
THE UNSUNG
THE AUDACIOUS, GLORIOUS, INCOMPARABLE MARY ELLEN PLEASANT
A HISTORIC TV DRAMA



THE FORMAT

Based on a real person and the legends and lore surrounding her, THE UNSUNG is a one-hour drama series based on Mary Ellen Pleasant; entrepreneur, activist and all around bad-ass. Each season is comprised of eight, one-hour episodes.

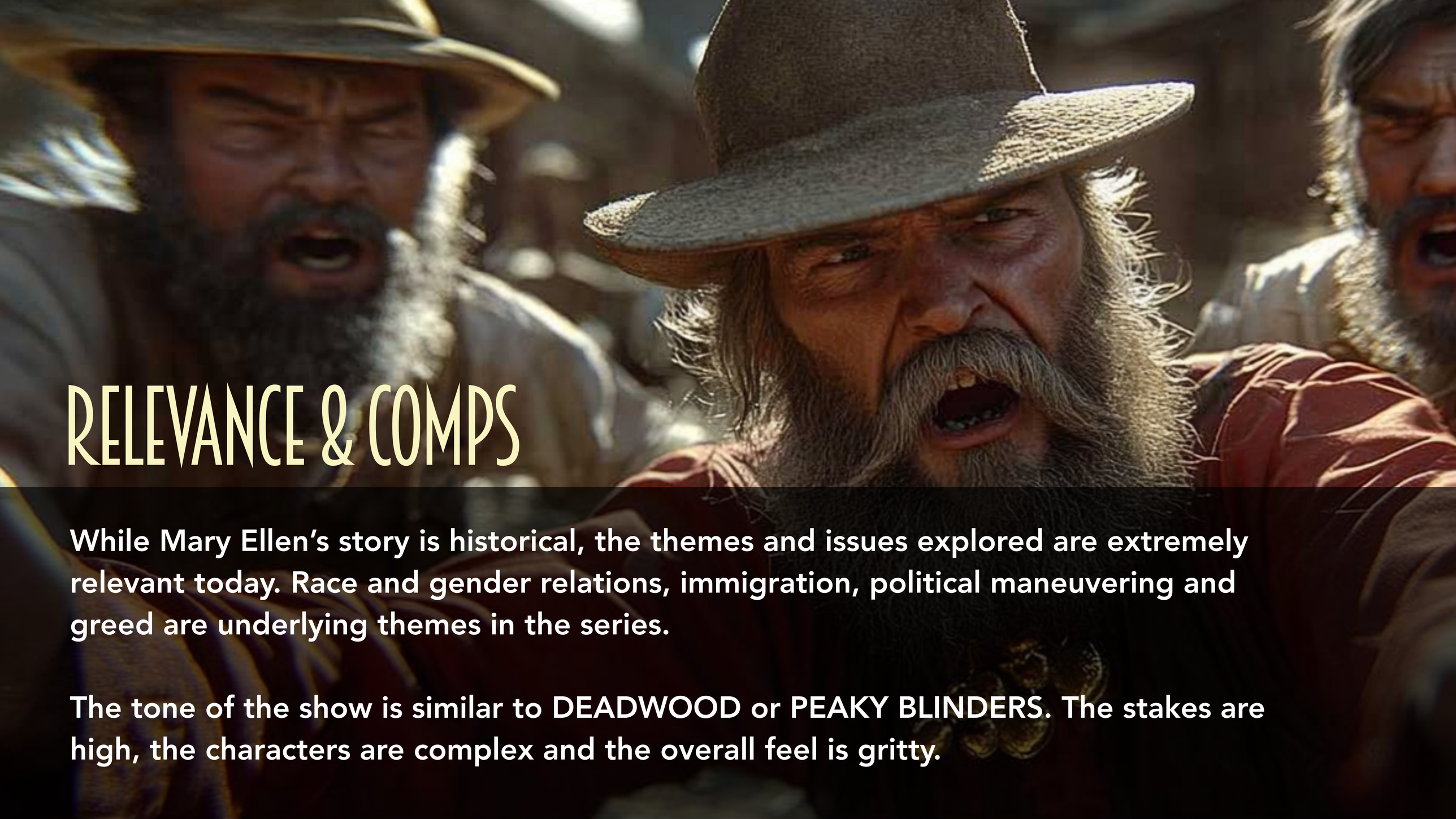
THE SHOW

Set during the rollicking days of early California, Mary Ellen builds an empire of boarding houses, bordellos, and laundry businesses. Each episode she pushes her dream of making California a safe haven for free Blacks. She never shies from working outside a system that refuses to recognize her.

If a good bowl of gumbo can’t convince the decision makers to see things her way, a little well-researched blackmail usually does the trick.

Using her wealth to buy favor and her “girls” as a network of spies, Mary Ellen gains leverage in the newly minted state. Fearful of her growing influence, the white, male, power-brokers of the day—from the San Francisco Police Chief to the Governor of California—sought to destroy her.





RELEVANCE & COMPS

While Mary Ellen’s story is historical, the themes and issues explored are extremely relevant today. Race and gender relations, immigration, political maneuvering and greed are underlying themes in the series.

The tone of the show is similar to DEADWOOD or PEAKY BLINDERS. The stakes are high, the characters are complex and the overall feel is gritty.



THE WORLD

The series opens in San Francisco in 1852, gateway to California's rich gold fields. Men outnumber women ten-to-one in the unrestrained city. The harbor is a ghost town of abandoned ships as even the captains have rushed ashore to find gold. The streets run thick with mud and sex-starved miners willing to part with gold for liquor and a woman's touch.

Amid the murk of fog and unwashed miners, a lavishly appointed boardinghouse, owned by a formerly enslaved woman, serves as a gathering place for California's elite. In spite of California's status as a Free State, Blacks, Chinese, Native Americans and other nationalities are systematically and often violently prohibited from participating in the American dream by vigilante groups, politicians and robber barons.

As the series progresses, San Francisco's shanty towns and tents are replaced by orderly structures of brick and wood-frame construction. The streets, now cobblestone, teem with well-dressed women, businessmen and families. Street cars run regularly. By the 1870s, the gold fields are depleted but the suppression and bigotry in the state is still as prevalent as ever.

MARY ELLEN PLEASANT

MARY ELLEN (40s) is the smartest person in the room. And she's smart enough to hide it from the powerful, white, male patrons she serves at her boardinghouse and brothel. Her enterprises fund her passion: helping people who escape enslavement create new identities and find work. She has wealth, political influence and a white lover who is well-positioned to help her execute her investments.

Our heroine doesn't always act "heroically." There are times she is greedy, ruthless and subject to jealousy. As such, the tone of the character and series is brash, raw and honest. For Mary Ellen, the big question is always, "What personal cost am I willing to pay to contribute to the greater good?"

Character is based on the real Mary Ellen Pleasant





JESSICA HARRIS

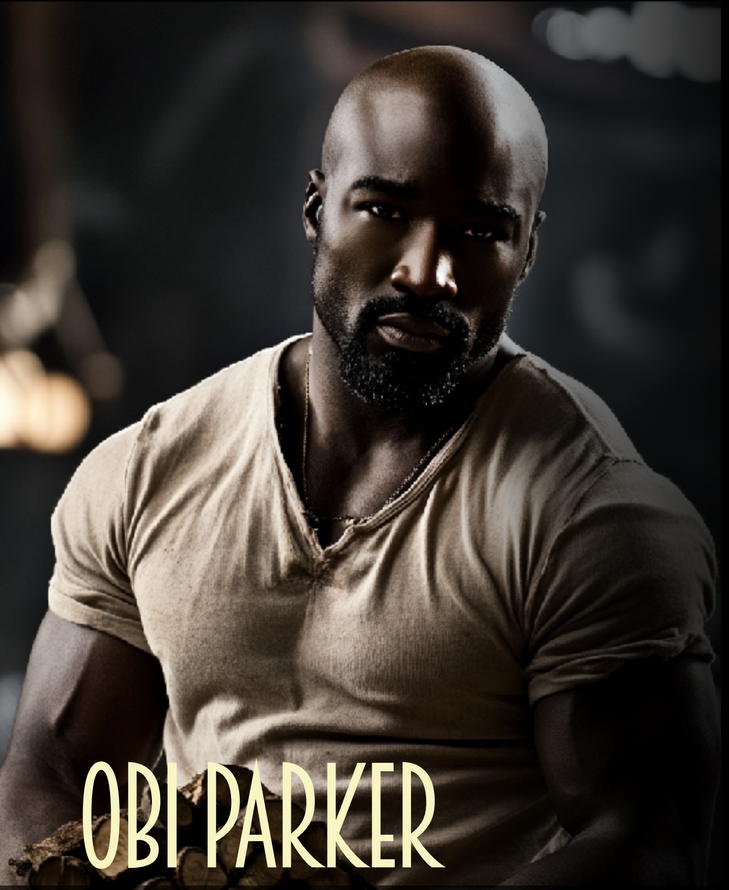
JESSICA HARRIS (19), Caucasian, is ferociously intelligent and appallingly naive. When Jessica, running from a tyrannical father, arrives in San Francisco alone, Mary Ellen discovers her medical acumen and manipulates her into providing ongoing medical care to her prostitutes. Through taking care of patients, Jessica finds her own strength and develops a fierce loyalty to Mary Ellen.

The character is a compilation of women who worked as physicians during a period of California's history when male doctors abandoned medicine in favor of gold fields.



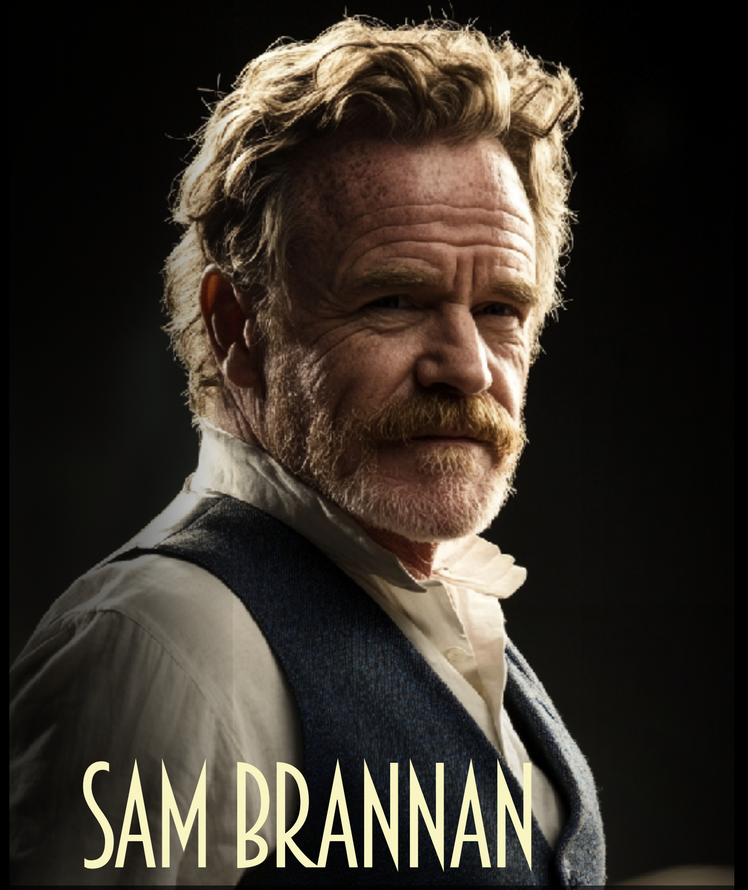
THOMAS BELL

THOMAS BELL (45), Scottish, is a high-level executive at the Bank of California, but he is subservient to Mary Ellen as her lover and business partner. He tries to assert himself as a moral compass for Mary Ellen but usually settles for helping her stay just within the legal margins. Mary Ellen's penchant for investment and Thomas' access to funds and the system make them a formidable combination. Mary Ellen loves him, but the access he provides her is the most valued part of the relationship for her. For Thomas, it's true love.
The character is based on the real Thomas Bell.



OBI PARKER

OBI PARKER is Mary Ellen's fixer in her business operation. He will haul wood or dump a body without questioning her. Mary Ellen has given him a new life and he is beholden to her. *The character is a compilation of narratives of people who escaped slavery in early California.*



SAM BRANNAN

SAMUEL BRANNAN is the Publisher of the Alta California newspaper. He is the leader of a Mormon colony in San Francisco. Professing to be an ally to Mary Ellen's cause, he forges papers for Blacks escaping to California. The two become bitter enemies when his true motivations are revealed. *The character is based on the real Samuel Brannan.*



PETER BURNETT

PETER BURNETT was the first elected governor of California. An outspoken white supremacist, Burnett is suspicious of the growing population of Blacks with "free papers" in San Francisco. He is determined to destroy Mary Ellen but she has leverage over him after helping "remove a problem" from his household. *The character is based on the real Peter Burnett.*

THE PILOT

ARCHY LEE, a Black teenager in 1850 San Francisco, is paid for his day's work for the first time in his life. He's on top of the world before he's snatched off the street by two ruffians. Archy tries to present his "free-papers" but the page is stomped into the mud.

In an opulent parlor in a San Francisco mansion, THOMAS BELL, a white banker and his older colleague are served tea by a deferential Black servant, MARY ELLEN PLEASANT. When the older man leaves, the servant is docile no more. Instead, she fervently orders Thomas to rouse the chief of police to go after the Vigilance Committee who snatched Archy. The boy knows too much and their entire operation is in jeopardy if he talks.

At the docks, Mary Ellen ushers a group of French prostitutes and some mysterious cargo back to Pleasant House. The cargo conceals Black men escaping slavery who need medical assistance. JESSICA, a refined young woman waiting for her chaperone at Pleasant House, jumps into action to save the ailing men. With all the doctors abandoning their practices and rushing to the gold fields, Mary Ellen coerces Jessica into staying at Pleasant House to tend to her "upstairs girls".

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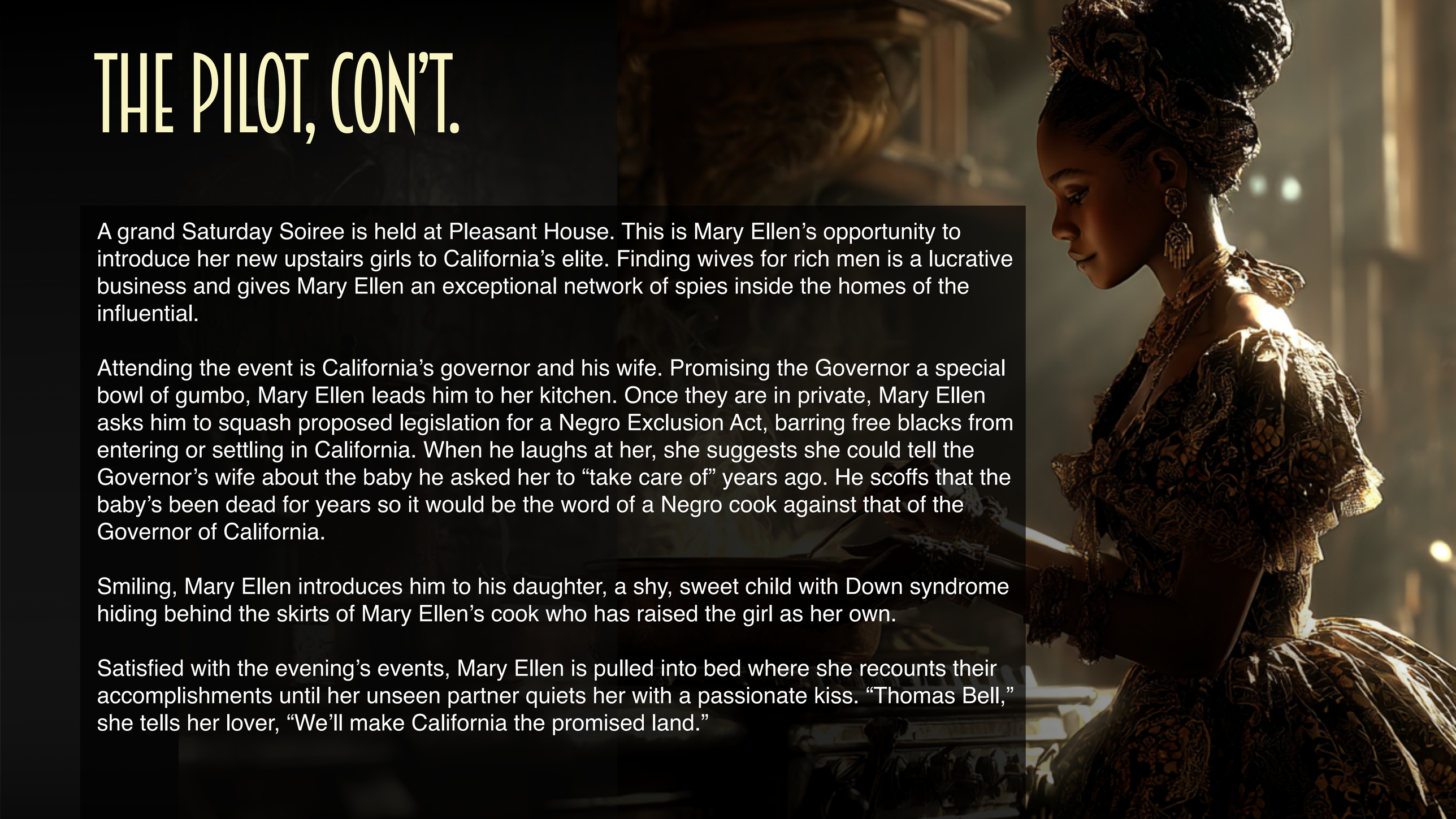
THE PILOT, CON'T.

A grand Saturday Soiree is held at Pleasant House. This is Mary Ellen's opportunity to introduce her new upstairs girls to California's elite. Finding wives for rich men is a lucrative business and gives Mary Ellen an exceptional network of spies inside the homes of the influential.

Attending the event is California's governor and his wife. Promising the Governor a special bowl of gumbo, Mary Ellen leads him to her kitchen. Once they are in private, Mary Ellen asks him to squash proposed legislation for a Negro Exclusion Act, barring free blacks from entering or settling in California. When he laughs at her, she suggests she could tell the Governor's wife about the baby he asked her to "take care of" years ago. He scoffs that the baby's been dead for years so it would be the word of a Negro cook against that of the Governor of California.

Smiling, Mary Ellen introduces him to his daughter, a shy, sweet child with Down syndrome hiding behind the skirts of Mary Ellen's cook who has raised the girl as her own.

Satisfied with the evening's events, Mary Ellen is pulled into bed where she recounts their accomplishments until her unseen partner quiets her with a passionate kiss. "Thomas Bell," she tells her lover, "We'll make California the promised land."



AFTER THE PILOT



Mary Ellen is providing new documents and employment for a growing stream of escaped slaves and has convinced SAMUEL BRANNAN, a newspaper publisher and Mormon leader, to print the documents for her. Because she doesn't completely trust Brannan, she makes an effort to learn all she can about him. Mary Ellen employs Brannan's wife as a piano teacher for her prostitutes and hires other "saints" (Mormons) as seamstresses to sew gowns for her girls.

Jessica, blackmailed by Mary Ellen to stay on as the medical help, grows confident in her medical knowledge and her practice expands beyond just caring for the prostitutes in the brothel.

Thomas Bell gets increasing pressure from his employers at the bank to marry. Living with Mary Ellen at the Octavia Street mansion is raising too many eye brows. Although he is vehemently opposed to marrying anyone else, Mary Ellen asks him to consider the idea.

She begins to groom one of her girls, Theresa, to be Bell's wife.

Jessica's future brother-in-law (who is supposed to be acting as her chaperone in California until her fiancée arrives) comes back to the boardinghouse to try to extort money out of Mary Ellen. When Mary Ellen thwarts him, he tries to rape Jessica. Archy, who now works for Mary Ellen, interrupts the assault, hitting the assailant with a shovel, inadvertently killing him. Mary Ellen orders Obi and Archy to remove the body and bury it.

AFTER THE PILOT, CON'T.

Back East, some Southern states are beginning to secede. In California, Mary Ellen is finding it increasingly difficult to find work and safe harbor for the escaped slaves. With mounting political pressure and increased penalties for abetting fugitives, Brannan finds his work with Mary Ellen too risky to continue. When his son has an accident, Brannan seeks Jessica's medical care for the boy. Mary Ellen intercedes and uses Jessica's expertise as leverage to force Brannan to complete a last set of documents for the 13 enslaved people she is hiding.

Increased rewards are being offered by powerful southerners for information regarding escaped slaves. Brannan, still furious at being bested by Mary Ellen, threatens to expose her operation.

Mary Ellen learns of a wife and five children Brannan abandoned in New York. She mentions how fond she has grown of Brannan's young wife and how heartbroken his wife will be to learn his dark secrets. The two tensely agree to keep one another's confidences.

Thomas and Theresa wed. Although he is reticent during the entire courtship, when he sees the beautiful bride, he is smitten. Mary Ellen, always in control of their relationship until now, feels the pain deeply and pulls away from Thomas. When Mary Ellen learns that Thomas did not follow her instructions to send money to John Brown for his Harper's Ferry insurrection, she shuns Thomas entirely.



AFTER THE PILOT, CON'T.

Mary Ellen's laundry businesses are doing very well and have become a threat to the businesses run by the Chinese Tongs (crime gangs). Her businesses experience vandalism and her employees (most of whom are formerly enslaved people) are threatened and beaten.

Mary Ellen regroups and gathers her resource for a land speculation scheme.

Unable to execute the plan on her own, she meets with numerous bankers and intermediaries to act as her agents. Refused on all fronts, she decides to reconcile with Bell. He is thrilled to have her attention once again. She moves in with Thomas and his wife, looking to the outside world like the family servant.

Theresa Bell gives birth to the first of the Bell's three children. Mary Ellen and Thomas Bell continue their love affair with Theresa's knowledge and growing jealousy. He continues to partner with Mary Ellen in business.

Jared, Jessica's fiancée, arrives in San Francisco after completing his medical degree. He is appalled to find Jessica practicing medicine and forbids her from continuing. Jessica reluctantly turns her thriving practice over to Jared.



AFTER THE PILOT, CON'T.

A new group of escaped slaves arrive, this time guided by a young woman, Hannah, who claims to be Mary Ellen's daughter. Mary Ellen had indeed abandoned a young daughter when she fled to California but she denies maternity. Hannah is capable, hardworking and very patient with Mary Ellen who grows fond of the girl.

As retaliation to the Chinese Tongs for interference in her laundry and prostitution businesses, Mary Ellen coerces her allies in the S.F. Police department to intercept a Chinese ship load of young sex slaves. These girls, some as young as five, are taken to the Presbyterian mission. The Tongs raid the mission and kidnap about half the girls but Hannah is able to hide a large group of the youngest, endearing herself further to Mary Ellen.

The Civil War ends and an influx of Blacks to California increases racial tension from white labor groups. Mary Ellen, with much hubris, offers to find work for all the emancipated people her colleagues in the East can send her.

Mary Ellen meets with Charles Crocker of The Big Four (railroad tycoons), who has secured contracts for building the Central Pacific Railroad. After being told the Chinese are able to supply as much labor as needed, Mary Ellen convinces Crocker and his associates to hold a contest between her workers and Chinese workers. The competition takes place and the Black workers win. Regardless, The Big Four turn Mary Ellen down, telling her the Chinese will be less expensive to employ.



AFTER THE PILOT, CON'T.



Unable to keep her promises of providing employment, Mary Ellen tries to increase her laundry empire. Several of her facilities are destroyed and three of her employees are killed by the Tongs. She sells off some of her assets to support the people she is unable to employ.

While Jared is away on a medical call south of the City, a critically injured man is brought to Jessica. She provides care, saving the man's life and has a resurgence of confidence and professional pride. When Jared arrives, she tells him she will continue to practice medicine. He is angry but distracted by information that may lead him to his brother. He is told two Black men were seen burying a body that matches his brother's description. When he leaves to investigate, Jessica tries to warn Archy and Obi. Archy escapes but Obi is caught by Jared and his cronies who hang him immediately.

Mary Ellen alerts her friends at the police department and Jared leaves Jessica and San Francisco before he is caught.

Theresa Bell has gained confidence and social influence and does her best to push Mary Ellen out of the Bell family's life. When a street evangelist points out the youngest Bell girl's doll (made by Mary Ellen) looks like Voodoo sorcery, Theresa embellishes the accusation and asks a cleric to come inspect the mansion. Plants and pouches of seeds are discovered and although Thomas Bell insists they belong to him (he is an amateur botanist) the idea of Voodoo Gris-Gris is too juicy for the city to ignore.

AFTER THE PILOT, CON'T.



Brannan publishes an article in the Alta Californian insinuating Mary Ellen descended from a line of Voodoo Priestesses. The article creates rifts between Theresa and Thomas Bell. Theresa takes the children and goes to Mary Ellen's ranch in Sonoma, north of San Francisco. While she is away, Thomas is discovered dead in the Octavia Street mansion, a weeping Mary Ellen at his side. The coroner rules that he was pushed off the upper mezzanine to the marble foyer and Mary Ellen is accused of the murder. She is eventually cleared of murder charges but not before Brannan publishes more articles accusing her of exerting unnatural power over Bell and other white men, selling babies, and more heinous crimes.

Mary Ellen's money and business acumen built the empire she and Bell enjoyed, but when Bell's will is read, all assets, including everything that previous listed Bell as Mary Ellen's trustee, are awarded solely to his legal wife, Theresa Bell and their children. The only property Mary Ellen retains is her ranch in Sonoma.

Her financial empire destroyed and her reputation tarnished, San Franciscans, white and Black, turn from her. Hannah is quietly at her side. With a ferry loaded with belongings, Mary Ellen sails across the Golden Gate of the San Francisco Bay and quietly settles with her daughter on her ranch in Sonoma.

CREATOR/WRITER

Katy Dore is an award-winning screenwriter and director drawn to stories exploring the collision of relationships, risk, and moral complexity.

Raised in a small logging town where a good chainsaw and a reliable truck were prized social currency, Katy's restlessness led to a degree at Stanford University and an MFA from the Academy of Art. She founded a boutique graphic design and marketing firm before following a less stable--but more satisfying--career path writing for film and television.

Katy 's work was selected for the prestigious Cannes Screenplay List. Katy's horror script GOT YOUR BACK was one of four scripts selected from over 17,000 scripts for a live read at the Austin Film Festival. Among other accolades, she was also the Grand Prize Winner of the Stage 32 Short Scripts Competition.

Katy is the co-director and producer of GIFT OF FEAR, a feature narrative bringing global attention to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) crisis. The film screened at festivals worldwide and is available on Amazon. She has also found notable success as the writer and director of short films. Katy's last two films have screened at over 70 film festivals and garnered 37 awards.

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