

Rewatching, Retelling, Reclaiming: The *Drama Queens* Podcast

On November 28, 2022, Hilarie Burton Morgan, Bethany Joy Lenz, and Sophia Bush Hughes dropped their weekly episode for their podcast, *Drama Queens*, where they rewatch and talk about episodes of their two-decades-old teen drama series, *One Tree Hill*, which centers high



school basketball. They felt like this episode was just like any other: talking with their close friends and fellow actors about their experiences and feelings on and off the set. But listeners disagreed. Immediately, articles were written about their

conversation, which dove into the manipulation they experienced by their boss, Mark Schwahn, in order to get them to do a Maxim cover photoshoot.

In real time, I listened to the three womxn unearth this manipulation twenty years later, a few years after the #MeToo hashtag went viral and they came forward the first time, realizing yet another layer of how they were pitted against each other as young womxn in TV. This is just one example of how the act of rewatching their show, together, allows them to claim the truth of what really happened behind the scenes, which represents a world filled with womxn who have been and continue to be suppressed in similar ways, no matter the environment. This essay seeks to continue the narrative, to uplift, to engage in the work of discovery that is so crucial to the

significance and momentum of #MeToo, along with showing how breaking a pattern in one place can break patterns in others.

First and foremost, it must not be ignored that the three womxn focused on here are White and cisgender, as well as privileged actors. Stories that involve other intersections, like race and gender, often get buried underneath stories of harm against White womxn. That is not the intent here. It is rather to write a passionate, informed essay about a show I love, as I continue this unearthing and narrativizing beyond Whiteness, how the dynamics here can be broken apart, its methods reapplied with nuance elsewhere to dismantle rape culture.

Additionally, I used the term “womxn” in place of “woman” because it is an explicit choice to include trans, queer, BIPOC, and any other different types of womxn-identified people out there in the conversation about sexual assault and harassment.

One Tree Hill was the first show of its kind that I watched. My first Netflix show, my first teen drama, the first time I felt a connection to characters this deeply. I was devastated to learn that the creator was so terrible to the womxn on the show, as many people in the past decade have been devastated as behind-the-scenes truths were revealed, and continue to be



revealed, in the name of #MeToo. I was even more devastated to read that the truth was kept under wraps by these womxn I love to preserve our hearts (Mazzeo). The podcast episode this essay focuses on is called “It’s a Fiasco,” reviewing Season 4 Episode 4 of *One Tree Hill*, which involves a Maxim photoshoot that the actors were required to do in real life. However, this

photoshoot was encased in manipulation, body-shaming, and threats. There is no doubt that Schwahn and other people in power wanted to keep male viewership high. They went so far as to collect data that showed when the womxn were beaten and abused on the show, their “male numbers in viewership skyrocketed,” as Burton Morgan says in the episode, when her character, Peyton, “got her ass kicked by Derek,” her stalker. Burton Morgan talks about being frightened by this, yet unable to express it.

Violence, objectification, and sexualization ran rampant on and off the set, hyperfocused on male viewers in a way that shocked the three womxn. About the viewership the people in power were fixated on, Burton Morgan exclaims, “They couldn’t do it with basketball, so we’ll punch a girl in the face.” Bush Hughes makes a point that really, they only supported the rhetoric that grooms men for violence, and Lenz responds by saying she does not think it was intentional. Burton Morgan interrupts by saying how “meta” it was though, that they were “clearly vilifying Derek, the creep on the Internet, right, while also soliciting the creeps on the Internet.” The pain the three womxn feel runs deep; it can be heard in their voices. How sometimes they exclaim, they laugh, they deflect, they rage, they cry. But they do it in the presence of each other, working it out, talking it through, no matter how hard it is to relive the memories of sexual trauma.

If this was simply what was going on on camera, behind the scenes, the same misogyny thrived. By rewatching and discussing these issues, they put into practice the work that needs to happen to overcome the deeply layered detriments of this lack of awareness of the creator and writers of the show. Burton Morgan laughs as she describes “the Maxim special,” as Bush Hughes describes the way her body was completely, unrealistically photoshopped. No one cared. They just wanted these womxn objectified. This theme underlies many environments, and these

three womxn show how to overcome, to force yourself into the seat of the subject, and quite literally grab ahold of the mic.

Bush Hughes and Burton Morgan both tried to stay as covered as possible; but they “were told to do it,” as Bush Hughes says in the episode, and her freedom on set was threatened, as the people in power said they were going to “keep her there forever,” unable to leave for movies, charities, etc. The same leverage was used over Burton Morgan. There was pressure to get their show on a cover, paired with the fact that they were simply, explicitly misled. Their agency was stolen from them. As the two womxn talk about this, Lenz asks in disbelief, “Where was your manager?... Your lawyer?” But the issues run deeper, the threats more profound than Lenz understands in this moment. What it comes down to is that their agency was stripped, their freedom threatened, which is something Bush Hughes could not afford because at this time she did not feel safe on set.

On the podcast, the womxn never dive into the details of the abuse they experienced,



although this information can be found online, like in *Variety Magazine*. But the details are not important. Their safety was unstable, and that is enough. Not only did their boss harass them, but he also did it in a way that split them apart, which is exactly what stops progress and justice, as the #MeToo movement has shown. At the photoshoot, he had given a gift to make a move on one of the womxn, put another womxn in her place, and make another womxn jealous. This is “a married, adult

man” as they repeat on the episode, in disbelief that he abused 23 year olds like this. The way they exclaim is what really needs listening to; this is more than a tabloid, than breaking news.

Meanwhile, Lenz was not at the photoshoot. She remembers being told that they replaced her with another, more sexualized actress from the show, and immediately, Bush Hughes exclaims, “*That’s what they told you?*” Because the other two womxn were told that they had to go to the shoot because Lenz turned it down. So for all of those years, tension and angst was allowed to thrive, miscommunication wielded so openly as a weapon of divisiveness and control. They told Lenz that she was “too fat,” and that she was not “a hot girl on the show anymore.” Fat is not a dirty word, but it was used to shame and create tension because of the social pain and implications. They were all set up to be mad at each other, to not have relationships and feel the community required for revolution.

Talking about their boss, Bush Hughes says, “What a fucker.” I do not like how curse words are bleeped out of the episode, in the same way I dislike the legal use of the word “alleged” in all the news stories I read; I wish the rage of these words and feelings could be fully embodied, so that is the space I will create here, in my continuation of the narrative. What a *fucker*. The manipulation by Schwahn happened in the script and behind the camera, with nuance that still reverberates for all three womxn today. Because Lenz was married outside the show, she was immediately written off. The womxn joke about being better in bed now than they were in their 20s, how they feel even more sexually attractive, so it baffles them, the ways in which they were both championed *and* discarded so young. It stems from a society that wants purity but not too much, naughtiness but not too much, womxn who walk the line so that they can be both exciting and controllable. All AFAB people can understand this, deeply, and one can step into the shoes of this feeling and others in any discussion that examines the world through a feminist

lens. But this dance has devastating consequences for the actual minds and bodies involved. All three womxn put a stop to this dance using their podcast, showing how pausing to reclaim can dismantle the momentum of silence that allows rape culture—a world in which the roots and effects of sexual assault are not wholly considered and abhorred— to flourish.

Bush Hughes says how it felt like the opportunities, what they “were allowed to do and portray” on and off set was “governed by whether or not our boss thought he might have a shot at fucking us.” I feel the catharsis the womxn feel that they are finally able to be open, to represent a *One Tree Hill* community with loving fans while also being truthful about what the experience was really like. They all express anguish at what womxn have to go through that men do not, but have hope that now, girls talk to each other, instead of being divided, tension festering. They are trusted, believed, open, creating the space that should have been created for them all along by prior generations.



This is the soul of the podcast, one that pushes for a better future, all womxn fired up by the same things, expressing it in different ways, because is that not what it means to be oppressed in the United States and beyond?

While doing research, I found plenty of stories with quotes from the womxn, some talking about the abuse they experienced and the stressful conditions on set. And although the truth is important—and the telling of this truth is indeed important—no news story can surpass the significance of the podcast Burton Morgan, Lenz, and Bush Hughes create by coming together, being vulnerable, and sharing their process to a willing, engaged audience. While

preparing for this essay, I did have many questions. I wanted to know what happened to Schwahn, what he thought, what his statements were, how specific the womxn have been in what they have experienced. I found the answers.

But while relistening to the episode for research, viewing pictures of the womxn, and finding an article that discusses how our Drama Queens “make joy out of pain” (Morse), my feelings evolved. Nothing else matters nearly as much as the act of reclaiming and the community created because of it. It does not matter what others think happened, especially the perpetrator who cast such a wide net of hurt, but rather that we listen to the womxn’s accounts. This rings true for other #MeToo stories. It feels like the news stories are the facts, but all this? This is the truth in every sense of the word, as a noun and a verb, what the womxn are doing and what they make.

It is essential that these discussions continue to reverberate well into 2023, five years after #MeToo first went viral, as I read stories from both then and now. It is essential that these stories remain shocking, until they are extinct from the fabric of society. It is essential to embrace Burton Morgan, Lenz, and Bush Hughes in their utter humanness, as we watch the womxn cherish each other while they watch their fictional characters on TV find themselves. It is essential that searching Mark Schwahn on Google results in multiple hits on sexual assault, and it is essential that this is not the case for the womxn. It is essential to let the facts speak for themselves, but to listen intently to the truth, engaging with the speakers as they buckle down and venture into freedom. We can learn from what these three



womxn do, what they set time aside for every week of their lives, as they rewatch, reclaim, retell, showing up as completely, utterly themselves every time, to break our hearts, that way we can rebuild together.

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Picture Links

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