpen, to take a session of nude shots with Sabina as her model. Having long fantasized about being present at the scene of one of Tomas's transgressions, she exacts a quiet vengeance for his adultery through the lens of her camera. Sabina then steals the camera and puts a blushing Tereza on the receiving end of the lens. The two actresses in tandem evoke a mood of fragile intimacy and taut sensuality, a scene that isn't remotely obscene. Amazingly, this is a Hollywood film whose god is Eros not Pornos.

**K**eep *Unbearable Lightness's* point of origin in mind. By Hollywood standards, it is long (the book can be read faster than the movie's 2 hours, 47 minutes) and serious in a way that American movies seldom are. It is meticulously filmed (by Sven Nykvist) in iron-curtain grays that aren't always pretty but bristle with integrity.

But Kaufman's plodding, dutiful seriousness is hardly ever broken by a shaft of the novel's "lightness." The tanks come. The principals exile themselves to Switzerland. Tomas and Tereza return to the newly disciplined Czech state and become subjects of Big Brother. Ultimately, the couple beats a bucolic retreat to a farm run by an eccentric rustic and his amusing pig Mefisto. The events of the novel are dutifully observed but robbed of meaning.

"In the kingdom of kitsch, you would be a monster," Sabina tells Tomas during one of their *outré* tussles, quoting verbatim from Kundera. (Tomas, the cynic and realist, professes kitsch to be his great bugbear.) But the visceral crescendo of emotion Kundera builds in his long account of the death of Tomas and Tereza's beloved dog Karenin is brusquely reduced in movie time to a scant few minutes. The event Kundera dispensed with so offhandedly—the death of Tomas and Tereza—Kaufman inflates into a lachrymose finale that fairly drowns in kitsch.

When Kundera asked for "the love story," did he expect everything else to be shucked down the memory hole?

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## Chairman Mao's Role Model

By Steven W. Mosher

*The Chinese Emperor*, by Jean Levi  
New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 341 pages, \$18.95



**China's Great Wall:** The first emperor of the Chin dynasty hoped to soak up the wealth of the country, thus rendering the people pliant.

**B**ureaucratic totalitarianism is often thought to be an invention of the 20th century, an evil alchemy of 19th-century Marxist ideology and 20th-century Leninist bureaucracy capable of transmuting precious freedoms into base slavery. But credit for this political sorcery must be given where credit is due. The inventor of the iron cage of totalitarianism is not Vladimir Ilich Lenin—though it is of course his specter that looms over the peoples of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe—but an emperor of ancient China, the Ch'in Shih Huang Ti, or first emperor of the Chin dynasty.

Throughout most of Chinese history, peasants could go about their daily lives unmolested by the government, except for taxes and occasional stints of corvée labor. However despotic the ruler who sat on the dragon throne, however much he

terrorized his courtiers at the capital and his officials in the cities and major towns, off in the villages a kind of grassroots democracy flourished. Peasants summed up their freedom from oppressive government in a folk saying: "Heaven is high and the emperor is far away."

The first emperor of the Chin dynasty, who unified China for the first time in 221 B.C., sought to collapse this distance between himself and his subjects. During an age when the reach of even the most ambitious rulers exceeded their grasp, the Chin emperor sought to make all the population of China accountable to him. Acting through an enormous cadre of bureaucrats, a complex skein of laws, and a highly elaborated ideology, he very largely succeeded. In so doing the Chin emperor became the archetype for a political monster that has become all too common in

our modern age. More than two millennia before George Orwell coined the term, ancient China endured the world's first Big Brother.

The Chin emperor is a household name throughout the Orient, yet few in the West, outside of a handful of Orientalists, have heard of this grandfather of all despots. Now French sinologist Jean Levi's new novel, based closely on the historical record, makes his story accessible to all.

We are introduced to the Chin emperor as a young man. Blessed with an acute mind, but limited by a weak constitution, he is a Chinese Strelnikov, a classical ascetic of the type that make such formidably single-minded revolutionaries. Pleasures of the flesh bore and even repel him, and he throws all of his energies into the quest for power. He launches a series of campaigns that soon bring most of what constitutes modern China into his domain, creating the largest empire the world had known up to that time. For the next 12 years, until his death in 210 B.C., he rules with an iron hand.

But it is his specific policies that so stunningly anticipated the bureaucratic totalitarian empires of our own century. To begin with, a special cadre of inspectors was established to keep watch over officialdom. At the provincial level, for example, there was a civil governor, a military commander, and a political commissar. The duties of the commissar were, like their latterday counterparts in Communist countries, to spy on the governor and military commander and make sure that they did not deviate from the official line or criticize government policy.

The emperor's credo was that "a wise prince doesn't ask his subjects to behave well—he uses methods that prevent them from behaving badly." Every arena of life was to be regulated. The people were not permitted to bear arms, and all weapons were confiscated and sent to the capital. Trade was viewed as "parasitical activity" and was made illegal. Wandering minstrels were banned and replaced by authorized troupes of singers and musicians whose repertoires had to be approved by the Ministry of the Interior.