

In the 1970s, *Little House on the Prairie* brought calming family values to prime-time TV, the Ingalls clan settling on their 1870s Minnesota farm and carrying out their homespun relationships in ways that warmed the hearts of America. It was sickening!

Thank God for Nellie Oleson, the show's spoil-sport brat, who pulled pigtails and caused all sorts of other trouble while totally saving the show. To me, she was always the hero, and everyone else just got in the way of her fiery tantrums.

Spunky Alison Arngrim, who played Nellie, gets my kudos, too, having gone on to become an AIDS activist, a gay icon, and an outspoken victim of incest and lobbyist for PROTECT. Alison has a knack for yanking people's chains in a good way. And her new bestselling memoir, *Confessions of a Prairie Bitch*, is such an absorbing read, I just had to give the woman a call for some bitch talk.

Me: Congrats on the book, Alison. It's so real.

Arngrim: I laid shit out.

Me: What motivated Nellie? Self-esteem issues?

Arngrim: Think of Mrs. Oleson as your mother. You're gonna be kind of nuts right there. She had to be driving those children out of their minds: 'We're not supposed to be in this one-horse town.'

Me: As basically the original Omarosa, how did you learn to love being hated?

Arngrim: I knew my mom wasn't really a talking ball of clay, though she did the voice for *Gumby*. And I saw people shot to death on cop shows and then they'd show up for dinner at our house. So I knew that being on TV had nothing to do with who they were. Besides, everybody talked about Nellie—'What's she gonna do now?' I thought that was cool.

Me: Not so cool was your patronizing co-star Melissa Sue Anderson, whom you roast in your book. Did she mention you in her new memoir?

Arngrim: Six times: 'Oh, no, I liked her very much—even though I was a real actress and she was just playing.' She paints herself as the serious actress while we were goofing off!

Me: The nerve of that petticoat princess! Is it true that your breasts were suddenly not so little on the prairie? Did anyone make catcalls?

Arngrim: The crew was very protective, but the mother of the twins, Carole Kay Bush, likes to say whatever comes into her head. I came out at lunchtime in a tight T-shirt, and she screamed out over the entire prairie, 'Get a load of them jugs!' Meanwhile, Melissa Gilbert was drawing a cartoon, 'Nellie is busting out all over.'

Me: In other scandalous developments, was your real-life father really gay?

Arngrim: It was a deal between he and my mother. They were madly in love, yet there was always some third party, some guy, hanging around a lot. Then, two years later, it would be some other guy.

Me: I guess Mom was as malleable as *Gumby*. And you're very brave to talk about how your brother incested you. Did you read Mackenzie Phillips's book about consensual incest?

Arngrim: Yes. Being drugged into a stupor and waking out of a coma to find someone on top of you with his pants around his ankles is not my idea of consensual. I sent Mackenzie a message on Facebook saying, 'This sounds as consensual as being hit on the head with a brick.' Then I read the book, and she makes it sort of

clear that he was the one who called it consensual.

Me: Do you and other ex-child stars have a kind of secret bond because of what you've gone through?

Arngrim: Yes! Some of us are sicker than others. Some of these people are fried. I ran into Todd Bridges years ago, and he was not right in the head. Then he got arrested. Then he seemed to be doing better, but he was still very tense. Then he got over himself, figured it out, and the last few times, he's been fantastic. But Melissa Gilbert and I would make cracks about being old Army buddies because it's like we were in some kind of war together, an experience that normal people can't grasp.

Me: I can't grasp it, but I can certainly appreciate the amazing way you've emerged.

Bend, Snap, and Crackle

Another blonde troublemaker/gay icon, the hilarious Jennifer Coolidge, killed at Comix the other night, puncturing the pretensions and absurdities of the biz while laying shit out. Coolidge gamely mocked Raquel Welch's claim that she originally wanted to do Shakespeare ('She wasn't even believable as Jugs in Mother, Jugs & Speed!'), the Times piece saying, 'It's Snooki's time' ('Thank God! I was so worried it wasn't gonna happen for her'), and Penélope Cruz's winning way of telling men flattering things they've never heard ('She told Matthew McConaughey, 'Slow down! Your thoughts are like lightning!' and she cooed to Tom Cruise, 'The reason your dick is so hard is that I'm standing before you naked, not because you strapped it to two toothbrushes.'')

The double-brush crowd might squirm over the premise of Dinner for Schmucks, the movie that left me wondering why I've gotten so many dinner invitations lately. But it's a scream, from the dead lobster bit to the lost clitoris remarks and the face-licking scene. 'Fine, I'll be your schmuck,' director Jay Roach cracked to me at the premiere bash, agreeing to be interviewed. 'Could the lead actors have switched roles?' I wondered, knowing they easily could have. 'Yes,' said Roach. 'They're a great team—like Matthau and Lemmon. I want to do a political movie with them. Paul Rudd would make a great candidate, and Steve Carell could be a great anxious campaign manager.' Or vice versa.

Totally invited but not a schmuck, reality star Ronnie Kroell popped up, fresh off his Playgirl spread. Did he suffer any self-consciousness about the nudity of it all? 'No!' Kroell swore. 'On Make Me a Supermodel, they made me do that every week.' Hmm, I'm going to have to start watching more cable.

This week's theater trend involved dark Off-Broadway comedies about parties gone awry, like *Viagara Falls*, in which two old men got down with a gerontophile hooker while my penis retracted into my body and came out past my hemorrhoids.

Far more ambitious is *Bachelorette* (a/k/a *Klonopin Falls*), in which a bride-to-be's three girlfriends share coke, champagne, and colorful attempts at destruction. By the end, the surfacey banter became so strangely compelling that I was desperate to grab for the anti-anxiety pills the bride had thrown onto the stage.

A bride at *Viagara*—I mean *Niagara*—Falls is one of the characters looking for connections at various American landmarks in *See Rock City & Other Destinations*, an environmentally staged musical that has the audience seated on the first folding chairs they can grab. Several of the scenarios are missable, but the rest had me willing to keep traveling with these people—though next time, a set, an intermission, and a real seat wouldn't be horrifying.

And finally, my own landmark site the next day was the James Beard Foundation's 'Chefs & Champagne' event at the Wölffer Vineyard in Sagaponack, a one-horse town that suddenly became host to a pig named Michael. After three hours of food-station-hopping with honoree Martha Stewart, I moved to the adjacent tent for an after-party filled with ravioli and cannoli. If I wore a tight T-shirt right now, you'd be yelling, 'Get a load of those jugs!'

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