

ARTS

TELEVISION EUNY HONG-KORAL

Avoiding the issues with a tale that's trashy but true

A really big news item, such as the US presidential election saga, gives audiences a rare glimpse into the unifying power of television. The news flash updates that constantly interrupt our usual fare of sitcoms and dramas are oddly comforting: no matter how niche-tailored television becomes, it still has the power to force issues in one's face.

But, for those who really want to stick their heads in the sand, there's always the USA Network. One has to give it credit for knowing its demographic. At the same time the election results were coming in over the other networks, it premiered its original film, *The Chippendales Murder*.

What a stroke of genius. There have probably never been two audiences with so little overlap. Good thing USA sent me a videotape.

The film, which will be re-broadcast in December (showtimes to be announced; check local listings), chronicles the true and preternaturally strange tale of Steve Banerjee, a

Brahmin-caste Indian immigrant who started the Chippendales chain of male strip clubs for women.

He was so protective of his idea - which was not copyrightable - that he murdered his business partner.

It is not as bad as it sounds, and it is especially difficult to be sanctimonious about trash TV, given the low journalistic standards of the network election coverage I had been watching instead.

Banerjee is played by Naveen Andrews, who previously gave graceful performances in *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The English Patient*.

His talents do not totally go to waste here, as the

script, reminiscent of the film *Boogie Nights*, requires a surprisingly deadpan delivery: "I want a classy, top-of-the-line Hollywood show for women."

Even seedy night-club owners have their idealistic salad days, apparently, and the scenes from this early part of the film are quite funny.

Veteran stage actor Paul Hipp does a skilful turn as Nick DeNoia, Banerjee's partner and eventual murder victim. He counsels: "Women want bedtime stories, you can't just rub raw meat in their faces."

From then on, the film has the strangely hypnotic quality of *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* (1988), or any other camp film reserved for insomniacs.

I suppose it's all right to give away the Chippendales ending, since the story is based on high-profile news events, besides which, no one is really going to watch this film. Banerjee gets arrested, then promises his wife: "I won't let them take away Chippendales."

He hangs himself in his prison cell, supposedly so as to nullify the government's seizure of his club which

John Leonard, I watch this stuff so you won't have to.

■ November sweeps must go on, whether we have a president or not. The night after election Tuesday, *The Drew Carey Show* continued as planned with a live improvisational episode, which the cast re-performed for each of the four time zones.

The live format made them a bit puckish. At one point, Drew was interrupted by a piece of paper thrust into his hand, which he read aloud: "The Florida votes are all in! Gore won!"

It wasn't quite a *War of the Worlds* situation, but I know some viewers who were jittery enough to believe that ABC had entrusted a sitcom star to deliver breaking news.

The celebrity guest appearance is a time-honoured sweeps tradition, but rarely has it been more deftly handled than in last week's episode of *Will and Grace*, which generously snuck in two cameos.

Camryn Manheim (from NBC's *The Practice*) was spectacular as "Psychic Sue", whom Will consults at

a drag queen. "I can do a much better Cher," he says, snippily, and a "Cher-off" ensues.

Perhaps the most welcome, most subtle sweeps stunt of all will go unheralded. NBC's *E/R* began using the widescreen letterbox format, which I've never previously seen on a US programme.

The film director Martin Scorsese has a long record of complaining bitterly about audience aversion to letterbox, giving the example of *Ben Hur*. When the chariot scene is broadcast on television without the benefit of letterbox, only one set of horses is visible at a time.

I hope NBC stays with the new format. One reason I didn't really watch *E/R* in the past was that its trademark side-to-side camera swish caused the vein over my right eye to throb.

Presumably, they used this technique in part because they couldn't fit the doctors and the operating slab in the same frame. The letterboxing should alleviate that problem. Oh, the possibilities!

A little black space on the top and bottom of one's TV screen may not seem earth-shattering. Yet it is a significant step for a medium that has typically had terribly conventional views of framing and cinematography.

Challenging industry prejudices a little at a time is a noble cause and a good

So this is the Kingdom of Heaven, thought Cohn. He hadn't known it was called the Stock Exchange!

Money, power, love and sex. All the tools of the users. People who destroy the lives of those around them for their own gain. Few friendships can survive them. Few loves sustained. Trust turns to fear.

