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Sitcom Men Find Work’s a Drag

By Darren Garnick

Hollywood has a darling suggestion for guys seeking job security in these uncertain times: Get used to wobbling around in heels and a dress.

In the new ABC TV sitcom “Work It,” which premieres on Jan. 3, two laid-off male car dealership employees are “forced” to take jobs for an all-female sales department at a pharmaceutical company. The catch? They have to keep their true identities a secret.

Sure, you’ve seen the plot before. Dustin Hoffman couldn’t get work as a male actor in “Tootsie,” so he put on lipstick and became a soap opera superstar. In the kitschy 1980s sitcom “Bosom Buddies,” Tom Hanks and Peter Scolari disguise themselves as women so they can get subsidized housing and get work at an advertising agency.

But in this gender-bender retread, ABC is hanging the storyline on perceived unemployment disparities between men and women — specifically, the so-called “Mancession.”

Conventional wisdom suggests that the recent slowdown in construction and the relatively stable need for health-care workers has meant that joblessness has been more cruel to guys than the ladies. However, recent studies of data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics point to an equally devastating job market.

Analyzing data from December 2007 to November 2011, the Institute for Women’s Policy Research found that in the current “recovery,” men have reclaimed 32 percent of “lost jobs” while women have only gained back 20 percent.

Pushing aside job statistics, does the premise of “Work It” even have a shaved leg to stand on? Could a drug company get away with hiring only female sales reps?

No way, says Kabrina Krebel Chang, an assistant professor of business law at Boston University.
“Under federal law, in order for the job to be gender-specific, they’d have to prove that you cannot do that job unless you’re female. Gender has nothing to do with selling pharmaceuticals,” she said. “So it’s unrealistic, but lots of TV comedies are unrealistic.”

Even more difficult to believe is that husky beard-stubbled guys would blend in seamlessly in an office populated by slender women. According to ABC press materials, “only Grace, the somewhat icy regional sales leader, keeps a suspicious eye on (the guys/gals), convinced that there’s something seriously wrong with them.”

“They’d never get away with it today,” agreed management professor Mike Boyd, who lectures on human resources at Bentley University in Waltham. “Some ‘friend’ would out them on Facebook!”