

## MOVIES

## Summer of working-class discontent

By Pat Aufderheide

You can wait all summer for That Movie, the in-the-dark equivalent of going to the beach. It's disposable, but likeable, because it's about real people.

Each summer the studios throw a large handful of light entertainment on the market, depending on a public inability to concentrate. And each year there's one that's more than an excuse for air conditioning, that shows how good movies can be in the unpretentious middle range. In past years movies like *Foul Play*, *Car Wash*, *Bingo Long and the Travelling All-Stars* and *Motor Kings*, and *Think Dirty!* have all been excellent reasons to keep watching the wide screen.

This year began poorly, with the new James Bond film, *Moonraker*, surfacing as a dull rehash of old routines. As the summer heated up, the movies didn't. *Meatballs*, aka *National Lampoon goes to Summer Camp*, could have had a tang of social critique like *Animal House* had, but it didn't. *Americathon*, a topical spoof by the *Tunnelvision* people on current crises, was a stupid set of bad jokes done adequately. *Dracula*, with Frank Langella playing the lead for sex appeal, should have been whopping good fun, but the film was reverential to vampire films gone by, and came out bloodless.

And then came *Breaking Away* (20th Century Fox). It didn't look like much. The summer of four young men's working-class discontent, focusing on a bike race in which the Bloomington townies try to show up the Indiana University gowies. Bike racing? Male bonding? Small town summer? Yawn.

No. The film, directed by English director and Hollywood vet Peter Yates (*Bullitt*, *The Deep*) with a surprising respect for the actors' abilities and for the cultural accuracy of Steve Tesich's script, holds our attention throughout, without every making us realize we're concentrating.

The hero is Dave (Dennis Christopher), the odd smart one in a gang of four unemployed 19-year-olds. The others are tough dumb Mike (Dennis Quaid), goofy wit Cyril (Daniel Stern), and small, serious, luckless Moocher (Jackie Earle Haley, the wonderful tough kid from *Bad News Bears*).

Each of the young men has



*These four small-town musketeers battle their college rivals with bikes.*



*The four friends win more than a race (above); below, Dave aggravates his father with his Italian act.*

his chosen reaction to being working-class, unemployed and young in a college town. Dave's is to pretend he's an Italian bike racer, complete with accent and Italian facial and hand gestures. His racing ability, the group's mutual loyalty, and their self-respect are tested in two bike races. Through them, Dave learns that you can't dodge the real world by pretending to be somebody else. And goodness triumphs over all.

The resolution is pure sitcom, and there are unfortunate moments that glare in a feature film, because their mechanical formulations are suited to a 27-minute format with laugh-track. But

dialog and character carry even these moments. The conflict central to the film—town vs. gown—is a genuine social one, and the characters are achingly familiar.

Mike, for instance, explains why he, the high school quarterback, hates watching college football. Each year, he says, there will be a new hero, and it'll never be him. All his life he'll be nobody—"I'm just gonna be 'Mike.' 20 year old 'Mike.' 30 year old 'Mike.' Crazy old man 'Mike.'" It horrifies not because you know he's right, but because you know he knows, already. When Dave's father (Paul Dooley) returns to his old workplace, the stone quarry, his chat with old buddies and his token work show us his deep pride in that job. Dave's mother (Barbara Barrie) displays both quiet strength and hoarded idiosyncrasies. Her situations, e.g. an argument over a low-fat diet for her husband, have no Hollywood gloss to them.

Where did anybody in Hollywood learn this much about small town life?

The problem—that these boys must make their decisions to settle for so little in plain sight of wealth and upward mobility—is central, but never schematic. The conflicts are always local, immediate, rooted in particular circumstances of family and place.

Along with the social conflict, we see the loyalty of these friends to each other. They are four musketeers. They protect each other; they love each other. This spectacle of men-being-men-

together does not grate, because it's so accurate. We see how their friendship works—how their characters are complementary and that they share a history. We see as well the limitations of their camaraderie—they avoid finding a job together; they stay kids together; they pretend together that they won't follow different paths as they grow up.

The success of the film is in the believability of the working-class characters and their behavior with each other. The moments in which conflict with the college kids becomes overt spur the plot. But the meat of the film is in the ethnographic small-town American immediacy of those four boys and their restless, good-hearted lives.

## Guindon



GUINDON 74

"Have you seen a Frisbee?"

## There's no business like it

•Mr. Clean: Harry Reems, the porno actor who was one of the defendants in a suit brought by Memphis prosecutor Larry Parrish against *Deep Throat*, has been cast in a non-porno film described as a "ribald comedy." He plays the head man of a vice squad in a major city.

•Mr. Decency: Meanwhile, Larry Parrish, who had counted on publicity from his anti-porno campaign to go into politics, has been unable to find backers among the "decency crowd" to fund a mayoral campaign.

•Love New York: Members of the Gay Activist Alliance and actors and others involved in theater and film production have been demonstrating in

New York during production of William (Exorcist, Sorcerer) Friedkin's film, *Cruising*. Gays claim that the film, which concerns a series of homosexual murders and has a brutal reputation, is hostile to gays. Demonstrators hope that the ruckus will raise costs of production so that, at least, the film's location would have to be changed.

•Yum Yum Eat 'Em Up: One of the two original disco recording companies, TK Productions (the other is Casablanca), has dropped several workers from its payroll. TK's business has been hurt by the disco lines introduced by major recording companies.

—Pat Aufderheide

# TV's Fall Line-up

*The real drama is off the air*

By Michael Massing

Another new TV season is almost upon us, and as usual, the fall's drama will appear not on our screens but in the weekly unfolding of the ratings sweepstakes.

Will ABC be able to add to the hits that have entrenched it as the dominant network over the last four years? Can CBS regain the touch that, throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, made it the "Tiffany's" of television, as it then liked to refer to itself? And will Fred Silverman finally be able to extricate NBC from the programming mess that has kept that network mired in the ratings cellar?

The advertising agencies have already placed their bets, and the smart money is riding on another ABC triumph. Ted Bates & Co., for instance, sees only a slight shift from last year's Nielsen tally, which produced a 19.7 rating for ABC, 18.7 for CBS and 17.0 for NBC. The agency foresees a slight decline for both ABC and NBC and a maintenance of last year's level for CBS.

The prospect of minimal change in the ratings reflects the lack of risk-taking that characterizes the upcoming fall schedules. Of the score of new series, few diverge from formulas that have proved successful in the past.

CBS offers a bevy of "youth-oriented" programs targeted at ABC's strength among young adults. Representative of the lot is *Working Stiffs*, a sitcom about two incompetent teenagers working as office janitors; it demonstrates that commercial TV can make blue-collar life as fleshless as airline stewardesses' sex lives.

Vying with it for lemon honors is *California Fever*, an adventure series featuring sun-kissed Orange County teenagers whose vocabulary is limited to "What's happenin'?" and "Later, man." Tiffany's, indeed.

At NBC, Fred Silverman and his programming disciples studied some 35 pilots for possible new series; the six selected for reviewers' screening include a James Bond spin-off (*The Man Called Sloane*), a *Star Wars* spin-off (*Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*) and an imitation of ABC's popular series *Eight is Enough* (*Shirley*). Among programs pitched to the adult crowd is a serialization of *From Here to Eternity*, building on last season's mini-series, which itself seemed less a portrayal of the James Jones novel than a screening of "Natalie Wood Goes Hawaiian."

ABC's new offerings appear most promising, from both a competitive and critical perspective. A network enjoying a sizable ratings lead can avoid the whirlwind sprint through the endless pilots that more desperate programmers find inescapable. With fewer holes to plug, the network can devote more attention to fewer projects.

Among ABC's more interesting new series is *The Lazarus Syndrome*, which presents a greater slice of realism than is customary for the networks, in this case through a dramatic look at hospital life. The relationship between the hospital's two main power-brokers, a black surgeon and a white newspaperman who enters the hospital as the surgeon's ward and is eventually asked to stay on as the institution's chief administrator, is central.

As for new ABC sitcoms, *Benson* is a funny spin-off of *Soap* featuring a black butler (played by *Soap*'s Robert Guillaume) who, hired to run the mansion of a humane but soft-headed Eastern governor, ends up as his chief political adviser. If any hit emerges from the fall schedule, *Benson* could be it.



*The Lazarus Syndrome gives us more realism than usual; characters from Shirley (right) and From Here to Eternity give us only more of the same.*

Predicting new hits, of course, is one of TV's least promising exercises. Last year, for instance, *Mork & Mindy* far outstripped ABC's modest expectations to become the season's runaway success. Rather than leave their destinies to the wind, the networks have enlisted other, time-honored tactics in their ratings war-gaming.

"Ninety percent of the successful programs on TV succeed because of where they've been scheduled," says Michael Dann, former programming whiz at CBS and now a consultant for Warner Cable. Scheduling tactics have dominated the networks' plotting for the fall season since planning sessions began last winter.

There are certain groundrules of the game:

- Nine p.m. is the anchor of each night's line-up—its "ridgepole," in the image current in the industry. Strong ridgepoles buttress programs aired both before and after the 9 p.m. slot.

- Ridgepoles, however, can't do it alone; they need vigorous "lead-ins" from the preceding hour, since viewers will more often than not leave their TV dials where they are. It has been estimated that every three points of ratings advantage before 9 p.m. will translate into a one-point edge for the program beginning at that time.

- Each evening's schedule is greater than the sum of its parts. Successful nights usually have a "flow" to their programming, a uniformity of appeal. One night might be "female," another more "male" in its orientation.

- A new comedy's chances of success are boosted if it can be "hammocked"—slotted between two established hits. Conversely, a pair of popular sitcoms should be separated only after each has demonstrated it is capable of standing on its own.

## Juggling success.

Sitcoms are the protein in the prime-time diet. The value of sitcoms helps explain ABC's scheduling strategy for the fall season.

Taking what some industry observers regard as a substantial risk, the network is breaking up the programming blocks that have proved such formidable ratings workhorses in the past. *Mork & Mindy*, which provided ABC such a strong lead-in on Thursday nights last year, is being siphoned away to 8 p.m. Sunday (Eastern time). ABC expects *Mork* to shore up its Sunday night performance, which in past seasons has been outpaced by CBS.

At the same time, *Mork*'s transfer could create a dangerous gap in the valuable territory at 8 p.m. Thursday, providing CBS and NBC the opportunity to shoehorn their way in for the entire evening. So ABC has substituted *Laverne & Shirley*, another top-rated program. ABC has been cautious in nurturing that program about two brewery workers in Milwaukee, allowing it to build its audience gradually in the 8:30 Tuesday slot, where it benefitted from the huge lead-in provided by *Happy Days*.

Now, having proved its own drawing power, *Laverne & Shirley* is being asked to repay its debt. In the opening time period on Thursday, the program is expected to provide support for the rest of the network's line-up that night, including *Benson*, which will premiere on Laverne's coattails at 8:30. The spot left vacant after *Happy Days* on Tuesdays is being filled with a new sitcom, *Nobody's Perfect*, which details the bumbling adventures of an eccentric Scotland Yard detective assigned to work with the San Francisco police department.

To Bud Grant, CBS vice president for programs, ABC's jockeying represents a real "gamble." "Just because *Laverne & Shirley* does well between *Happy Days* and *Three's Company* is not to say it will do as well on Thursday nights," says Grant. "And I can guarantee *Mork & Mindy* won't get the same share on Sundays as it does on Thursdays."

## Don't rock the boat.

CBS's strategy is to rock its own boat as little as possible. Of the 16 CBS series returning from last year, 15 are slated for the same time slots. "Because there's been so much schedule churning in the last few years, we felt there should be some stability," says Grant.

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*"Ninety percent of the successful TV programs succeed because of where they're scheduled," says one programmer. The planners talk of "ridgepoles," "female nights," and "hammocking."*