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# Can Quinta Brunson save broadcast TV? Does she want to?

BY RANDEE DAWN

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Quinta Brunson's ABC series, "Abbott Elementary," occupies a rare position this Emmy's season. It's the only broadcast show to have earned a nomination, along with many of its cast members. (Rosaline Shahnava)

When the Quinta Brunson-created "Abbott Elementary" first premiered late in 2021 on ABC, no one could have predicted the strange position it would occupy in the 2023 Emmy race. Having won three Emmys for its first 13-episode midseason run just last July, the series picked up eight more nominations for the 22 episodes of Season 2.

But that's not exactly what makes the ABC show unique this year. Instead, it's this: "Abbott Elementary" now occupies a kind of last-man-standing position. It's the only broadcast series this year to receive a show nomination — and its actors (Brunson, Sheryl Lee Ralph, Janelle James and Tyler James Williams) the only broadcast series actors to be nominated in lead or supporting roles for comedy, drama or limited series.

Can Quinta Brunson save broadcast TV? More to the point, does she want to?

Brunson, who spoke to *The Envelope* via Zoom mere hours before the SAG-AFTRA strike hammer came down, is certainly a traditional TV supporter. “There are shows that are doing incredible work on broadcast, especially in comedy,” she says. “You have to hit that sweet spot of being interesting, in the zeitgeist, and a show that people want to write about, talk about and commune over. I think that is harder on broadcast. But it can be done: ‘Abbott’ is testament to that.”



AWARDS

### Why the women of ‘Abbott Elementary’ could teach chemistry

May 31, 2022

In less than two years, “Abbott” has become a testament to a lot of things, including the tenacious survival of the longer-season sitcom. Format-wise, it’s not exactly groundbreaking — the mock-doc format has proved successful since “*The Office*.” But “Abbott’s” ensemble cast is particularly sharp — Brunson as Janine, the eternal optimist of a teacher in a Philadelphia school, along with a cast of fellow educators who sport various levels of jadedness, a feckless principal and a very knowing janitor. Is it funny? Certainly — while also being fearless when it comes to tackling politics and class as they relate to American education.

This past season’s 22 episodes came as a learning experience, says Brunson. They had lots of “time and space” to let the storytelling breathe. It also left them room to play around. “What does it look like when we have an episode that almost has no point?” she asks. “Because that’s what you’re going to do with that many episodes, you’re going to have some that are completely nonsensical.”

So much time also allowed the show to more fully address their “will they or won’t they” couple: Janine and her co-worker Gregory (Williams, who was also nominated for the role last year).



“You have to hit that sweet spot of being interesting, in the zeitgeist, and a show that people want to write about, talk about and commune over,” says the “Abbott Elementary” creator and star. “I think that is harder on broadcast. But it can be done.” (Mariah Tauger / Los Angeles Times)

“Janine and Gregory are so much fun for us because these characters in the show are 25, 26,” says Brunson, 33. “I just came out of my 20s and you make really dumb, weird mistakes and it’s fun to play with those. Black characters in the past haven’t often been afforded the awkwardness we get to see with them — so that’s exciting to write.”

The fact that this is a well-worn TV trope doesn’t bother her in the least. “I love tropes,” Brunson says. “I think we all do, whether we know it or not. We’ve been watching and listening to the same stories since the beginning of time — and we love them. If people didn’t want to see them anymore, [the industry] would have stopped with Sam and Diane. But we love it because at the end of the day, that’s storytelling. It’s always about how do you make the trope look different. You’re finding a way to reinvent the wheel.”

Philly born and raised with a kindergarten teacher for a mom, Brunson spent her pre-“Abbott” career learning her craft and figuring out ways to write her way into Hollywood’s spotlight. A brief stint with Second City led to her developing a following with funny videos on Instagram and BuzzFeed; she scripted and starred in comedies for YouTube Red and Verizon’s go90, then increased her visibility in 2019 when her credits included appearances on “A Black Lady Sketch Show,” “iZombie” and “Magical Girl Friendship Squad.”



#### AWARDS

### Showrunners Roundtable: Quinta Brunson, Alex Kurtzman, Ashley Lyle, Michelle King & Cathy Schulman

June 17, 2022

And although she’s made her name writing many of her own starring vehicles, she’s also discovered that “I really don’t want to write everything for myself,” she says. “One of the best lessons I learned on ‘Black Lady Sketch Show’ — I didn’t write for that show, though a lot of people think I did — was that I love being a cast member. I love being someone else’s paintbrush, so to speak.”

Initially, Brunson’s dream résumé included a regular stint as a “Saturday Night Live” cast member (and she was Emmy nominated this year for hosting the series), but a mentor/boss talked her out of it early on, alerting her to the scope of the full-time job based in New York City. Brunson wanted to be in Los Angeles.







Quinta Brunson stars with Tyler James Williams as the will-they-or-won't-they fellow teacher she may have feelings for, and William Stanford Davis as the very knowing janitor at Abbott elementary school. (Gilles Mingasson / ABC)

“At the time I was like, ‘I might have a baby soon,’ and she was like, ‘[Then] that’s not going to happen.’ She really laid it out for me,” says Brunson (who married in 2021 but does not have children). “It pushed me in another direction.”

Family finds its way into a lot of her conversations. She may have named the series’ titular institution after her middle school English teacher, but she draws on her own Philadelphia public school education — and her mother’s years as a teacher — for episode ideas.

“A lot of what I’ve seen with my mom goes into either Janine or Barbara [Sheryl Lee Ralph, who won an Emmy for the role in 2022],” she says. “I can’t even count all the ways we’ve included it.”

And in discussing what makes her laugh, family relationships surface all over again: Brunson loves “America’s Funniest Home Videos” because “I love watching family dynamics, people interacting. ‘Abbott’s’ built off of that.”



## AWARDS

**This season, the men of 'Abbott Elementary' find their depth**

June 6, 2023

Asked about her favorite non-comedic movies, the list is easy: “Crooklyn,” “The Truman Show” and ... “Jurassic Park,” which she saw in the theater when she was 3. Why? “My brother — he’s eight years older than me — took me, because he was supposed to be baby-sitting me and he decided that no matter what, he was going to see this movie,” she recalls. “He was obsessed with dinosaurs. When I got older, it was kind of my way to connect with him. It’s my earliest memory.”

Still, although Brunson’s inspiration may come from family, she’s not shy about knowing when to point the humor directly at herself. “Abbott” regularly features jokes about her short stature, and she’s 100% on board with that.

Being short, she notes “could have” hampered her career. “But that’s where writing for myself, or showcasing myself, came in handy,” she says. “There are not many other 4-foot-11 actresses out there. It feels just like me and Kristin Chenoweth. When you’re as short as I am, you aren’t necessarily looked at as a lead, or even seen as attractive — which is wild.”

Still, no matter how many jokes they may make, it’s possible to expect that Brunson is larger than life. She laughs, “People still don’t realize how short I really am. They think the rest of the cast is made up of giants, and I’m like 5-foot-6 or something. But I love short jokes. They crack me up.”

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