

Channeling Kathy Bates: Harry's Law and Shoe Emporium

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Kathy Bates recently told an interviewer that it was easy to play the character Harriet (Harry), a thirty year veteran patent attorney who is fired when one of her partners finds her watching cartoons while smoking a joint and burning holes in her paper coffee cup while proclaiming that she is “so bored with patent law” because she is naturally grumpy. I get that. I think a lot of women lawyers get it too. And probably quite a few male lawyers. I think a lot of attorneys that have been practicing for more than ten years get it too. Let’s just admit that law schools graduate a lot of nice people who in time become jaded, bored and grumpy people. At least some of the time anyway.

What’s really fun and fascinating about “Harry’s Law,” David Kelley’s new legal series on NBC, is Kelley’s always quirky, frequently hilarious, and sometimes exceptional writing that appeals to the audiences that loved “Boston Legal” and “The Practice,” but also people who appreciate the brilliant acting of Kathy Bates as the fired patent attorney who opens what appears to be a criminal defense practice in an abandoned store front in a crummy part of Cincinnati in which the previous tenant abandoned a large number of designer shoes. Think Prada, Jimmy Choo, and Louboutin.

There have been some fairly memorable lawyer characters in Kelley’s past series, but none that captures the ennui that every attorney who practices for any length of time experiences quite like Bates’ Harriet Korn. Although Harry has tried many patent cases, in her first criminal trial she is so completely lost

the judge admonishes her for putting on an incompetent act so the jury will feel sympathetic to her client. Harry tells the Judge she’s “sorry” with a sidelong glance, roll of the eyes, and certain glumness that is exactly what many attorneys would sometimes love to express. As in past series, some of Kelley’s props are improbable, but tantalizing. I thought it was terrific when her legal assistant was selling Prada (and knock off Prada) shoes while

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Harry is in court. While Harry told her assistant to “get rid of the shoes,” the shoes have stayed, and they provide spectacular decor to the otherwise nondescript law office. I, for one, am considering bringing in my once-worn Manolo Blahnik four-inchers just to spice up my office. Perhaps I’ll place them strategically below my Eastern District license.

Like other Kelley productions, Harry’s Law takes on some legal taboos. In a recent episode, Harry tanked a murder trial because she realized during voir dire that her client was not only a murderer, but a lying murderer. As a result of her telling the jury that her client committed murder, the trial court declared an immediate mistrial and recommended that Harry be permanently disbarred. Since the show has not been

canceled yet, that she survives her disciplinary hearing is not a spoiler threat. As an attorney that literally gags at the thought of trying a criminal case, and in full recognition that tanking a trial is a very, very bad thing, I can still sympathize with Harry. From my standpoint, representing criminal defendants is distasteful – especially lying, guilty defendants. So, part of the fun is that while I recognize that I would not do many of the things Harry does, I get a vicarious thrill when she does what we fantasize about doing as lawyers.



Veteran actor Kathy Bates takes on a dramatic and comedic role as an attorney with a new-found calling in NBC’s “Harry’s Law.”

There is another thing about Harry’s Law that I really like besides the shoes: finally a show that depicts a female lawyer who is middle aged, does not look botoxed, and restylane-filled and is really, really smart. It took almost forever, or at least a couple of decades, but finally Kelley has created a character who looks like me, talks like me, and apparently thinks like me, and does things that (in my dreams) I would do. ■