



AWARDS

Sarah Paulson pulls in strong roles, as with 'Ratched.' But one thing still eludes her



Sarah Paulson stars as nurse Mildred Ratched in the Ryan Murphy series "Ratched." (Mel Melcon / Los Angeles Times)

By RANDEE DAWN

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An actress sailing into her 40s traditionally doesn't begin landing the most interesting roles of her career, but Sarah Paulson, 46, has bucked that trend. Able to play baby-faced vulnerable and calculating stoic — sometimes in the same scene — she's been riveting in Netflix's ["Ratched,"](#) which fills in the back story of Mildred Ratched, the harsh "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" nurse, an Oscar-winning role for Louise Fletcher in 1975.

Paulson, who won an Emmy for another Ryan Murphy-affiliated project ("American Crime Story: The People v. O.J. Simpson") and who frequently appears in Murphy's "American Horror Story," spoke with The Envelope over a video call about emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic; taking advice from her partner, fellow actor Holland Taylor; and how she'd love to be hired for being funny — for once.

How are you and Holland doing, emerging on the other side of this whole pandemic?

I don't feel I'm on the other side yet. I'm one of those clingers, I've decided to call myself. I'm venturing out very minimally and very slowly. I still feel a little shaky. Holland is doing fine. It's an interesting thing for her to be where she is in her life [Taylor is 78] and have such a limit on what she's allowed to do. We have responded differently to it because we're at different points in our lives.

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Before signing on with “Ratched,” I assume you’d already seen “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest”?

I had, when I was a much younger person. And at first I thought, “Don’t watch it [again]. This is something [born of Ryan’s imagination](#) and Evan’s [Romansky, cocreator] imagination.” But then it almost felt disrespectful to Louise Fletcher and her extraordinary performance for me not to. The backbone, the vertebrae of Mildred was Louise Fletcher’s performance. She did something so powerful with her stillness and sort of begging you and almost demanding that you pay attention to her, but not in the normal way that happens sometimes with performances. I’ve been guilty of it — where you get so frightened that if you don’t do it all, it won’t be interesting. But Holland is always saying, “Look, nobody wants your 100%.”

Why in a performance would you not want to give your 100%? Why make an audience work for it?

I feel like watching a movie or television program or reading a book or watching a play should be more of an integrated experience from the audience to the performers. You want the audience to be engaged. Sometimes leaving everything on the floor when you’re done with the scene is you asking the audience to do nothing other than bear witness. I like the idea of a more interactive experience. People more often than not don’t reveal every nook and cranny of themselves. I love the idea of having a bit of mystery. You’re thinking about playing a human being and not an idea. Though, God knows, a good old mustache twist is really delightful.

As someone in a relationship with a woman, was it important for you to be half of a couple in a fictional lesbian love story in “Ratched” where the same old tropes weren’t revisited yet again?

Cynthia [Nixon, who played Mildred’s lover, Gwendolyn] and I talked about it. Originally, Gwendolyn was supposed to die — not because she’s gay but because that was going to contribute to Mildred’s sorrow. Nurse Bucket was supposed to die. Edmund was supposed to die; they were all going to die. Then, Ryan decided not to kill any of them. I feel like not everybody has to be in peril all the time. There is happiness. Same-sex couples have happiness too; why would we want to reduce that to some stereotypical trope, a narrative that isn’t indicative of lives that are really lived?

You’re shooting “American Crime Story: Impeachment,” where you play Linda Tripp — who recorded Monica Lewinsky talking about her affair with then-President Clinton. Has playing her changed your perspective on that scandal?

Oh, my God, yes. She was 150% operating from a place of absolute conviction that she was doing the right thing. That is a powerful thing for a person to believe. So I have to find ways to believe with conviction that these were the right things. It’s a much more challenging thing for me to do. I wonder if we’ll start thinking again about who the villain is in this story.

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What kind of roles are you still looking for?

I would love to do a comedy. Nobody asks me to do anything funny, and I understand it. There are things about Linda that are funny — maybe that will change somebody's mind. But at the end of the day, once my career took a turn for the better when it did — an uncommon thing when you're in your 40s and a woman — I could have never dreamed up the things I've gotten to play. I like the idea of just seeing what comes.

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