

ARTS

TELEVISION EUNY HONG-KORAL

A triumph for the traditional

Last autumn, I was so appalled by the truckload of monotonous television series about Generation Y types experiencing "quarter-life crises" that, during the first week of première season, I wrote about lemons instead.

It's a good thing I didn't waste the ink, as most of those hotly anticipated shows failed spectacularly before Thanksgiving. Some of the shows were cancelled even before they hit the airwaves.

It demonstrated at long last that the slavishly coveted youth market is so volatile that it can't even be relied upon to watch programming about itself.

That prescient producer Aaron Spelling was the first to see the writing on the wall when he announced more than a year ago that this past season was to be the last for *Beverly Hills, 90210* (1990-2000). So certain was he of the demise of the teen drama, which he helped invent, that he was willing to unemploy his daughter.

An additional sign of the changing tide came this summer, with *Survivor*, CBS's high-stakes endurance game. As many have already observed, the four finalists were among the oldest of the participants.

One online magazine wrote of Richard, the 39-year-old corporate trainer who won the \$1m prize: "His surprise victory showed age and cunning triumphing over youth and idiocy."

One might even say that *Survivor* heralded the themes of the new programmes being introduced

self in a new sitcom, *The Bette Show*, in which she belts out tunes with a soulful abandon not seen on TV since Judy Garland sang "God Bless America" (CBS, Wednesdays at 8pm ET).

In one of the most surprisingly amusing moments of the new autumn season, she drives home the new TV zeitgeist by arranging a Kidd Rock head-banger song into a jazzy Gershwin-like tune. I can't even recall the last time a TV show included a good sight gag, let alone a joke based on musical wit.

The new trend has allowed for more creativity across the board. Since older characters tend to be more established in their lives and careers, it is easier to write fuller, fleshed-out traits into their personalities.

Take, for example, a sharply scripted new sitcom called *Welcome to New York* (CBS, Wednesdays at 8.30pm ET/PT), whose two principal characters are nearing middle age: a crumpled, balding weatherman from Iowa (played by Jim Gaffigan) and a slick news producer (played by Christine Baranski).

The talented Baranski is best known for her role as the boozy dowager on *Cybill* Shepherd's series (*Cybill*, 1995-98). The two actresses made television history when their characters discussed their menopause on the show. In a different entertainment climate, no actress could hope to find work after that, yet here Baranski is, continuing to steal the show.

Part and parcel of the

Price, who plays a police-woman on the NBC drama *Third Watch*, told an interviewer that to the best of her knowledge, her character was the only leading female role on network TV to have a job, and also to be married with children. She was on to something. At the time, the other female characters were either housewives (such as the good Mafia wives on *The Sopranos*), or single career girls (*Ally McBeal*), or divorced working mothers (*Once and Again*).

This year, a handful of new programmes add a few more having-it-all women to Price's list: the aforementioned *Bette*, *The Geena Davis Show* (ABC, Tuesdays at 9.30pm ET), and Delta Burke's character from *Dag* (NBC, Tuesdays at 9.30pm ET), in which she plays the First Lady.

There is even a show

about two yuppie couples with competing theories of parenting (*Yes Dear*, CBS, Mondays at 8.30pm ET/PT). In the show, the wives are sisters who get along famously with each other. Extended families raising their children together? We haven't seen anything like that since *The Cosby Show* and *Roseanne*, which, in TV time, was aeons ago.

Perhaps it is not surprising that traditional TV is back. In a few years, shows such as *Ellen* and *Will and Grace* gloriously shattered the gay taboo. *The Simpsons* provides enough post-modern, self-referential irony for all the networks combined. *Ally McBeal* pushed the envelope to the point of alienating the audience. There were no new frontiers to cross. Suddenly, two-parent homes and women over the age of 35 seem exotic.

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