

Learning to love an oafish, sullen character in ill-fitting clothes

In Margaret Cho's current Off-Broadway show, *I'm The One That I Want*, the comedienne complains that she was asked to lose weight for her failed 1994 sitcom, *All-American Girl*. The real slap in the face, says Cho, is that the following year the same network (ABC) signed on *The Drew Carey Show*, whose eponymous star was, shall we say, no less *zaftig*.

Carey was also oafish, sullen, and clad in ill-fitting clothes that bunched up in the wrong places. If his character were to come on strongly to a woman in a bar, she wouldn't deign to slap him; she would give him a fake telephone number instead.

In a recent collection of essays, Carey recalls reviewers' initial response to his less-than-presentable demeanor; one advertising executive wrote: "Carey is not an acceptable lead."

That was five years ago. Now, his show is a permanent fixture in the Nielsen Top 20, and this week he stars in *Geppetto*, Disney's first original musical made expressly for television. (ABC, Sunday, May 7, at 7pm ET.)

Though definitely a children's movie, it is pleasant, and vaguely evocative of the Danny Kaye film *Hans Christian Andersen*.

Carey is no Danny Kaye (could anyone be?), but proves remarkably comfortable in the heel-clicking, tra-la-la brand of feyness required for a musical. This is impressive when one considers that musical comedy has dwindled to the point where hardly anyone receives any training in the genre outside high school stage productions.

It is Carey's proclivity for singing and dancing that sets *The Drew Carey Show* apart from similar shows that have occupied the "everyman" sitcom niche.

Shows such as *Grace Under Fire* and *Roseanne* also featured coarse blue-collar characters lacking in social graces, and living in thrice-mortgaged houses

with fake wood panelling. But such programmes seemed to feel an obligation to represent some sort of workers' struggle, and were often bogged down in anti-bourgeois ideology and the glorification of processed food products.

Carey's show, meanwhile, has become known for its trademark song-and-dance numbers, including an episode in which *Rocky Horror* fans compete with *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* fans in a flashy dance

firing people whose bosses can't muster the courage to do it themselves? Does he know he's just a pawn of corporate risk-aversion? Does he care?

This is the best sort of sitcom: one that tries to have fun, without having to be a symbol of something larger than itself.

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May sweeps week is here, bringing with it the network series' season finales.



Having fun: Drew Carey in ABC's *The Drew Carey Show*

number done entirely in drag. Another episode was a send-up of *The Full Monty*, including a creative male striptease number.

Drew's character (also named Drew) has worked some 15 years in the human resources department of a Cleveland department store. It's the sort of job which is so nebulous that Drew is in no danger of being either fired or promoted. That's the way he wants it.

Does he know he's doing the company's dirty work,

Beverly Hills, 90210 (1990-2000), the programme that laid the foundation for the fledgling Fox network 10 years ago, will wrap up for good. (Fox, Season finale airs Wednesday, May 17, at 8pm ET/PT.)

I am deeply saddened by this passage, though I have never actually been able to sit through an episode from start to finish.

An hour is an excruciatingly long time to spend watching a show that, along with the book *Lord of*

the Flies, almost seems to be based on my own high school. Besides which, I was able to glean all the major 90210 plot events over the past 10 years just by watching the promotional commercials for the series, the ones that give away all the "shocking revelations". Fox should win an award for the network whose commercials are most likely to make its own programming obsolete.

For the same reason, I am intimately familiar with all the episodes of *Party of Five* (1994-2000), another important Fox series ending this year, of which I have never seen a whole episode – not because it reminded me of anything unpleasant; it just looked boring.

Just Shoot Me, a sitcom about a glossy magazine resembling *Cosmopolitan*, airs special sweeps episodes throughout May.

In one such episode, the thirtysomething male receptionist, Finch, infiltrates a high school and poses as a student for a magazine story. It's supposed to be a homage to *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, a true-life chronicle by an undercover writer long before it became a Phoebe Cates film vehicle (in 1982).

The same theme was revisited in last year's Drew Barrymore comedy, *Never Been Kissed*.

If one were to believe everything that flickered on a screen, one would think American high schools were overrun by undercover cops and reporters.

Frustratingly, the logistics of the set-up are never explained. Do they have to do homework? Can they keep guns in their lockers? And where are the fruits of these undercover labours? I don't recall seeing an article about "the real life of a teen" – nor would I want to.

No, this isn't so much a conceit of print media; it's primarily the big and small screens that advocate the notion that everyone cares how today's pep rallies differ from those of 10 years ago. The TV watchcry: the teen is dead. Long live the teen.