

Coming attractions

Networks unveil new fall programs

By Frank Sanello

HOLLYWOOD (NEA) — This fall's TV season will not be remembered for its vanguard of innovative and strong programming. In fact, many of the new shows are rather weak and seem to be awaiting their inevitable mid-season replacements.

But a few gems, like "Frank's Place" (CBS), "The 'Slap' Maxwell Story" (ABC) and "J.J. Starbuck" (NBC), have managed to sparkle amid a vast wasteland of nighttime programming.

TV's zeal for re-creating the sanitized nuclear family — sparked by "Cosby" and spread like wildfire to "Growing Pains" — has dimmed. Instead, this season's crop offers a skewed interpretation of family dynamics in "Mama's Boy" (NBC), "My Two Dads" (NBC), "Full House" (ABC) and "Everything's Relative" (CBS). Confused paternity, slap-together family units and unusual mother-son relationships seem to be the abnormal norm this season.

No one network comes out on top with this season's offerings, either. Each of the big three has a handful of strong — but not guaranteed — shows and a balance of largely mediocre programs.

Comedy is supposed to be king these days, but the fall lineup offers almost as many new police/detective dramas (seven, most of which hail from CBS) as it does sitcoms (eight), with two hybrids that offer both bullets and belly laughs.

Kudos should go to CBS for even airing "Four of Duty." Even though the show's topic — Vietnam — will probably keep away viewers looking for the upbeat viewers, CBS is the first network to give the controversial war more significant attention than a passing documentary or TV movie.

The best of this fall's crop is ABC's "Hooperman," which is either a sitcom with pathos or a drama with laughs. It's from the creative team that gave us last year's class act, "L.A. Law."

The worst? The competition is too strong to single out a top stinker.

ABC

Dolly (Sunday): Dolly Parton tries to become the Carol Burnett of the '80s. Conventional wisdom says variety shows have been killed off by the talk show, which is cheaper to produce. Parton promises her show will be zany and break the old variety mold. Unavailable for review.

Buck James (Sunday): Dennis Weaver is a crack trauma surgeon at a major Southwestern hospital. A good-ole-boy rancher, Dr. Buck ropes cattle and sews up emergency-room patients with equal unbelieveability. Buck's personality is more obnoxious than flinty. ★

Thirtysomething (Tuesday): A yuppie soap opera about two married couples and their unmarried friends, all pushing 30. Self-absorbed like most yuppies, they all take themselves too seriously, especially since the pilot's big dramatic question is whether or not one couple can find a baby sitter in order to take a camping trip. Tedious and hard to watch. ★½

Hooperman (Wednesday): The new show to beat. The first episode has an hour's worth of grim humor and full-blown pathos as a "Hill Street Blues" and "L.A. Law," compacted into a fast half-hour. John Ritter is Harry Hooperman, a San Francisco police detective who inherits an apartment building full of eccentric tenants after his lovable landlady is brutally murdered. Great ensemble cast headed by Ritter's police boss, Barbara Bosson (Fay Furillo on "Hill Street"). ★★

The 'Slap' Maxwell Story (Wednesday): Dabney Coleman is the title's newspaper sportswriter. The pilot wasn't available for review, but the first two scripts were hysterical. In the opening scene, Coleman asks a golf pro if it's true that "a bunch of homosexual coke freaks have infiltrated professional golf" and gets beaten up for his effort. ★★½ (based on scripts)

Full House (Friday): A recent widower raises three young daughters with the help of two live-in friends who are so immature you wouldn't trust them with your pets, much less your children. Lame gags (one of the



JOHN RITTER puts "Three's Company" far behind him as he takes on the title role in the highly touted ABC series "Hooperman."

friends is a standup comic) with icky-sweet kids. ★½

I Married Dora (Friday): Comedy about an architect who marries his Salvadoran maid so she won't be deported. From a creator of "The Cosby Show." Unavailable for review.

Once a Hero (Saturday): Captain Justice jumps off the pages of his failing comic strip and enters the real world in order to pep up the bored cartoonist who draws him. The hero also fights crime with the aid of fellow cartoon character Detective Gumshoe. Unavailable for review.

NBC

My Two Dads (Sunday): Another sitcom with a weird, rather distasteful premise. Thirteen years ago, Greg Evigan and Paul Reiser both had sexual relationships with a woman. She dies and leaves them her 12-year-old daughter. The dubious laughs come from each man trying to prove that he's the biological father. "Lolita" without sex — or much intelligence. ★½

J.J. Starbuck (Tuesday): Veteran TV Western star Dale Robertson returns to portray an eccentric Texas billionaire who travels the country, helping people and solving murder cases that stump the local police. Producer Stephen J. Cannell ("The A-Team") brings us a witty, touching mystery with a lot of heart. ★★½

A Year in the Life (Wednesday): Last year's miniseries returns as a weekly show. The best role and performer in the original was Eva Marie Saint, and the producers killed her off in the first episode! The miniseries was a pretentious soap opera. Maybe the series will be better. Unavailable for review.

Beverly Hills Buntz (Thursday): Of all the colorful, wonderful characters on "Hill Street Blues," why did the network decide to spin off two of the creepiest — crooked cop Norman Buntz (Dennis Franz) and his stoolie, Sid Thurston (Peter Jurasik)? On "Hill Street," Norm and Sid were fun in small doses as supporting characters, but they're not strong enough to carry their own show. ★★

A Different World (Thursday): Denise Huxtable (Lisa Bonet) goes to college in a spinoff from "The Cosby Show." NBC could probably air a dramatization of my computer manual in the time slot after "Cosby" and get as good a ratings share. My computer manual, however, is slightly more entertaining. The only spark in the pilot occurs when Cosby makes a cameo telephone appearance. But maybe new producer Ann Beatts ("Square Pegs") will give this series fresh impetus. ★★

Private Eye (Friday): Written by the creator of "Miami Vice," "Private Eye" ends up looking and sounding like a parody of it, with interminable MTV-style sequences and brooding

method-acting by stars Michael Woods, who plays an ex-cop thrown off the force for a crime he didn't commit, and his sidekick (Josh Brolin, James' son). It's even more violent than "Crime Story" and the pilot is convoluted beyond comprehension. Set in corrupt 1950s Los Angeles, "Private Eye" tries hard for a Raymond Chandler flavor, but instead offers only pseudo-tough-guy dialogue and world-weary cynicism. ★

Mama's Boy (Saturday): A weird comedy with Oedipal overtones. Nancy Walker moves in with her newspaper-columnist son (Bruce Weitz) and wreaks havoc with his sex life. Embarrassing rather than amusing to watch. The show airs only once a month, like "Beverly Hills Buntz." NBC calls it a "designated hitter," but it sounds as if the network feels "Mama's Boy" isn't strong enough to run weekly. They're right. ★½

CBS

Everything's Relative (Monday): Two bachelor brothers — one a hunk, the other a toad — share a New York apartment and a nagging mother who constantly asks the stale question, "When are you getting married?" Nice performances all around can't rescue a hoary premise. ★★

Jake and the Fatman (Tuesday): Veteran TV detective William Conrad ("Cannon") is wonderful as a slob of a district attorney who not only convicts criminals but chases them too. The two-hour pilot is a "Columbo"-style mystery. Joe Penny will give Don Johnson competition as the fashion-plate detective who works for the roly-poly D.A. ★★

The Law and Harry McGraw (Tuesday): A spinoff of "Murder, She Wrote," but not as clever. The chemistry between Jerry Orbach's low-life detective and Barbara Babcock's ("Hill Street Blues") socialite lawyer almost makes up for the lack of suspense. Almost. ★★½

The Oldest Rookie (Wednesday): Paul Sorvino is the head of public relations for a big-city police department who decides to chuck it all and become a beat cop. The gimmicky premise is quickly dumped after Sorvino and his handsome young sidekick are promoted to detectives, and the series turns into a routine cops 'n' robbers show with a few nice gags. ★★

Tour of Duty (Thursday): Experiencing the Vietnam War once was one time too many, but the war is doing boffo box office these days, and CBS hopes to duplicate the success on the small screen. But do we really want to see the war refought every week in our living room? So as not to offend liberals or conservatives, the series refuses to take a moral stand. Instead, it substitutes endless battle scenes sanitized for the family hour. ★



LISA BONET spins off from the Cosby clan in the NBC sitcom "A Different World."

Wiseguy (Thursday): In this Stephen J. Cannell production, a good-looking cop goes undercover to infiltrate an organized-crime family as a "wiseguy," or low-level employee of the organization. Even though they're Anglo-Saxon Protestants, the gangsters are attractive in a "Godfather" sort of way. The undercover cop (Ken Wahl) is sympathetic as a man cut off from family and friends because he can't tell them he hasn't really become a crook. ★★½

Beauty and the Beast (Friday): Despite some surprisingly touching moments, the ridiculous premise that a half-man, half-beast (Ron Perlman) lives in the sewers of New York and



THE SMALL SCREEN tackles the Vietnam War in CBS's "Tour of Duty" starring Stan Foster (foreground) and Kevin Conroy, among others.

rescues citizens in distress makes it hard to take this dramatic show seriously. The show has garnered praise from many TV critics, but it remains to be seen if the plot will regress into predictable weekly derring-do. ★★

Frank's Place (Saturday): A gentle character comedy from the creator of "WKRP in Cincinnati." A New England college professor (Tim Reid) inherits a restaurant in New Orleans and has to deal with its wonderfully cantankerous staff — plus a beautiful mortician! The humor may be too gentle for some. ★★½

Leg Work (Saturday): Will New Yorker Claire McCarron ever find a steady boyfriend? Will she ever catch the hitman out to kill her? This curious hybrid mixes "Molly Dodd" angst with formula detective fare. McCarron (Margaret Colin) quits her humdrum job as an assistant attorney for the more glamorous life of a gumshoe? The plot gives equal importance to her arid love life and battles with bad guys. ★½

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LINDA HAMILTON is an attractive district attorney who becomes emotionally involved with a strange man/beast that lives under the streets of New York City in the new CBS series "Beauty and the Beast."



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