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TELEVISION EUNY HONG-KORAL

Something to win over the critics

When the networks unfurl their new programmes in autumn, it is incumbent on a television critic to pick the winning horses, as it were. But the networks have already decided which shows the critics are supposed to like, which ones are supposed to have a broader audience appeal, and that baffling third category, the programmes no one could possibly like.

Over the next few weeks, I'll discuss all three types of shows. For now, the focus will be on the first category: those shows that seemed most eager to get my attention.

Of all the new programmes *Deadline* tries the hardest to pander to critics. (NBC. Premieres Monday, October 2 at 9pm ET.) Nonetheless, I can't help giving it my grudging respect.

For one thing, the series depicts journalists as being the heart, mind, and conscience of the US justice system, and it is difficult even for a critic to resist that kind of flattery.

The programme uses other tactics to attract critics' attention, cramming the programme with all the things we're supposed to like. It has one of the most racially diverse casts of the new season. It includes literary allusions designed to make us congratulate ourselves for recognising them, such as this reference to a Hemingway story: "It's the American nightmare: a shooting in a clean, well-lit place."

The one critic-baiting feature that truly works well is the cast, which includes such respectable

veteran stage actors as Oliver Platt and Hope Davis, who both have reputations for hand-picking well-written, low-profile projects. They appeared together in the film *The Imposters* (1998), a charming but commercially disastrous throwback to the 1930s shipboard stowaway farce.

In *Deadline*, the two pay homage to another Depression-era film staple:

aimed at pleasing the critics, but with greater subtlety and poetry, is *Gideon's Crossing*. It is unrivalled as the finest new programme of the season (ABC. Tuesday, October 10, at 10pm ET).

I normally dislike hospital dramas, but unlike *ER* and other programmes of this ilk, *Gideon's Crossing* isn't about the staff sleeping with one another, or showing off

Gideon tells one patient: "The treatment will probably kill you before the [disease] does."

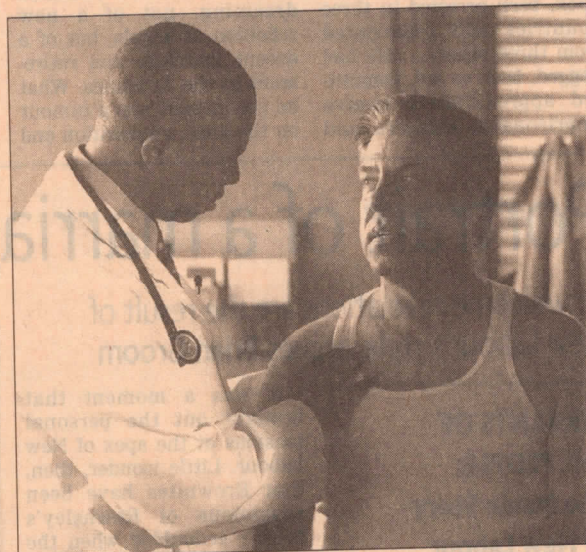
Like its main character, this show takes many risks that pay off in spades. Most US programmes, particularly legal and hospital dramas, have a large amount of yelling. By contrast, *Gideon's Crossing* has the characters speaking *sotto voce*, giving the programme an atmosphere of gravitas and respectability.

Perhaps that's why Gideon can get away with the arrogant speeches he gives to his fellow doctors, practically *ex cathedra*: "A doctor is in a performance. Every word you say will be repeated 30 times in the course of the day to a [patient's] relatives. They want a human being, but with no unkind feelings, and who makes no mistakes."

Gideon's Crossing may not be totally free of the God Complex endemic to hospital dramas but, in small details, this programme does succeed in breaking from its squeaky-clean genre. For example: Gideon's doctors take cigarette breaks.

I wish both programmes well but, frustratingly, the matter is out of my hands. Unlike, say, theatre, television is a wholly market-driven consumer product.

Even when I'm feeling good about myself, I realise critics have little influence in rescuing a good show with low ratings, or in crucifying a bad show with high ratings. The race, as I said, is rigged from the start. On which, more later.



Andre Braugher (left) and Bruce McGill in 'Gideon's Crossing'

the socially crude but morally irreproachable world of the newspaperman. Here Platt and Davis play an adversarial divorced couple working for the same newspaper, an obvious allusion to *His Girl Friday* (1940).

The ghost of *The Front Page* (1931) and other classics of the newspaper genre figure prominently in the hardboiled dialogue: "Just for the record, there ain't no off-the-record," says Platt in his role as "Pulitzer-prize-winning investigative reporter Wallace Benton".

In keeping with the genre, Benton is addicted to hard candy and hard liquor, chugging down Bush Mills and other cocktails I've never heard people order in real life.

As with many TV programmes that have a familiar air, I can't decide

their ability to pronounce medical terms. Instead, *Gideon's Crossing* is an understated meditation on medical ethics, and on how weird patients can test the limits of the Hippocratic Oath.

Dr Benjamin Gideon (played by Andre Braugher) is chief of medicine at an unusual private hospital, where the most hopeless medical cases come to be treated with risky, last-ditch experimental techniques. As

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