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**THE HANDMAID’S TALE**

**The Characters**

Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them. ― **Margaret Atwood**

**Bruce Miller** – Creator and Executive Producer

One of my most favorite things that’s happened is I’ve lost my actors in their characters. I know all those people quite well. Sometimes, you're stunned that the character and the actor are so different. And yet you see why. If it was someone else, it wouldn't work.

The one thing that Elisabeth Moss, as an actor, can’t hide is how strong she is as a person. That comes through even when June is being beaten or imprisoned. You never feel like she’s down and out. Every time Lizzie puts her shoulders back and straightens up, you believe that June can make it through.

What makes Aunt Lydia great is that Ann Dowd, no matter how much she tries to, can’t hide Ann. Lydia has a warmth, a caring – qualities that Ann has in great measure. It has to be Ann Dowd, who, when she calls you ‘darling’, sends a message of love. I also like the fact that everybody thinks she's 9 feet tall.

Luke often behaves like a passive man. But you know that he will stand with June, fight for her, for their child because, by his very presence, O-T Fagbenle gives Luke strength, gives him power.

The lightness Bradley Whitford brings to Lawrence, the architect of Gilead can we add something like “and now New Bethlehem,” is also the lightness he brings to the set. Also, with Bradley, there is an aspect of him watching an actor who he met when she was 17 on “The West Wing.” And now, Elisabeth Moss directs him in“The Handmaid’s Tale.” He looks like he’s looking at his daughter all the time. And I feel the same way about her.

Janine is an inspiring character who is incredibly consistent. When you first meet her, she’s screaming, yelling and mouthing off. She’s still that person inside, but the fierceness never goes away. She just takes all of that strength and uses it to disassociate from reality, to go where reality won’t hurt her. It’s a mindful way for her to survive and protect her Janine-ness. She’s become such an incredible leader, an understander of other women. One of the most powerful things on the show is the relationship among these women. I cannot say enough about Madeline Brewer – how she built that character, her thoughtfulness and devotion to Janine.

Although she’s known for comedy, Ever Carradine is so good dramatically that she makes Naomi almost sympathetic. I love when she says to Janine, ‘It's good to have a friend,’ and Janine turns on her with ‘You're not my friend. I hate you!’ And you feel bad for Naomi, which seems impossible.

We’ve had a lot of life while this show’s been going on – engagements, marriages and babies, and, sadly, a few deaths. All these events have brought our cast closer together – that and the fact they’ve been working together for so many years. You see those deeper relationships on screen. The cast is fearless. And, I think they’re fearless because they have each other and because they’re led well by Elisabeth Moss.

**Elisabeth Moss on June Osbourn**

When we first meet June in Season One, she has been in Gilead for a few years. She’s completely lost her voice. She’s not allowed to speak. We only hear her thoughts. We start out with her already halfway down the arc. She’s already not the person that she was, which is so interesting for an actor to play. Then we flashback and see her as a mom, a wife, a girlfriend. She had a job, drove a car, all these normal, normal things. Over the course of the series, June becomes a completely new person, a person who does find her voice, an angry voice, a powerful voice. She’s a different person than she was. A lot of the romance with Nick is because of that. They are two people who understand and share the burden of Gilead’s tyranny.

By Season Six, June evolves into somebody who is stronger, angrier, smarter. Yes, she is carrying a lot more pain, but she has a fight that she didn't have before. She becomes more and more of a superhero. All moms, all parents, all caregivers of any kind are superheroes. But she does become kind of a real actual hero for this movement.

But, it’s important to remember that June is doing nothing new. You just have to look at the endless examples in history and the endless examples that are in front of us right now of people who have been through so much and have managed to retain their dignity. June is not an anomaly at all. She’s the story of so many people that have fought through adversity, whether it’s in their high school or their dance class, or in a country or in a family environment - somebody who feels that they can’t be who they are and has to fight against oppression. She’s like all of us, I think.

**Yvonne Strahovski on Serena Joy**

I feel so grateful to have played this character. She is so many things in one. We definitely enjoyed hating her to begin with. But what kind of a villain has she been? She's made a lot of bad choices, but she’s also tried to make better choices. She must survive, and for better or worse, she makes choices based on that need to survive. And I think that’s been her ebb and flow. I just think it’s such an amazing reflection of humanity itself on how complex life can be and all the gray areas in our own psyche, and all of our complex feelings as humans and how we navigate all of that.

As an actor, I've had to decide how much of a debt Serena feels she owes June because it’s such a fine line. I play a character that is somewhat narcissistic and somewhat manipulative, and quite narrow-minded. I think Serena gets overwhelmed with the amount of debt and gratitude that she owes June, but there are moments where she’s not going to acknowledge it. She’s going to be in denial, usually for some self-serving reason. Is Serena going to do the right thing, or isn’t she? Is the audience going to be on her side? Are they going to be rooting for her? We’ll see.

**Max Minghella on Nick Blaine**

I think some of the edges fray on Nick this season. His moral center is actually shifting. He has been quite selfless for much of his life, especially in this dynamic with June. And so maybe his gas tank for that is starting to run out. He’s speaking up from himself a little bit more and sometimes in quite misguided ways. His dignity is breaking a little bit.

A lot of people who are in positions of power wrestle with their insecurities. Many of us have imposter syndrome. It’s an easy facet of Nick for me to access, and I think it is a really relatable thing about him. Obviously, there are things that Nick does that are very off-putting and unrelatable. One of the things that I’ve always found very easy to tether onto is his lack of self-esteem or his sense of not feeling like he belongs in this kind of more upper-class society. He’s a blue-collar kid who’s found himself in a very well-to-do situation.

This season Josh Charles, an extraordinary actor, joins the show playing Nick’s father-in-law, Commander Wharton. I feel a comfort around Josh. Both Max and Nick respond to his confidence and straightforward approach. The only other key male figure that Nick has had is Commander Lawrence who is an eccentric. There’s something in Wharton’s masculinity that Nick has been searching for. One of the things that this season explores is the notion that a lot of these men in Gilead have broken relationships with their fathers. I think Nick sees in Wharton a mentorship that he craves. This season is the first time Nick’s been tempted by the dark side on a fundamental level, primarily because of that relationship.

**O-T Fagbenle on Luke**

The motivating and propulsive energy behind Luke’s wanting change this season is getting Hannah back. He realizes that his window is closing both because of her age but also because of how things feel on the ground in Canada, his adopted country. Feelings toward refugees are changing, hardening. He could be locked up. And then how will he help Hannah? He could be sent away. He could be expelled to some other part of the world where he’s even farther from his daughter than he is now. So, now’s the time for action.

One of the things that I like most about Luke is that he’s just a normal guy. He’s not an action man. He is like millions if not hundreds of millions of people around the world who are forced to suffer their situation and the mental anguish it causes, the sense of powerlessness in the face of grand schemes in the world. It can be really crushing. I’ve had lots of people come up to me and say, ‘Hey, it’s very relatable seeing this ordinary guy; his incompetence is relatable.’ Through the seasons we’ve seen Luke disenfranchised in many ways. What I really love about this season is he’s now willing to die for change. It’s change or death.

**Amanda Brugel on Rita**

Rita is very different from a lot of the other characters. I think that Rita is like most people who watch the show. She is hopeful. She does want to resist, but she doesn't want to risk her family. She doesn't want to risk her personage. She just wants to live in peace and have a comfortable, easy life with the least amount of resistance. But she’s friends with June, so it’s not easy to escape resisting; but I think that Rita is the better for it because she’s learned that she has a power inside and that she does have a capacity to fight. It’s just that she’s a quiet fighter.

The thing that I love is that there’s a line through all the seasons. Rita has saved June quietly for many seasons, whether it’s been helping her to escape and rushing her out the door, or taking the children to Canada or passing her notes from other handmaids. There’s always been an element where Rita does something to support her friend and to save June’s life.

I've been involved and in love with “The Handmaid’s Tale”for over 30 years. When I was in Grade 10, I was introduced to Margaret Atwood’s work. I was entranced by “The Handmaid’s Tale.” But did I want to be an actor or a writer? In 1996, at York University, to be an actor, you auditioned; to be a writer, you turned in a thesis, a sort of a grand gesture to show your writing capabilities. My thesis was on Rita. I received a full scholarship to the writing program based on that thesis. But, I became an actor anyway.

**Ann Dowd on Aunt Lydia**

I've always loved Lydia. The rule with acting, I think probably the rule in life period, is no judgment. When I was getting to know her, I did not see her as evil and cruel. I saw her as someone who thought these girls needed to be united with God. They don’t have a relationship with the Divine. Their lives are askew. I think her love of the girls was real. Her belief in God is real. I’ve always appreciated Lydia’s strengths and her determination.

Lydia has the ability to see where she’s made mistakes. When she begins to love her girls rather than just instructing them and punishing them, when she begins to love them - what happens? What happens when love is in any situation? The walls begin to crumble, and the heart takes front and center. And that’s, I think, the long, long process for Lydia. Can I just say, playing her is a blast.

**Madeleine Brewer on Janine**

I started the show and my journey with Janine when I was 24. That was six seasons and eight years ago. I’ve grown up with her. She’s shaped me. She’s helped me become a better person, a better woman, a better friend, a better daughter, and probably a better future mother. She’s taught me about resilience and about kindness. She’s taught me some of the most important lessons of my life so far.

Some key things I’d like for the audience to take away from Janine is everything that she’s taught me - how to love more thoroughly and without fear to always seek the light, even when, you’re locked in a milk tank as Janine and June were. People can and will try to bring you down, to change you, to shape you. But your spirit is yours. And it’s up to you to decide whether or not it changes.

Janine herself is a leader, but she’s not the same kind of leader as June. Janine is a lover and not a fighter. Really. She’s not. I mean, and I’m very happy that the writers decided things would go this way, but Janine never takes a life, ever. And she has opportunities, but she never, never does, because that’s not her spirit.

**Bradley Whitford on Commander Lawrence**

Commander Lawrence is a fascinating character. There are multiple things going on with this guy. He was always morally in play. I have always worried about where he would end up on that sort of spectrum. There were conflicting forces going on inside him, which is, for me, the key to the most interesting acting experience I can have. In some ways he's horribly sexist and arrogant, but he reached out for this handmaid, June. He was fascinated with her. Even though it starts off as this condescending power dynamic, June ends up inspiring him, leading him. And that's been a really fun thing to play. He’s not a static character.

The parallel, for me, to understanding Lawrence is Robert McNamara, the U.S. Secretary of Defense during Vietnam War. He was a brilliant economist who had a political opportunity. Basically, his big brain obliterated his humanity. The excitement of putting his economic ideas into action resulted in the death of millions of people. The documentary ‘The Fog of War’is about the end of his life where there is a sense of his humanity creeping back in.

I think that Lawrence’s story is similar. The environment was toxic; infertility was the norm, and he saw the religious wackos in Gilead as a delivery system for his ideas on correcting these problems. The violence he was causing didn’t hit home, which does not say a lot about him, until he realized it destroyed his wife, whom he adored. And I think it’s sad that we can’t, certainly Lawrence can’t, and a lot of people cannot understand the cost of suffering until it hits them directly.

I do think that made him interested, in a flawed way, in redemption. Part of the argument that he then gets into with June becomes one I see in politics today: Do we reform from within the system or from without? Lawrence’s argument to June is - if we want to reform, chucking grenades and leaving a trail of bodies is not going to transform Gilead into a bucolic commune. We need to reform from within, which means I have to be political, function within this system. And she, justifiably, is saying, you're functioning in a fundamentally septic political system. And that’s a really interesting argument, unfortunately, for our times.

**Sam Jaeger on Mark Tuello**

I think the history of Serena and Mark is a fascinating one. His very introduction to her was flirtatious, and then that led to his trying to get her to leave Gilead. There’s always been this undercurrent between them. With these two, it’s almost like Elizabethan romance where so much goes unsaid. They are both very good at navigating politics and vying for power. I think they admire that about one another. Yvonne and I are always very protective of that dance, we don’t want to overplay it. Because these characters would never give that much power to one another.

Mark and June have become almost like siblings – Mark the older, mature one; June being the abrasive younger one, the scrapper, the unrelenting nuisance. But he actually knows how powerful she is and what an instrument of change she is. He also knows that she is going to push him to places that he’s not comfortable with. And as the hope of what was once the United States unravels, he realizes that he must change to become more like June.

We’ve seen Lawrence vacillate between wanting to be a part of Mayday and wanting to protect himself. Because of June, Mark has come to see the good in Lawrence and is willing to push him just far enough to do the one rebellious act that only he can do. By the end of Season Six, a lot of the alliances that Mark had hoped for have fallen apart. Lawrence may be Mark’s only last, desperate hope to retaliate for all of Gilead’s many atrocities. I think that’s one of the great things about the series - the characters change; they evolve.

**-- 2025 --**