Behind the scenes

Nurse Jackie may be fiction, but the actors who put the television show on air are getting some real-life lessons on the profession. **By Suzanne Gordon**

Everyday between mid-September and December, the cast and crew of Nurse Jackie gather at the Kaufman Astoria Studio in New York City. On the day I arrive in November, they’re working on the dark comedy’s second season, which aired this spring on the Movie Network. The group includes former Sopranos’s star, Edie Falco, who stars as Jackie Peyton, Anna Deavere Smith who plays Nurse Administrator Gloria Akalitus, Eve Best who has the role of Jackie’s best buddy, the steely Dr. Eleanor O’Hara, Peter Facinelli, who plays junior ER attending MD Fitch Cooper, and Meritt Wever as student nurse Zoey Barkow. Each day, additional actors and extras, producers, directors and screenwriters fill out the permanent cast. And finally there is real-life ER nurse Lisa Wing, who’s on the set to make sure technical details are correct.

After studying the image of nursing for more than two decades, as soon as I learned that three new TV shows about nurses were airing last year, I immediately tuned in. Between HawthoRNes, Mercy, and Nurse Jackie, it was no contest. Nurse Jackie won hands down. Not just because of its great production values and acting, but because it’s also the best contemporary television has to offer about nursing. Jackie Peyton is a smart, tough, no-nonsense, and matter-of-factly caring RN.

From the show’s opening scene in the very first episode of the premier season, it was clear to me that Nurse Jackie was breaking new ground. When a young bike messenger was brought into the ER, Jackie – not the physician who missed it entirely – knew he had a brain bleed and was in trouble. In a voice over, Jackie explains the physiology of the injury. In both the entertainment and journalistic media, the golden rule is that RNs never, ever get to explain the scientific facts. That’s the doctor’s job. But here, it’s the nurse’s as well. On each subsequent episode in season one, viewers learned more about the real-life challenges nurses face as they try to do their critical work.

Unfortunately, not enough nurses understand how revolutionary this program is. In the U.S., the New York State Nurses and Oncology Nurses Associations have lodged protests with the producers, demanding that Nurse Jackie air a disclaimer because its main character violates nursing’s code of ethics. They just can’t get past the fact that Jackie is flawed and breaks the rules. That’s why I’ve come to the Astoria studio to talk to members of the cast and crew. I want to know what they’ve discovered about nursing through their work on Nurse Jackie. What I learned confirmed my expectations: Nurse Jackie not only teaches its viewers about nursing, it also educates the cast and crew.

Some of those associated with Nurse Jackie have had serious off-screen encounters with the health-care system. Steven Wallem, for example, who plays the RN Thor, was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes when he was 10 years old. His family has thus been in steady contact with both RNs and MDs. He tells me he knows how important nurses are and he would like to encourage more men to go into nursing. Executive producer Richie Jackson also recognized the power of nursing pre-Nurse Jackie.

In 2000, he and his wife were expecting identical twins, who arrived three months early. One of his sons died two hours after he was born, the other spent three months in neonatal intensive care units. “The nurses who took care of my son had three patients, not just one,” Jackson recounts. “There were the two parents as well as the baby. What was extraordinary to me was their skill and expertise and how agile they were. They had so much more experience than some of the doctors. They would know what was going on medically. Because of all their experience,
they were able to tell us when there was something to worry about, and when not to worry. They were able to manage this roller coaster we were on.”

One of Jackson’s experiences became part of an episode of Nurse Jackie. “A day or two after our son was born a doctor came in and gave me a very grave assessment of his condition,” he recalls. “It was awful and a nurse was standing behind him shaking her head no. When he left, she said, ‘it’s not that bad.’ She was right, and she literally kept me from collapsing.”

Not all members of the cast and crew have had such difficult educational encounters. They have learned about nursing from their work on the show. Nevar believes that she is not only a student of nursing on the set but off, getting valuable lessons about the profession from real-life nurses. When I first meet Best, who plays Jackie’s physician friend, the very first words out of her mouth are, “Nurses and teachers should make more money than anyone else.”

And Deavere Smith offers an interesting insight into the relationship between the nurse administrator she plays on the show and Jackie. Deavere Smith’s character, Gloria Akalitus, has so much trouble with Jackie, Deavere Smith surmises, because she “knows that it’s Jackie who is in control.” Nurses who enact this complex choreography of control every day will certainly find much to reflect on in this analysis of the dynamic.

Falco has particularly interesting insights on the subject of nursing and nurses. She says what drew her to the show was Jackie’s character, not her profession. “The character of Jackie Peyton would have been interesting to me no matter what she did,” Falco explains. “She’s unwilling to let things get in the way of doing what she needs to get done. She doesn’t have a lot of room for bureaucracy and rules when they stand in the way of her taking care of someone.”

Falco now realizes what she describes as “the magnitude of the obstacles that nurses have to deal with in order to perform the simple but noble task of helping people.”

From talking to real nurses and watching Wing, the on-set nurse expert, she has also recognized the magnitude of knowledge nurses have. Before she started to play Jackie, for example, she visited Bellevue Hospital, which has one of the busiest ERs in New York City.

Falco says that she learns about nursing everyday by studying Wing. “She’s very understated. She’ll say, ‘well the reason for this is...’ and she’ll rattle off the names of things, and you’re in awe of the amount of information she’s gotten on top of the amount of training she’s had. It’s huge. She also has the ability to put her hands on patients, and soothe them just with the tone of her voice. You see her dealing with extras or day players who have to play the patient. I watch her, and she’ll say, ‘I’m going to put this on you and it’s going to hurt a little.’ And I think, ‘how beautiful.’ You really can imagine feeling secure with these people around you.”

Falco has also learned a lot, she says, from people’s reactions to the show. Some doctors have made it clear they do not appreciate the way MDs are portrayed. Nurses have worried about the fact that Jackie is addicted to medication. Falco, who is a recovering alcoholic, had complicated feelings about Jackie’s addiction. She has, however, learned Jackie isn’t the only nurse – or doctor – who has trouble with drugs. She also believes that Jackie’s inability to take care of herself – while, that is, she spends her time taking care of others – rings very true for many people, not just nurses. As a single mother of two young children, she knows that caregivers tend to put themselves last, even though they too have needs that need to be addressed.

Falco and others on the show know that it has struck a nerve among nurses. Although a lot of nurses believe Nurse Jackie nails modern health care, some are understandably skittish about Jackie’s flaws. As an actor, Falco does not believe it is her job to remind people that this is a dark comedy, not a documentary. “I am not willing to get in there and fight the good fight for my TV show. I love that people are talking about it even though some of the things they’re saying are not positive. Who knows if people, nurses, are uncomfortable then maybe the show is portraying things as they really are and they don’t want to be seeing things about the issue of drug use or other things that I am discovering are real. If it weren’t capturing something real, perhaps they’d just say ‘it’s a silly TV show’. I’m just happy that it’s causing conversation.”

She’s also pleased that people are enjoying the show. “I have kids now and I don’t want to be putting any more viruses into the subconscious of the population. I want people to see something positive.”

In my view, Nurse Jackie is definitely positive. It highlights the problems with dysfunctional nurse-physician relationships, what happens when units are short staffed, don’t have appropriate lift equipment, and when RNs don’t have enough authority over their work. Yes, of course, Jackie bends – sometimes even shatters – the rules. But she’s a character in a 21st century medical drama. To create the kind of drama that makes good television, writers and producers have to create credible, interesting, and compelling characters who don’t have picture perfect lives, and constantly break the rules. Today’s heroes – consider the doctors on House or Denis Leary and his fellow firefighters in Rescue Me – are a mess, but also masters of their craft.

As real life RNs watch Nurse Jackie they might consider what the Pulitzer Prize-winning American historian, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, said about women: well-behaved women seldom make history. They don’t make good television either.

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