

**tnr.com**

## **The Double Lives They Lead**

A lot of people like the spy show *Alias* because its star, Jennifer Garner, is hot. Other people watch it because the plot is a garden of forking paths, or because co-stars Lena Olin and Victor Garber have crazy chemistry. All true. But, ironic as it may seem that a show featuring outlandish plots about international cartels of evil would be the one to tell this particular truth, *Alias* is also the cultural product that most clearly depicts the experience of being a smart, powerful woman in America.

The entertainment industry has always had a narrow, wax-coated view of what it's like to be a powerful girl. Most of the "Girl Power" movies, films, and musical groups of recent years--with the notable exception of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (R.I.P.)--follow along the lines of Drew Barrymore's *Charlie's Angels* and the erstwhile *Spice Girls*. These productions are chirpy, full of camaraderie, and colored in pink and yellow, resembling nothing so much as a Marshmallow Peep. They burst with attractive women in high-heeled boots kicking a lot of ass in between toothy smiles. Problem is, they also have little to do with the reality of being smart and powerful--at least not from the point of view of the woman.

*Alias* is different, because the open secret of main character Sydney Bristow's very secretive life is that she's, well, miserable. Sydney is a double agent--a CIA operative who's penetrated SD-6, an association of slick evildoers that traffics arms, intelligence, and technology for its own nefarious purposes. She's eminently capable, able to think, run, kick, decode, and lie with ease. But she has no stable relationships, no mellow friendships, and little constancy in her life. Forced to falsely represent herself to everybody around her, she ends up isolated and unfulfilled. Bad for her, good for viewers.

Among other things, Syd's relationship with her only non-CIA friends, Will and Francie, was always problematic, since she had to lie to them all the time in order to keep her cover and protect them from knowing too much. This left her feeling lonely even in their company. And that was the high point of Syd's out-of-work friendships. Thanks to a variety of plot twists, the third season opens with Will in witness protection and Francie dead.

Sydney is also constantly conflicted. In the first season and a half of *Alias*, Sydney's subterranean life as a double agent forces her to change personalities like most women change outfits; she becomes an expert at keeping her emotions below the surface. Episode after episode, Sydney has to pull off missions with Dixon, her trusty partner, without ever telling him he's not working for the CIA like he thinks he is. Early on in the series, she takes Will to a dinner at the home of Sloane, the SD-6 leader (whom Syd knows was responsible for the death of her fiancé). Sydney and Sloane spend the whole dinner enmeshed in a mutual charade designed to convince Will that Sydney really works in a bank. There are times when you completely lose track of which Sydney is the Sydney of the moment.

Sydney sometimes cracks from the stress and unburdens herself, like when she tells Agent Vaughn, her CIA handler, how lucky he is that he gets to tell friends what he does for a living. When SD-6 is broken up, and Syd can shed that part of her identity, she lets loose a torrent of invective at Sloane. "You have been a plague upon my life," she hisses, speaking for every girl who's ever turned a smiling face to a menacing cheerleader in the cafeteria. Almost as soon as SD-6 is dismantled, you start thinking that Sydney can at last get back to having only two identities (CIA and non-CIA). But it's not to be. The show's creators promptly make Sydney disappear for two years with no memory of where she's

been or what she's been doing. For Sydney, full mental integration is not to be.

Girls as smart and capable as Sydney experience a sort of "double consciousness," in the lexicon of W.E.B. DuBois. As with African Americans torn, in DuBois's words, between being "an American, a Negro; two warring souls," there's not really an acceptable model of how to be both a smart girl and also attractive and un-intimidating. Instead, most smart girls spend their high school years hiding test papers, laughing at jokes they don't find funny, and selling themselves short with boys who don't deserve them. What you end up with is two girls: the girl herself, the "American," who knows inside that she'd rather be reading or writing or playing around in a chem lab; and the other girl, the "Negro," who wants to be pretty, date the cutest boy, and have friends. The genius of *Alias* is to acknowledge both identities.

Some posters to the online "Television Without Pity" forum about *Alias* became irate when Sydney's relationship with the angular hunk Agent Vaughn came apart after Sydney's two-year-long kidnapping and brainwashing (talk about a forking path). But this viewer applauds the move. Powerful women in America know that happy endings often have false bottoms. Sure, Syd is even more miserable now than she was in the first season, before she got together with Vaughn. But all the scenes of romantic idyll--all the Sunday mornings the couple would spend lounging around in bed--seemed a little too good to be true. Welcome back, smart, alienated, conflicted Syd.

October 22, 2003