

Television

LOS ANGELES, June 13, (AP) — “Jeopardy!” needed a host, and Lucille Ball had an enthusiastic suggestion for creator Merv Griffin: The smooth-voiced, debonair emcee of the “High Rollers” game show. That was 1984. Decades later, filling the void left by the late Alex Trebek involves sophisticated research and a parade of guest hosts doing their best to impress viewers and the studio that’s expected to make the call before the new season begins taping later this summer. Think of Sony Pictures Television as clutching the rose, and Mayim Bialik, Anderson Cooper, Katie Couric and “Jeopardy!” champs Ken Jennings and Buzzy Cohen among the suitors so far, with more to come including Robin Roberts, Dr. Sanjay Gupta and LeVar Burton. Sony has “the most robust team of people I have ever seen looking at this and analyzing it in a very cerebral way,” said executive producer Mike Richards. “It’s a real change from the way casting has traditionally been done on television.” “It’s usually been a gut instinct of the head executive: ‘How about that person?’” Richards said. That was producer-entertainer Griffin’s approach when he brought a syndicated version of “Jeopardy!” to TV, five years after the quiz show’s last network iteration wrapped in 1979 on NBC. A word from Ball, of “I Love Lucy” fame, and Trebek’s skill and experience sealed his hire. Audience and critical regard for the Canadian-born Trebek grew

over the years, which makes finding a worthy replacement both a gesture of respect for the late host and the means to protect a corporate asset. While ratings have shifted under the guest hosts, “Jeopardy!” remains among the top-ranked syndicated programs in viewership. Trebek helped build the show’s “display of excellence with his own excellence. And it’s tremendously difficult to find somebody to replace him, not only because of the status that he had in the American imagination,” said Deepak Sarma, a Case Western Reserve University professor and Netflix cultural consultant. “Anyone who is going to take his position will be judged in the end against this model of perfection.”

Competing

Game show hosts of Trebek’s era were usually radio and TV broadcasting veterans steeped in the genre, and almost invariably white men. Among the “Jeopardy!” subs are men and women of color and prospects from a variety of fields, including NFL quarterback Aaron Rodgers. The approach makes sense to Louis Virtel, a longtime fan whose vantage point is informed by writing for a game show (“Match Game”) and competing on “Jeopardy!” in 2015. “It’s great to see all these different fill-ins. I’m open to suggestions, and I think most people are,” said Virtel, a “Jimmy Kimmel Live!” writer and co-host of the “Keep It” podcast. “‘Jeopardy!’ is a one-of-a-

kind show, and the replacement should be tailored to the game.” What makes for a good “Jeopardy!” host? “I think establishing a sense of comfort (so) the audience just eases into the game,” Virtel said. “Also a sense of stakes, that a real tough game is being played. It’s called ‘Jeopardy!’ for a reason. The host is there to make sure we’re all on our toes.” The try-outs are an unusually public form of auditioning, one that could cause flop sweat even for veteran emcees. For actor Bialik of “Blossom,” “The Big Bang Theory” and “Call Me Kat,” any nerves were crowded out by the demands of the job — and she’s a neuroscientist. “There is very little room for not being 100% dialed in to the job of hosting when you are on that stage,” Bialik said in an email. It proved the most “joyful, challenging, transcendent act I have undertaken — second only to giving birth to my second son on the floor of my living room.” Back in the day, there were only a handful of pioneers like Betty White, the first female game show host to win a Daytime Emmy (for 1983’s “Just Men!”), and Adam Wade, a Black singer who hosted the 1975 game show “Musical Chairs.” Wayne Brady, Steve Harvey and Meredith Vieira are among those who made further inroads, with pressure only growing on the entertainment industry to reflect America more broadly on screen.

Variety



This image released by Gravitas Ventures shows a scene from ‘Queen Bees.’ (AP)

Film

Burstyn’s film has a decent heart, some lovely moments

A star-studded retirement home in ‘Queen’

By Lindsey Bahr

There are two genres I tend to approach with extra caution: Slashers and retirement home comedies. Both have found me covering my eyes for not entirely unrelated reasons. Yes, the dismembering is more metaphorical in the latter, but sometimes it’s equally hard to stomach seeing a great group of actors reduced to incontinence jokes. Also, I’m still recovering from the Diane Keaton movie “Poms.”

The latest retirement home comedy is “Queen Bees,” about Helen (played by the majestic Ellen Burstyn), who reluctantly moves into a senior community while her beautiful suburban house is being fixed up after an accidental kitchen fire. Helen is still sharp and active and capable of living alone, but her real estate agent daughter (Elizabeth Mitchell) just seems to want to get the inevitable transition to out of the way. Helen, for her part, suspects her daughter just wants to sell her home and she may not be wrong.

For as lovely as Helen’s house is, the retirement community is pretty nice and full of active and social seniors. It’s also stacked with talented actors: Alongside Burstyn in this senior home is James Caan, Ann-Margret, Jane Curtin, Loretta Devine and Christopher Lloyd, all of whom it’s a delight to simply see on screen and none of whom are subjected to tasteless gags (although some are borderline).

“Queen Bees,” directed by Michael Lembeck and written by Donald Martin, isn’t exactly a bad movie, but it’s not exactly good either. It has a decent heart and some lovely moments, but it also has many of the clichés that we’ve come to expect: An incontinence joke, a marijuana scene, stroke gags, a truly horrendous score and an appalling lack of curiosity about the characters we’re asked to spend a few hours with.

Even the title seems carelessly thrown at the

movie as an attempt to peg it as a senior citizen “Mean Girls,” which it only sort of is. Curtin’s Janet is the Regina George of the home and keeps her bridge and walking group small (just Ann-Margret’s Margot and Devine’s Sally are members). But aside from that and a slow-motion walk into the lunchroom to claim their designated table, they don’t seem to yield much power or envy among the other residents. And it’s not too long before Helen, who is apathetic to their exclusivity, is invited to the bridge table. If you’re looking for a comedic, anthropological study of cliques in a retirement home, “Queen Bees” isn’t it.

Personality

“Queen Bees” also has the bones of a much better movie and is frustrating because of it. There is a sitcom blandness to the whole endeavor — any edge or personality has been flattened out. Characters get at most a single bit of background: One had five husbands, one had cancer, one sleeps around. In one jaw-dropping scene Helen tells Sally about her days protesting with Dr. King and has zero follow-up questions for her Black peer about HER experience during that time. Instead they pivot to talking about hair extensions, which Helen is just learning about.

And for all the comedic talent in the film, from Curtin to Lloyd, who seem game for anything, there are precious few genuine laughs to be had. Perhaps the script should have allowed for more improvisation.

Yet mercifully everyone emerges with their dignity intact. Burstyn even finds ways to make her character deeper than what’s on the page and there’s a moving tenderness to her little flirtation with Caan’s Dan, who is blandly sweet and charming.

Helen’s most meaningful relationship in the film is with her very kind and attentive grandson (Mat-

thew Barnes), who, when attempting to explain all the nuances of his 80-something grandmother to her potential suitor, reduces her to a Twitter bio: Likes famous quotes, ballroom dancing and neatness. Surely there must be more to her than that, you think.

“Queen Bees” has the same problem: It’s a film that seems to have been dreamt up by a reverent grandchild who assumed they knew everything there was to know and never thought to ask the grandparent themselves.

Rarely has an actor been as good for as long as Burstyn has. She is still, at 88, tireless, her vitality almost preternaturally undiminished. As intense as her early career was — Lee Strasberg’s The Actors Studio in the late 1960s followed by ’70s classics like “The Last Picture Show,” “The Exorcist” and “Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore” — her later years have been no less probing or challenging — “Requiem for a Dream,” “Interstellar,” last year’s “Pieces of a Woman.”

She has the awards to show for it. A six-time Oscar nominee and one-time winner (for “Alice,” a movie she might have directed until she picked a young filmmaker, Martin Scorsese, to do so instead), she has a Tony and two Emmys, too. And while “Queen Bees,” in theaters Friday, is more of fun diversion, Burstyn remains a magnificent and fierce screen presence. She plays a proudly independent senior temporarily staying at a retirement community that turns out to be as rife with comical cliques and romantic possibility as “Mean Girls.” The cast includes James Caan, Ann-Margret, Jane Curtin, Loretta Devine and Christopher Lloyd.

“Queen Bees,” a Gravitas Ventures release, is rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association of America for “for drug use, suggestive material and some language.” Running time: 100. Two stars out of four. (AP)

NEWARK, NJ: A reputed mobster who assaulted the then-boyfriend and now husband of a former “Real Housewives of New Jersey” cast member in exchange for a deeply discounted lavish wedding reception has been sentenced to more than two years in federal prison.

John Perna, 44, of Cedar Grove, New Jersey, must also pay \$17,816 in restitution as part of the 30-month sentence he received, according to federal prosecutors. He had pleaded guilty last December to committing a violent crime in aid of racketeering activity.

Prosecutors allege the former husband of cast member **Dina Manzo, Thomas Manzo,** hired Perna to assault his ex-wife’s then boyfriend. Perna is part of the Lucchese organized crime family and carried out the assault with a member of his crew in July 2015, prosecutors said.

Authorities said a month later, Perna held a wedding reception for 330 guests at Thomas Manzo’s Brownstone Restaurant in Paterson for “a fraction of the price.” Many of the guests were members of the Lucchese crime family, according to prosecutors.

Thomas Manzo has pleaded not guilty to conspiracy and committing a violent crime in aid of racketeering activity. He is awaiting trial.

Dina Manzo left the Bravo reality series in 2015 and she married **Dave Cantin** in June 2017. (AP)

PORTLAND, Maine: The estate of pop artist **Robert Indiana** has reached a settlement that keeps intact a longstanding relationship with Morgan Art Foundation, which holds the copyright for his iconic 1960s “LOVE” series, to promote and preserve his work, officials said Friday.

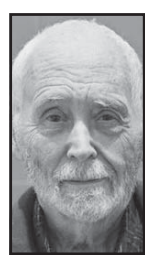
New York-based Morgan Art Foundation intends to work with the Maine-based Star of Hope Foundation, which aims to transform Indiana’s island home into a museum to celebrate his work.

While the museum takes shape, the two organizations will work to display Indiana’s artwork at venues around the country.

“We’ve done a lot of good

stuff, but it’s overshadowed by the litigation,” said **Larry Stiers,** chair of the Star of Hope Foundation. Completion of the museum is likely years away, he said.

Indiana’s estate, which is valued at upward of \$80 million, had been entangled in a lawsuit brought by Morgan Art Founda-



Indiana



Manzo

tion. The lawsuit was filed the day before Indiana’s death on May 19, 2018, at age 89 on **Vinalhaven Island,** 15 miles (25 kilometers) off **Rockland, Maine.**

It accused the reclusive artist’s caretaker and an art publisher of taking advantage of Indiana and producing forgeries — accusations

the pair denied. That led to more claims and counter claims.

Under the agreement, Morgan dropped its lawsuit against the estate and Indiana’s caretaker but not against the art publisher.

It also doesn’t resolve a case brought by Maine’s attorney general, who claims the estate paid excessive legal fees during

litigation. That lawsuit contends \$3.7 million paid to four law firms and about \$400,000 collected by the estate’s personal representative were excessive.

Indiana created a lifetime of art but he’s best known for LOVE, spelled with two letters to a line and with a tilted “O.” (AP)