

Barnhart's Unauthorized TV 2003

by Aaron Barnhart

The fall television season is upon us, and trend-watchers are excitedly screening the 37 new network shows in much the same way that fashionistas mull the larger meaning of low-rise jeans.

One commentator for an East Coast newspaper wondered if Middle America had become more tolerant of porn culture, citing as evidence the new Fox soap opera "Skin," which pits a glamorous, caring adult entertainment baron against a brittle, self-righteous D.A.

Another observer noted several new intergenerational shows, like "Las Vegas" (NBC) and "Joan of Arcadia" (CBS), as a sign that families were cocooning more and watching TV together again.

I've yet to hear anyone suggest that UPN's "The Mullets" heralds the return of an unfortunate hair fad from the '80s, but who knows? If this comedy about two dimwitted brothers with big coiffures turns into a hit, can "The Shags" be far behind?

Here's an encouraging trend: Networks are including more characters with disabilities or other signs of mortality. On "Joan of Arcadia," Joan's 20-something brother is in a wheelchair. On "Threat Matrix," a band of youthful government hackers includes a deaf woman who communicates in sign language. And in the premiere of "Cold Case," one of the detectives gives himself an insulin shot.

This being TV land, however, even the less advantaged are not burdened with crow's-feet or crooked teeth, except on "Extreme Makeover," where the object is to fix them.

On the whole, network TV still looks more like Beverly Hills than the rest of America. Network executives keep promising to reverse the trend, with CBS this summer opening a "diversity institute" for minority directors and writers. We'll see about that. For now, only the WB gets a gold star for adding three new comedies with racially integrated casts.

A more discouraging trend is the appearance of three Archie Bunker comedies — shows with a politically incorrect, to put it kindly, protagonist. "Luis," "Whoopi" and

“It’s All Relative” have one other thing in common: They’re all about as entertaining as watching a mob burn down the U.S. embassy. It is true that Americans are largely opposed to immigration and are feeling an extra surge of patriotism these days. But that does not translate into xenophobia, homophobia and all the other phobias that TV executives seem to think are running rampant throughout Middle America. (To this dishonor roll let us add the worst new show of the fall, “Married to the Kellys,” which portrays Kansas Citians, and thereby all Midwesterners, as simple-minded boobs.)

As Harvey Pekar likes to say, ordinary life is pretty complex stuff. Shows like these, which reduce ordinary life to the most simplistic ethnic and gender stereotypes imaginable, reveal that much of the entertainment industry would still rather snicker at everyday Americans than try to understand them.

Of all the new trends this TV season, the dominant one is really a carryover from last season and the season before that. I can prove it. The numbers don’t lie: 37 new network shows, 16 of them with legal and/or law enforcement story lines. Last year at this time the number was 11 out of 36 and in 2001-02, 11 out of 33 new shows were about cops and courts.

The tone of these shows runs the gamut from the comic (ABC’s “10-8,” about the misadventures of a rookie cop) to the tragic (“Skin” has a Romeo-and-Juliet subplot), from the sublime (Jerry Bruckheimer’s elegant “Cold Case”) to the ridiculous (David E. Kelley’s horrid “Brotherhood of Poland, N.H.”).

To understand this shift, look at what’s happened in the TV business since the late 1970s. Back then the big networks relied on such tried-and-true programs as prime-time soap operas, miniseries and medical dramas to bring in large audiences. In recent years viewers warmed to nonfictional forms of entertainment like reality and game shows and newsmagazines.

All of these genres are now in decline. The only two new doctor shows last season, “MDs” and “Presidio Med,” were scheduled against each other — and against “Law & Order,” which ate them with fava beans and a nice Chianti.

As for game shows, they followed Regis Philbin back to daytime. Reality shows scare network executives, who are afraid of cheapening their schedules with too many of them (except of course during the summer, when they gorge on reality schlock). Newsmagazines also have lost their appeal, with NBC, which not long ago aired five editions per week of “Dateline,” cutting that number to two this fall.

Even the venerable sitcom is under siege on two sides, from stations that air nightly reruns of old favorites and from cable channels willing to take more risks in comedy. ABC and Fox had modest successes last year with “Life With Bonnie,” “8

Simple Rules” and “Wanda at Large,” but most new sitcoms last year flamed out fast. (Raise your hand if you remember any of these: “In-Laws,” “Bram and Alice,” “Greetings From Tucson” or “The Pitts.”)

Given the rising popularity of cable, there’s no guarantee the old shows will ever come back. Only one thing is for sure: Viewers can’t get enough of gory crime scenes and interrogation rooms.

The hottest of the hot are the “procedural dramas,” in which a complete story is told in one hour, with no bulky story lines or complex characters for viewers to have to remember from one week to the next.

Led by “Law & Order” and its medical counterpart “CSI,” the procedural drama has become the surest way for the biggest of the big networks to attract what passes these days for a network-sized audience.

Perhaps this season’s safest bet is the “JAG” spinoff “NCIS,” in which Mark Harmon plays a military investigator whose crack team performs “CSI”-style autopsies. Another winner appears to be “Cold Case,” a procedural drama in which detectives reopen long-unsolved crimes.

”Threat Matrix” takes place inside the new U.S. Department of Homeland Security, but it too uses the paint-by-numbers approach, as investigators race to solve terrorist attacks before they’re committed. (Its survival chances are considerably lower, because ABC has scheduled it in a toxic time period: 8 p.m. EDT Thursdays, opposite “Survivor” and “Friends.”)

CBS chief Leslie Moonves makes no apologies for these easy-to-swallow dramas.

”When you look at the end of the week and you see among the top 10 shows three ‘Law & Orders’ and two ‘CSIs,’ there’s obviously an appetite for these shows,” Moonves said recently.

Over at NBC, where antacid-chugging executives must cope with the departure after this season of its top comedy, “Friends” — and very likely “Frasier” too — they have seen the future and it is not more “Friends” but more “Law & Order.”

The network is owned by General Electric, which currently is negotiating to take over the assets of French-owned Vivendi Universal. Perhaps no asset is more highly coveted than the Universal TV studio that produces “Law & Order.”

NBC now pays Universal for the rights to air the “Law & Order” franchise. According to the Wall Street Journal, owning Universal would make it easier and cheaper for NBC to crank out a fourth and potentially fifth night of “Law & Order,” creating a 10 p.m. franchise Sundays through Thursdays that would give “L&O” addicts the ultimate fix and, in turn, give local affiliates a captive viewership for their late

newscasts.

It could all come crashing down, too. But not this year. Among the new fall shows (which I've ranked from 1 to 37 nearby), those with legal angles often ranked near the top of my list.

Some of these aren't really crime shows at all but relationship shows with a detective element tossed in to add drama. Even some of those I didn't like, such as "NCIS" and "Las Vegas," were given choice time slots, a sign that the networks view procedural drama as the key to their future vitality.

Some fall shows have already debuted, but many premieres are scheduled for the week of Sept. 22. That's the same week most returning shows will launch their new seasons.

All the fall shows, ranked 1 to 37

On TV shows, the good guys almost always prevail. But when it comes to deciding which shows live or die, travesties of justice abound.

What viewer hasn't fallen in love with a new series, only to find it's been cruelly taken off the schedule by some network ogre? Meanwhile, shows that are a menace to society ("Good Morning, Miami," anyone?) earn reprieves.

That's why, in addition to ranking all of the new fall series from best ("Joan of Arcadia") to worst ("Married to the Kellys"), I've rated each show's chance of surviving its first season. That can help you decide whether to get emotionally involved with a series that has as much chance of getting renewed as Ted McGinley, the unofficial patron saint of canceled TV, has of getting cast on "ER."

I calculated the chance of survival by adding my rating (one to five stars) to the quality of its time period (one to five points) and multiplying the result by 10 percentage points. Only "Two and a Half Men" seems a lock for a second season: Besides being my favorite new sitcom, it immediately follows "Everybody Loves Raymond," TV's top-rated comedy.

All times are Eastern.

1

Joan of Arcadia
8 Fridays, CBS
premieres Sept. 26

Joan (Amber Tamblyn), a girl on the cusp of womanhood, begins to receive

messages from God, who speaks through strangers on the street. It's not "Touched by an Angel" at all—more like "Oh, God!" meets "CSI." With Mary Steenburgen as Joan's mom and Joe Mantegna as her dad/local police chief, we get three characters to instantly care about as well as an intriguing parable about finding one's calling in life. It doesn't hurt that the Lord helps solve crimes. **Percentage chance of survival (PCS): 80**

(Postscript: I've now seen the second episode of "Joan" and it's becoming clear that another budding star of the show is none other than Jason Ritter — yup, John's kid, who recently appeared in the "Freddy vs. Jason" flick. Here he plays Joan's brother, now confined to a wheelchair as the result of a recent car accident. His job on this show is to struggle with physical adversity the way Joan struggles with existential identity — and he does it really, really well. I feel bad saying this, but he is probably going to deepen his character this season now that he's having some real-life experience in tragic loss. The way Ritter's character's interacts with his mother also gives Steenburgen a chance to remind us of what a terrific talent she is. Just like in her Oscar-winning role in "Melvin and Howard," she somehow knows how to bring depth instantly to a limited and formulaic role. It also becomes clear that Mantegna's character will have to deal with trouble at work, and he won't necessarily have help from Joan and her special friend in every episode.)

2

Two and a Half Men
9:30 Mondays, CBS
premieres Sept. 22

From "Dharma & Greg" creator Chuck Lorre comes the most perfectly executed sitcom since "Scrubs." Charlie Sheen is a fabulously wealthy jingle writer bored with his money and oceanfront house and frivolous sex. Just in time, along comes his brother Alan (Jon Cryer), whose wife has kicked him out of the house, and Alan's 10-year-old son, Jake (Angus T. Jones). Charlie is a reluctant uncle, but Jake wins him over with his poker skills and the way hot single women dote over him at the store ("You're even better than a dog," an amazed Charlie says). Sheen and Cryer are great, the kid's a comic miracle, and Lorre and co-creator Lee Aronsohn seem incapable of turning a bad line. There's something worth watching after "Raymond." **PCS: 100**

For my story on Lorre's text-heavy vanity cards, and how he's using one of them to tell the heartwarming story of how this show came to be, go to:

<http://www.kansascity.com/mld/kansascity/6802439.htm>

3

Cold Case
8 Sundays, CBS
premieres Sept. 28

Yet another winner from movie-TV impresario Jerry Bruckheimer, who derived this from his hit “Without a Trace,” which in turn was spawned from his empire-building “CSI.” The focus here is on unsolved murders, but with the high-gloss look and feel fans of those other shows have come to expect. And here’s a surprise bonus: a terrific female lead in Kathryn Morris, who stars as the detective hooked on dusty folders and yellowed photographs. She can be sweet and sassy one minute, tough as nails the next. What a pleasure to find a woman who doesn’t need to karate chop some no-neck to prove she’s in charge. **PCS: 80**

4

Coupling

9:30 Thursdays, NBC

premieres Sept. 25 (at the special time of 9:25)

Often called “the British Friends,” the BBC sex comedy revolving around a half-dozen young singles seems destined for success on both sides of the Atlantic, thanks to NBC’s decision to schedule it after “Will & Grace.” The humor in the American version is broad enough for viewers of must-see TV, although it might take some getting used to. Critics gripe that the original “Coupling” episodes airing on BBC America are funnier—but who watches BBC America? **PCS: 90**

5

The Lyon’s Den

10 Sundays, NBC

premieres Sept. 28

If it weren’t for Rob Lowe and Rip Torn, there would be no hope for this soapy legal drama reminiscent of last year’s ratings dud “Mister Sterling.” Lowe, who left “The West Wing” last season, stars as a do-good lawyer unexpectedly tapped to lead a prestigious D.C. law firm after the suicide of its managing partner. Torn, who plays his senator dad, is pulling the strings behind stage—but for whom, and why, is part of a tangled web designed to lure viewers back each week. I’m in. **PCS: 70**

6

All About the Andersons

9:30 Fridays, WB

premiered Sept. 12

In this delightful family show, Anthony Anderson (“Barbershop,” among other movies) plays a single dad forced to move in with his parents to chase his dream of an acting career—one his crotchety old man (John Amos) seems determined to end. The pairing of Anderson with ’70s TV legend Amos (“Good Times”) as his hair-cutting dad has endless comedic possibilities. And the cute kid is pretty cute (as he ought to be; the role was recast at least twice). **PCS: 70**

7

The Handler
10 Fridays, CBS
premieres Sept. 26

Joe Pantoliano, last seen in “The Sopranos,” has an unusual job: He shepherds cops on long-term undercover assignments, checking in with them at least twice an episode. I counted no less than four stories in the pilot, and though there was a little too much gear-shifting for my taste, Pantoliano’s considerable charm helped keep me focused. Here’s hoping other viewers stay tuned as well; CBS hasn’t had much luck at this hour. **PCS: 50**

8

Karen Sisco
10 Wednesdays, ABC
premieres Oct. 1

Adapted from an Elmore Leonard novel that already has been turned into a movie (“Out of Sight”), this stars Carla Gugino as TV’s newest warrior vixen. She’s a tough-talking, pistol-packing U.S. Marshal who may not be lucky in love, but on the job she always seems to get her man. Robert Forster is excellent as her mentor-dad. Engaging as this show is, its work is cut out for it going against “Law & Order.” **PCS: 50**

9

The O.C.
9 Thursdays starting Oct. 30, Fox
returns after baseball

The show called “90210 South” did well in its pre-season launch, but Fox is pulling it for six weeks until the World Series ends, then shifting it to a new night. Set in Orange County, it revolves around a troubled teen (the quietly appealing Benjamin McKenzie) and his public defender (Peter Gallagher) who brings him back to his improbably lavish beachfront house, where the intrigues flow like hooch served at one of the countless teen raves in this swanky ZIP code. Even with a fine ensemble cast and story hooks galore, Fox is asking a lot of its audience to follow this show from Tuesdays to Thursdays. (A Fox executive said Sept. 18 that the network was considering leaving the show on Tuesday nights, where it had premiered to strong ratings.) **PCS: 70**

10

Tru Calling
8 Thursdays, Fox

premieres Oct. 30

Eliza Dushku (Faith from “Buffy the Vampire Slayer”) stars as a recent college graduate who takes a job in a morgue, where the cadavers begin Instant Messaging her brain. Then she discovers she’s stepped into “Groundhog Day” and must relive the previous 24 hours to save the doomed from their fate. It shouldn’t work but it does, thanks to Dushku and some clever twists. Speaking of doomed, check out the time slot. **PCS: 50**

11

Tarzan
9 Sundays, WB
premieres Oct. 5

The Edgar Rice Burroughs tale is transplanted to modern-day Gotham and turned into a sexy love story in this latest rewrite from the network that moved Superman back to Smallville. Stylishly done and assigned a choice time slot, “Tarzan” might have WB viewers swinging from trees. **PCS: 80**

12

The Mulletts
9:30 Tuesdays, UPN
premiered Sept. 11

OK, so I liked it. From two “Simpsons” producers comes this live-action sitcom about brothers who sport the heavy-metal hair and value the Homer Simpson ethic. Loni Anderson plays the mom and John “J. Peterman” O’Hurley the stiff stepdad—how can it lose? Well, for starters, “The Mulletts” is scheduled opposite ABC’s hit “Less Than Perfect.” **PCS: 60**

13

Steve Harvey’s Big Time
8 Thursdays, WB
premiered Sept. 11

Nice to see Steve Harvey back on network TV, even if it is on this minor variety show that specializes in stupid human tricks. Harvey could interview the dead and be entertaining, but it won’t be enough to save this show. **PCS: 50**

14

A Minute With Stan Hooper
8:30 Wednesdays, Fox
premieres Oct. 29

This uneven sitcom stars Norm Macdonald as a big-shot TV commentator who decides to move to small-town America and become “an ordinary guy,” albeit one who does his TV commentary from a small town. Out of this lame and patronizing premise springs a likably nutty show with some laugh-out-loud oddballs, led by Fred Willard as the town’s big cheese (literally—he makes cheese). It just might work, especially airing after “That ’70s Show.” **PCS: 70**

15

10-8

8 Sundays, ABC

premieres Sept. 28

An L.A. County sheriff’s deputy remembers his first year on the force as a bumbling trainee in this show that mixes lighthearted fare with life-and-death drama. Danny Nucci is likable as Rico, a street punk turned good guy, and Ernie Hudson, late of “Oz,” is delicious as his hard-nosed supervisor who enjoys nothing more than telling Rico he’ll never cut it as a cop. The best of the new shows featuring Latino leads. **PCS: 60**

16

Happy Family

8:30 Tuesdays, NBC

premiered Sept. 9

Proven comic actors John Larroquette and Christine Baranski make a surprisingly good TV couple as parents of adult children who refuse to grow up. Unfortunately, NBC hasn’t done anything in this time period since the early days of “NewsRadio.” **PCS: 40**

17

Miss Match

8 Fridays, NBC

premieres Sept. 26

Alicia Silverstone graces the airwaves as a young divorce lawyer with an ironic gift for hooking people up. Ryan O’Neal stars as her hard-bitten (and divorced) dad. Court cases and romantic love: If there’s a better show to take the place of “Providence,” I haven’t seen it. **PCS: 70**

18

I’m With Her

8:30 Tuesdays, ABC

premieres Sept. 23

In this comedy a movie starlet falls in love with average Joe. Sound familiar? It should, if you saw “Notting Hill”—or even better, the “Simpsons” takeoff of “Notting Hill.” This show succeeds thanks to good ensemble work by David Sutcliffe as the schoolteacher, Teri Polo as the starlet, and Teach’s star-struck students. Show creator Chris Henchy already has a more promising sitcom than the one his wife, Brooke Shields, starred in (“Suddenly Susan,” in case you’ve understandably blotted it from memory). **PCS: 70**

19

Jake 2.0

9 Wednesdays, UPN
premiered Sept. 10

Well, bringing back “The Twilight Zone” didn’t work last year for UPN, so now it’s revived “The Six Million Dollar Man.” Christopher Gorham plays Jake Foley, a tech-support dude at the National Security Agency who is accidentally infused with an experimental chemical that makes him faster, stronger, better. The pilot episode was riddled with story holes, but maybe the target audience won’t care (it airs after “Enterprise”). **PCS: 50**

20

Hope and Faith

9 Fridays, ABC
premieres Sept. 26

Kelly Ripa and Faith Ford mix it up in this sibling comedy that begs to be called “wacky.” But aside from that food fight scene you’ve seen played over and over in the promos, the show consists mainly of stock characters trading silly insults. Both actresses really sell their parts—Ripa as the prima donna who barges into Ford’s middle-class household—but that may not be enough to lure viewers back to ABC on Fridays. **PCS: 50** (or lower based on the role of co-star and “Jump the Shark” patron saint Ted McGinley)

21

Arrested Development

9:30 Sundays, Fox
premieres Nov. 2

This screwball comedy stars Jeffrey Tambor (Hank from “The Larry Sanders Show”) as a real estate developer sent to jail over accounting improprieties. His arrest sends the business—and the spoiled family members it was propping up—into complete disarray. I didn’t enjoy it as much as other critics, but if you like mockumentaries like “Best in Show,” this has that feel to it. **PCS: 60**

22

Like Family
8:30 Fridays, WB
premieres Sept. 19

Mom and troubled teen, both white, move in with old friends who are black—and conventional family comedy ensues. “Like Family” is well-matched with WB’s comedy hit “Reba,” and it can only improve. **PCS: 70**

23

All of Us
8:30 Tuesdays, UPN
premiered Sept. 16

Duane Martin stars in this unusual if uninspired family comedy about a man caught between two women—his wife-to-be and his ex-to-be. Will Smith and Jada Pinkett Smith are producers of this show, which also stars Chris Rock’s brother Tony Rock. The 5-year-old son looks like he’s reading off cue cards. **PCS: 50**

24

Eve
8:30 Mondays, UPN
premiered Sept. 15

In real life, the mononamed Eve is apparently a hip-hop star. (As if I would know.) As musicmakers go, she’s a competent star of her own UPN sitcom, though that’s a pretty modest accomplishment. And she gets a lot of help from the rest of her ensemble. No matter: Hammocked between “The Parkers” and “Girlfriends,” this show has a captive audience. **PCS: 80**

25

One Tree Hill
9 Tuesdays, WB
premieres Sept. 23

If there is a word for this basketball soap opera, it’s “insincere.” A spoiled rotten prep star is pitted against a bookish playground shooter who happens to be his half-brother. The prize: bragging rights and Hotshot’s stuck-up cheerleader girlfriend. It’s a Hollywood recipe for high drama, but “One Tree Hill” shows not the slightest interest in making it work. Passionate arguments melt away into mild pouty fits. The girlfriend can’t even stay stuck up for a whole scene. The whole show has as much bounce as a half-inflated Spalding. But it has “Smallville’s” old time slot and all season to find its game. **PCS: 80**

26

Run of the House
9:30 Thursdays, WB
premiered Sept. 11

Mom and Dad leave town and give their kids ... hence the title of this so-so sitcom. Paired with last year's barely renewed "What I Like About You," it follows that show's lead of pairing a teenage girl with a protective older sister. Here, however, there also are two big brothers, a la "Full House." Despite all the talent, no stars break through—bad sign. **PCS: 50**

27

Las Vegas
9 Mondays, NBC
premieres Sept. 22

I expected more from a show featuring James Caan as a wild-eyed, control-freaky Vegas hotel security chief. Inexplicably, not only is Jimmy C. a supporting character, but the producers have turned what should be an excellent action-adventure show into a soap opera occasionally punctuated by minor casino crimes. The star is one of Caan's security lieutenants, played by Josh Duhamel, who either has his boyish mug in every scene or is heard narrating over the throb of disco music and unending camera zooms. Which reminds me of the best line of the pilot, where Caan tells Duhamel, as only he can, "You might want to stop talking." On the whole, "Las Vegas" seems like a high-stakes game of Baccarat, with NBC throwing good money after bad. **PCS: 60**

28

Skin
9 Mondays, Fox
premieres Oct. 20

Even more hoopla has been made over this drama airing opposite "Las Vegas." A modern-day retelling of "Romeo and Juliet," it stars Ron Silver and Kevin Anderson as feuding fathers and D.J. Cotrona and Olivia Wilde as their lovesick kids. The twist: Silver runs a porno empire and Anderson, the local D.A., is on a crusade to shut him down. The show is stylish, fast-paced, well-cast[e] and a complete bore. Leave it to a Fox show to pit a loving, caring smut merchant against a righteous prig who's a lousy dad. It's produced by Jerry Bruckheimer, but its wooden characters and tinny dialogue prove that even a megaproducer can build a clinker. **PCS: 60**

29

Navy NCIS

8 Tuesdays, CBS
premieres Sept. 23

We all knew a “JAG” spinoff was coming; the surprise is it was handed “JAG’s” prime-time slot. And no doubt it will be a hit, especially with cool hand Mark Harmon at the helm as a crack military investigator who builds wooden boats in his spare time. Not that I will be watching. If the first episode is any indicator, “Navy NCIS” is going to rely on the imminent threat of a domestic terrorist attack to rope in viewers. No thanks—I’m nervous enough as it is. **PCS: 80**

30

Threat Matrix
8 Thursdays, ABC
premiered Sept. 18

Watch as hunky young hackers help the Department of Homeland Security foil terrorist attacks. The pilot takes place on American soil. And if you just read my “NCIS” review, you know I’m not watching this one, either. Unfortunately for it, few other people will—it’s on against “Friends” and “Survivor.” **PCS: 30**

31

It’s All Relative
8:30 Wednesdays, ABC
premieres Oct. 1

She has two daddies. His father’s an Irish Catholic homophobe. And they’re in love. Here’s a show that might have seemed dated 10 years ago; today it’s plain old retrograde. Of course the gay dads are cultured and clever, and the Irish dad, played by Lenny Clarke, runs a bar for dockworkers. It figures, right? I loved Clarke as the doughnut-downing detective in “The Job,” but he’s no Carroll O’Connor. Bleah to a most bleah-worthy show. **PCS: 60**

32

Rock Me Baby
9 Tuesdays, UPN
premiered Sept. 16

A shock jock’s world changes when his wife has a baby. Possibly inspired by Howard Stern, who is (partly) famous for blabbing about his marital life on the radio. I’d rather watch a show based on Stern’s divorce. **PCS: 40**

33

The Ortegas
8:30 Sundays, Fox

premieres Nov. 2

Weirdest new show of the season. Part improvised, part scripted, this alleged comedy takes place in a California back yard, where Cheech Marin has built a talk-show set for his adult son (Al Madrigal) to interview celebrities (Howie Mandel) for no good reason. Like "Coupling," it's based on a BBC show. Unlike "Coupling," this one doesn't translate for American audiences. Maybe Fox should've held on to Andy Richter. **PCS: 50**

34

The Brotherhood of Poland, N.H.
10 Wednesdays, CBS
premieres Sept. 24

David E. Kelley brought us "Picket Fences," "The Practice" and "Boston Public." Lately, though, his magic touch has eluded him. Witness last year's laughably bad "girls club" and now this wretched mess about three brothers who went from high-school heroes to middle-aged zeroes in their small New England town. They're not very nice, and they have personal problems galore. (Randy Quaid, playing the town's misanthropic police chief, has begun punching people real hard.) The choice is yours: Struggle to get to know these oafs or switch over and kick back as a killer is brought to justice on "Law & Order." I thought so. **PCS: 20**

35

Luis
8:30 Fridays, Fox
premieres Sept. 19

Actor Luis Guzman ("Traffic") has the honor of starring in the most politically insensitive sitcom since UPN's "The Secret Diary of Desmond Pfeiffer." He plays the proprietor of a doughnut shop in Spanish Harlem, where a black kid sells junk out of the nearby Dumpster, the only person over 50 is a hag and Chinese people practice illegal medicine out of their kitchen. "Luis" gets a boost by being matched with another opinionated sitcom, "Wanda at Large," at least until viewers realize Guzman is no Wanda Sykes. **PCS: 30**

(Postscript: Days before the premiere of "Luis" on Sept. 19, Fox sent critics a "revised" version of the show, which was virtually unchanged from the abominable pilot that was made last spring. Guzman is still the the angry landlord-slash-doughnut slender who can't resist turning every ethnic or social stereotype into a lame-bordering-on-offensive joke. What struck me, on viewing the pilot a second time, was when the show's only black character accuses Luis of being gay, Luis retorts that at least "gays aren't criminals." In the four months that this episode sat on the desks of Fox TV executives, no one seems to have considered how that line might be interpreted by the show's large African-American viewing audience.)

36

Whoopi

8 Tuesdays, NBC

premiered Sept. 9

From being the big fish in a dried-up pond of game shows, Whoopi Goldberg has made the leap from “Hollywood Squares” to her own prime-time sitcom, “Whoopi.” Suddenly, being center square doesn’t seem like such a bad gig. “Whoopi” is not a spectacular train wreck like earlier NBC comedies that were built around a single star (Emeril Lagasse, Kristin Chenoweth, Nathan Lane, Michael Richards, etc. etc.). It’s just a bad show in the usual bad no-name sitcom kind of way, with predictable jokes, unlovable characters and freeze-dried laughter. The show does try doggedly to mine the headlines in a misguided attempt at relevance (SARS and terrorism are too funny!), but it is otherwise indistinguishable from nearly every failed sitcom of the 1990s.

Goldberg plays a has-been soul singer named Mavis Rae who used the proceeds from her one hit single to buy a “boutique” hotel in Manhattan. The place is stocked with the usual bunch of oddballs, which in relation to the TV sitcom universe makes them not odd at all. There is the handyman Nasim (Omid Djalili), an Iranian national who is always butting in with lighthearted observations about the Ayatollah or Saddam Hussein. In one running gag, Nasim responds to anyone who calls him an Arab by rolling his eyes and screaming that he’s a Persian.

Then there’s Mavis’ straight-laced Republican brother Courtney (Wren T. Brown) and his dreadlock-wearing white girlfriend (Elizabeth Regen), who spouts endless hip-hop nonsense and purports to teach Courtney “how to be black.” No doubt some group will be outraged at this, but most viewers will not care, let alone laugh. Whoopi and Co. try their darnedest to be as offensive and politically incorrect as they wanna be. But that’s not so easy on a show loaded with rich, happy writer-producers (I counted 17 of them in the credits) who are as likely to offend the sensibilities of NBC suits as Tom Brokaw is apt to criticize GE defense contracts.

As hotel burlesques go, “Whoopi” is a lot closer to Norman Lear’s ’70s flop “Hot L Baltimore” than it is to “Fawlty Towers.” **PCS: 20**

37

Married to the Kellys

8:30 Fridays, ABC

premieres Oct. 3

The first television show set in Kansas City since “Malcolm and Eddie” explores the differences between a New York writer (based on the one who created this

show) and his Midwestern in-laws (based on the same). Let's break them down.

New Yorker: a funny, witty, slightly neurotic fellow who's eager to please.

Midwesterners: simple-minded conformists who relieve the monotony of their pathetic little lives by holding family get-togethers, where they have themed dinner nights and play competitive board games like it's 1972. Being from Kansas City, the Kellys rigidly enforce gender roles, as when the uncle calls the New Yorker "fruit salad" for wanting to help with the dishes. Also, did you know Kansans—why am I not surprised there is no mention of Missouri on this show?—Kansans are obsessed with the 3 C's—cooking, crafts and cleaning the house? Me neither. TV is so educational. **PCS: 40**