

## ARTS

TELEVISION EUNY HONG-KORAL

## Gazing at the same old navels

During an initial viewing of several autumn season preview tapes it became difficult to tell some of the new programmes apart. So I scribbled shorthand mnemonic descriptions in my notebook: "Ed is like *Northern Exposure*, but lawyer this time, not doctor. The *Geena Davis Show* is like *Sex and the City*, minus sex. Tucker is like *Malcolm in the Middle*, but no father."

Perhaps it should not have been a surprise when, a few weeks later, the television reviewer for a New York-focused weekly magazine made those very same three comparisons.

Had he been peeking at my notes? Of course not. It is just that the television canon is so limited that there is sometimes a one-to-one correspondence between old shows and new ones.

The most extreme examples are the shows that are thinly veiled reincarnations of recently deceased shows. The purpose is to carry over the same audience, and hope they won't notice.

This tradition dates back to the earliest days of television: Lucille Ball played three different Lucys for *I Love Lucy*, *The Lucy Show*, and *Here's Lucy*. In similar fashion, Mary Tyler

are banking on the largely fictitious phenomenon of *Seinfeld* withdrawal, releasing not one, but two descendants of that show. Neither includes Jerry Seinfeld himself, as if to confirm what some critics have been saying all along: that Jerry was the most expendable participant in his own show.

Actor Michael Richards, who played the antic neighbour Kramer in *Seinfeld*, shines in his new sitcom, *The Michael Richards Show* (NBC). Premieres Tuesday, October 24 at 9.30pm). In the series he plays a goofy private eye named Vic Nardoza who, like Kramer, is a nebbishy, irritating twit who gets by on brazenness and dumb luck.

The programme's jokes are as old as the Marx Brothers', but that's fine for people who, like me, happen to like the Marx Brothers.

In the pilot episode, Nardoza has a meeting with some prospective clients. Preparing to present him with their case, they lean over and whisper: "We have a sensitive issue to discuss." Nardoza replies: "Oh, okay, do you want me to leave the room?"

The programme's creators are aware that this, the show's premise, is formulaic in many ways.

are excited to introduce a new sort of programme to television – the detective show. While America is unfamiliar with the [genre], we believe that our intensive direct mail and blimp campaigns will help educate them to the possibilities of this new and exciting format."

In the grand *Seinfeld* tradition, ironic self-knowledge has been introduced to vaccinate a programme against criticism. We'll see how long the immunity lasts.

*Seinfeld* literacy is a prerequisite for watching *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, a 10-episode, self-styled *cinéma vérité* comedy series. Its creator and star is Larry David, one of the co-creators of *Seinfeld*, as well as the basis for that show's George Constanza character (HBO). Premieres Sunday, October 15 at 9.30pm ET).

The title of this new series is meant to be sarcastic, because David is incredibly phlegmatic and low-key – at least, for someone who apparently thinks the mundane details of his life merit multiple television series.

Watching this programme is like reading rough drafts for *Seinfeld* episodes; they're entertaining, but somewhat pointless after the fact.

Touching on David's usual

joker a thousand-fold.

It is very much like the *Seinfeld* episode in which Jerry tries to date a woman of American Indian descent. For those who don't recall the episode, Jerry makes a racist comment that makes it impossible to recover from subsequent misunderstandings, such as: "I called the restaurant to make a reservation – uh, I mean, to tell them that we were coming."

The episode was bold and edgy, but seeing it again in rehashed form on *Curb Your Enthusiasm* just makes David look as if he is proud of his insensitivity.

I guess the point of this programme is to show us what *Seinfeld* might have been like if it didn't have to be cleaned, polished, and well-lit for the network. Which is to say, there would have been more Holocaust jokes that I really could have done without.

There's also an episode about the rudeness of the staff at Barney's clothing store, which was the basis for yet another *Seinfeld* episode. If David hates the store so much, why doesn't he just stop shopping there?

But, ah, this is David's key problem: repetition-compulsion. Until he works out this malady, we're