

# discontent

A handful of the new television programmes that debut each autumn get such poor ratings they have to be killed off before Groundhog day. So the networks must have ready an arsenal of mid-season replacements.

As it happens, these B-list substitutes are often more interesting than the originals, because once the mercenary fall season has subsided, the networks feel at liberty to trot out riskier, more unconventional programmes. But not always.

As the moon is to the sun, the small screen reflects the big screen's light. Riding on the success of last summer's films *The Blair Witch Project* and *The Sixth Sense*, a few mid-season television replacements have supernatural twists.

A new NBC drama, *The Others*, proves surprisingly chilling (NBC. Premieres Saturday February 5pm at 10pm). The programme's central characters belong to a support group whose aim is to lessen the psychological burden of having psychic powers. They also provide *pro bono* psychic assistance for residents of the Greater Boston area.

Each psychic has his own forte: one communes with the dead; another can pass back and forth between this life and the next; another is clairvoyant. The programme succeeds for the same reason *The Sixth Sense* does: it appeals to the primeval fear that grudges live beyond the grave.

In a debating society of which I was once a member, a person claiming to be an atheist was presented with a challenge from his opponent: sign away his eternal soul to the Devil for \$5. The atheist blanched, refusing to sign. He did not believe in God, but the Devil was another matter. Or perhaps he thought the two might be in league.

At least, that's the implication in *God, the Devil, and Bob*, an animated cartoon (NBC. Broadcast date to be announced). The programme begins with the premise that God and the Devil are professional rivals who like to wager at the expense of arbitrarily chosen victims.

In the pilot episode, God (who looks like Jerry Garcia and wears a Hawaiian shirt) mentions that he is disappointed with the world and is thinking about destroying it and starting over. The Devil is beside himself with joy, but cautions: "You bet-

the whole world's fate to rest on the actions of one man. For their Job, they select an unremarkable barfly named Bob.

This is an impressively original premise, but it remains to be seen where the producers are going. Instead of "why do bad things happen to good people", the question is "why don't God and the Devil have better things to do".

Another adult-oriented cartoon, *Sammy*, is supposedly based on comedian David Spade's real-life relationship with his irresponsible father (NBC. Broadcast date to be announced). Spade, of *Saturday Night Live* fame, produced the programme and lends his voice to the two main characters.

The crux is the actor-agent relationship in Hollywood, a subject that the denizens of that town have failed to realise is interesting only to them. The only thing this programme has going for it is that annoying people are marginally more tolerable in cartoon form, as Casey Kasem (voice of Shaggy and Scooby-Doo) has previously demonstrated.

Animated characters often have better comic timing than real actors. *Malcolm in the Middle*, a new live-action series, attempts to rectify this by using rapidly changing backdrops, fast-forwards and slow-motion to emulate the erratic pacing of a cartoon (Fox. Sundays at 8.30pm). It captures some of the odd politics of elementary school, such as the fact that special education classes and "gifted and talented" classes are often taught by the same teacher. To its detriment, however, the show tries too hard to be gross, as when a flock of birds starts making a nest with Malcolm's father's back hair shavings. That sort of image is only bearable if it is done with crude cardboard cutouts, as in *South Park*.

The television mid-season is not entirely a waste of time. The networks do not seem to be taking full advantage of the fact that the off-season's low profile offers them creative leeway. *Northern Exposure* and *Seinfeld*, for example, were introduced as mid-season and mid-summer programmes, respectively, but there's nothing of that calibre this season.

Hollywood doesn't seem to accomplish much in the winter; the first three months of