

# "Morton & Hayes" one-of-a-kind TV Rob Reiner and Co. deliver the goods

By Steven Alan McGaw

Undeniably, television has its highlights, works that break the mold in terms of insight, execution, intelligence or originality. But, to tell the truth, TV fare is often guilty of glaring repetition, a numbing sameness that diminishes each program and the medium as a whole. That, of course, is why audiences react when a truly original program comes along. And that's also why Rob Reiner's brilliant new series, "Morton & Hayes," deserves a swift and immediate response from the viewing public. The innovative comedy premieres Wednesday, July 24, on CBS.

The premise of the show is inspired; each episode (introduced by Reiner) features a comedy short by '40s duo Chick Morton and Eddie Hayes, played by Kevin Pollak and Bob Amaral. Reiner admits the team was never truly popular with audiences and their cheaply produced two-reelers were mediocre at best. Still, a number of Morton & Hayes' works were unearthed in the vaults of producer Max King and readied for television. The shorts have no continuing theme or devices, save for Morton's acidic wisecracking, Hayes' blubbery buffoonery and their colossal ineptitude as a team.

Kevin Pollak is terrific as sharp-tongued Chick Morton, arguably the "brains" of the duo. Morton is a blow-hard, a coarse loudmouth given to snap decisions and unable to admit a mistake. He also loves to berate his dim-bulb colleague. Bob Amaral (where has this guy been?) is a delight as Eddie Hayes, a big, fearful baby of a man, clumsy, goodhearted and devoutly eager to please his contentious partner. Amaral's face is a playground of expression, his big eyes threatening to pop out of his head.

The show's look is very authentic, which adds mightily to the humor. The cheap sets, tacky sound effects and silly camera tricks of factory-style filmmaking are well in evidence. Reiner and company's sharpest idea, however, was to film the show in great, grainy black and

white. Instantly, viewers' living rooms will become '40s-style movie houses, where features were preceded by a spate of newsreels and "programmers" much like the works of Morton & Hayes.

The opening episode, "Daffy Dicks," finds the team in line, or at least as Reiner implies, representative form. Morton and Hayes are inept private detectives, clearly ready to bungle any assignment that comes their way. In walks tearful socialite Amelia Von Astor (Catherine O'Hara), determined to prove her husband's infidelity. When she presents the pair with the time, date, place and even the address of her philandering hubby's next assignation, Eddie remarks grimly, "Well, it's not much to go on." What follows is as unlikely and corny a

series of plot contortions as ever devised, punctuated by the peerless bumbling of Morton & Hayes.

The hilarity is aided by Christopher Guest as Dr. Von Astor, a sinister man with a loonily incomprehensible dialect. Guest, one of the show's producers, also directed the premiere.

"Morton & Hayes" is billed as a summer show, implying a finite place on the schedule; perhaps vigorous audience response can change that.

Bob Amaral (right) and Kevin Pollak star as Eddie Hayes and Chick Morton, a near-forgotten '40s comedy duo whose mediocre two-reel shorts have been unearthed and readied for national telecast. "Morton & Hayes" premieres Wednesday, July 24, on CBS.



Historian Shelby Foote (right) is the principal commentator for Ken Burns' epic 11-hour documentary, *The Civil War*. The award-winning series begins Wednesday on PBS.