

TELEVISION EUNY HONG-KORAL

# An original lesson in legal drama

By way of explaining why film trailers often reveal the full plot of the film they're advertising, film critic Roger Ebert quoted director Robert Zemeckis (*Forrest Gump*, *Contact*): "We know from studying the marketing of movies that people really want to know exactly everything that they are going to see before they go to see the movie."

"The reason McDonald's is a tremendous success is that you don't have any surprises."

If the Hollywood establishment really believes this, perhaps it explains why an original television programme would try to market itself as a trite one.

*Boston Public*, Fox's new hour-long series about a troubled, under-funded inner-city Boston high school, has been packaged misleadingly as a teen comedy.

Its titillating ads and unappealing series premiere promises the audience braless teenage girls and student-teacher liaisons. (Fox, Mondays at 8pm ET.)

But, beginning with the second episode (which is aired on October 30), the series reveals itself to be a serious, if flawed, reflection on the politics of school administration.

Perhaps that doesn't sound very stimulating at the outset, but it is one of the freshest ideas that executive producer David Kelly (creator of *Ally McBeal* and *The Practice*)

principal of *Boston Public*'s fictitious Winslow High, says: "Being the principal of a public high school is a political position."

His job consists mainly of coping with the bad news piled on his desk by teachers and students. The school's football team refuses to shower with a gay team-mate. Both parties might sue.

One emotionally distressed teacher abandons her classroom leaving a note on the chalkboard: "I've gone to kill myself. Hope you're happy." If he fires her, she can sue; if he keeps her, the students' parents might sue.

A history teacher tries to attract her listless students' attention by discussing the un-PC theory that certain native American tribes were cannibals, thus potentially jeopardising the school's federal funding. All this, "and it's only 10.15am", sighs Harper, slumping in his chair.

In this drama, teenage pregnancies and school gangs are almost old-fashioned problems, like students chewing gum in class.

The real concern, as one character says, is "the legal stranglehold": whichever side the administration takes on a given issue, it seems to be exposing itself to a lawsuit.

Instead of churning out yet another lawyer show, Kelly (himself a former practising lawyer) has invented a new genre: the

affects all professions on a day-to-day basis.

Speaking of legal dramas, why is it that the announcement of a large cash award is so often considered a legitimate form of dramatic denouement? You've seen it 100 times, in films such as *Erin Brockovich*: the head juror unfolds a sheet of paper and reads out: "Thirty-five million dollars," and the

the fictitious firm of Balmont Stevens doing an IPO for Ivygene.com, a start-up e-commerce company that sells the semen and ova of Ivy League graduates.

Minutes after the offering, our young entrepreneurs high-five each other, shrieking: "I'm worth \$140m!" By market's close, they lose the lot. I couldn't bring myself to get excited about fictitious profits and losses.

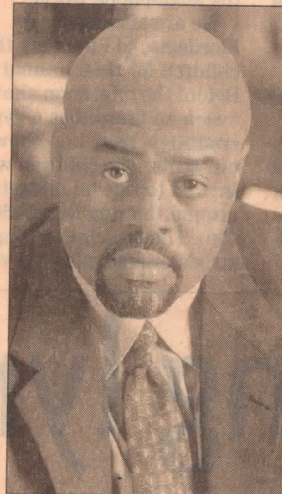
On the other hand, smaller personal growth stories aren't necessarily the magic formula for a good programme, either. This is demonstrated by the new Fox sitcom *Normal, Ohio*.

The protagonist, Butch Gamble (played by John Goodman), is a burly blue-collar gay man who moves back to Ohio to live with his parents and belatedly to raise the son he abandoned. (Fox, premieres Wednesday November 1, 8:30pm ET.)

In the series premiere, one of the running gags is that Gamble's nephew frantically asks questions such as: "Is [gayness] hereditary?" and "Do you kiss guys?"

The programme's seemingly socially progressive agenda is really a façade for one of network television's oldest formulas: juxtaposition of clashing personality types.

As the programme's official website promises: "If nothing else, [Gamble] family dinners will be very interesting!" It's as if even



Chi McBride as Stephen Harper in 'Boston Public'

lawyer starts crying and hugging his client.

Then we get the fade-out music and the credits roll, as if something important has happened. Don't fall for it: this is not storytelling.

Perhaps this is why I'm not wild about Fox's much-touted new drama about high finance, *The Street*. (Fox, premieres