

TELEVISION EUNY HONG-KORAL

Sifting gems from the trinkets

During the autumn television season, the networks send television critics huge piles of mixed messages. On the one hand are the trinkets designed to draw attention to their videotapes: this year's booty included T-shirts, a chalkboard that doesn't erase well, a rubber apple toy and a mouse pad. TV critics must be second only to physicians in the volume of items in their homes emblazoned with a commercial logo.

Contradictorily, many tapes also came with caveats or warning labels. For example, a preview tape for a popular legal comedy was accompanied by a letter signed by the executive producer. The letter instructs: "We ask your co-operation in not revealing any story points which are intended to be a surprise."

Two things about this bother me. The first is the notion that I am supposed to provide free PR services, exhorting my readers mindlessly to watch the programme, without any further explanation.

Second, I watched the tape, and could not determine which of the programme's many clichés were supposed to be the surprise.

Some tapes were furiously marked up in capital letters, "ROUGH CUT - NOT FOR REVIEW", the implication being that the network is going to refine the product and send it to me later. I'm honour bound to withhold judgment until I receive the final draft, choosing not to make fun of such utterances as: "You keep me at arms' length like you got some great big dark something going on." So it remains a mystery as to why they kept the line in the final cut.

Such dialogue is a sign of

I decided to take on the rather quixotic task of championing those programmes that have not attempted to confuse with toys or instructions. Perhaps the mark of a good programme is that it does not make reviewers feel complicit in the business of packing off audiences to advertisers.

One of the most low-key and enjoyable new programmes this season is *Ed*. (NBC, Sundays at 8pm ET.)



Soft sell: Tom Cavanagh, who plays the title role in 'Ed'

Its premise is perhaps best encapsulated in Ed's description of himself to a judge: "Your honour, the term 'bowling-alley lawyer' suggests that I am a lawyer specialising in bowling-alley cases. This is not so. I'm a lawyer who happens to have his office in a bowling alley."

Television has taught us that anyone wishing to change his life must either move to, or away from, New York City. Ed is of the latter

episode, the titular character (played by Tom Cavanagh) decamps from the big city in favour of his birthplace of Stuckeyville, Ohio.

There he discovers a rule of television small towns: the folk who remain in the boondocks their whole life do so because they are too weird to find acceptance outside their hometown.

Ed has the requisite cadre of wacky friends who help him run the bowling-alley half of his dual practice.

gags that one can repeat at the office water-cooler the next day.

Also kicking off a new programming season, but almost invisibly, is PBS's *Masterpiece Theatre*, now in its 30th year.

This autumn's first instalment is a new adaptation of *Oliver Twist*, brought to us by the prolific British writer Alan Bleasdale. It begins with a two-hour "prequel", a dramatisation of the events preceding Oliver's birth: his unfortunate mother's love affair and out-of-wedlock pregnancy, and the origin of his father's hastily written will.

This part of the programme arose out of Bleasdale's fertile imagination, based on a threadbare summary of events from Chapter 51 of Dickens' novel. The adapter's dramaturgy is so skilful, and so in keeping with the spirit of the tale, that it took me a few hours of brain-racking and doubting my own memory before I realised this section wasn't in the original book.

Bleasdale makes Monks into a more rounded character than we see in Dickens' original story. In this film, we are shown Monks' early character development, and how a simple-minded boy became corrupted by his mother.

The remaining part of the film, alas, exhibits less life force, as Bleasdale seems to find himself trapped by the innumerable film adaptations of *Oliver Twist* that preceded him.

But it could have been worse. When asked in an interview about his rendition of the famous "Please sir, I want some more" scene, Bleasdale joked: "I was really pleased that the cast didn't break into song like

One of them, named Phil (played by Michael Ian Black), foists himself on Ed as a sidekick, or a barnacle, depending on one's point of view. He shows loyalty to Ed by forcing all the bowling alley employees to wear barrister's wigs, and by making a sign with magic marker that reads, "The Lawyer is In", in Peanuts comic-strip fashion.

This is going to be a hard sell for NBC. Like the best stories, it is made up of