

Strange bedfellows make TV magic in 'Eerie, Indiana'

Film's Joe Dante directs pilot

By Suzanne Gill

Each fall, there's at least one show that's the darling of the critics. Even in unimpressive TV seasons, one or two gems somehow find their way to the air. Such is the case with "Eerie, Indiana," a Sunday-night series debuting on NBC this season. At first blush, the premise for "Eerie" seems too glib for an audience: boy moves with his family from the comparative normality of New Jersey to a supposedly perfect Indiana town, but his dad ("Donna Reed," half-jokingly) is a suit piece of snuff for National Lampoon, but it's a series.

The show's mongrel bloodlines offer no guarantee, either. "Invisible Monsters" producer Jim Henson and Joe Meurer, who have no apparent experience with comedy (unless you take your humor very black indeed, are executive producers of the show, which Meurer says means they read scripts and show up at taping. More to the point, "Eerie" is the creation of writer-producer Earl Kender and Joe Rivera. Three years ago, Kender produced the sitcom "777-9311" (forerunner of the sitcom "Bulldog"), a mediocre effort at best. Playwright Rivera's resume is more promising and includes the provocatively titled "Last Day Out With Stein," a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and a stint as playwright-in-residence at London's Royal Court Theatre. To the mark is added the wicked genius of director Joe Dante, who co-wrote "Eerie" in a limited role as creative consultant and occasional director.

Joe Marshall, father of the series

main character, 15-year-old Omri Katz moves from the adult dream world of "Dallas" (where he played J.R. Ewing's son) to a fantasy land kids can appreciate. Marshall loves his cookie-cutter-generic family — a mom, dad and teenage sister — but can't help thinking they're a little naive about Eerie. After all, where else does the mailman carry a sidearm or Elvis Presley live on the paper route? Marshall and his younger friend Simon (Justin Shenkarow) are collecting evidence of the town's abnormalities (watch closely for props from Dante's films), which they keep locked in Marshall's attic. (For your own evidence that "Eerie, Indiana" is a bit, listen for kids to start quoting Simon's signature battle cry, "I was BORN for this.")

Whether in spite of or because of its premise and pedigree, "Eerie, Indiana" delivered a strong, memorable pilot episode — a tough assignment that's rarely completed. Full of satire, sight gags and just the right amount of tension, the episode found Marshall's mom being wooed by one of Eerie's most enterprising housewives, a widow with twin sons who supports herself by peddling Foreverware, her late husband's invention, to ladies in the neighborhood. With his reallably sloppy mom in a defrosting frenzy and about to mortgage the house to a woman in a pink shirtwaist dress and a flip, Marshall discovers the twins are trapped in a time warp that has kept them in the seventh grade for 30 years. Anyone with any sense of justice — or any experience with the seventh grade — would be sympathetic to their plight. And thereby hangs a tale that, if you missed it in the premiere episode, should be saved and savored in a repeat.

The second episode, airing Sunday, Sept. 22, involves another eerie, or rather, Eerie event. One of Marshall and Simon's chums is

littered for a retainer that jacks up sound waves in the dog's spectrum. From this, he learns Eerie's citizens are plotting to take over the town... just as soon as they can figure out how to work a doorman. Future shows include "The Jolly Rogers," in which Marshall meets seventh-generation pirates who've become landlocked in a Winnebago, and

"The Lost Hour," in which Marshall rescues himself and a lost girl from a parallel Daylight Savings Time universe. Eventually, there must surely be an episode featuring the Eerie raven, who appears in the show's opening plucking out the eyeballs from postage stamps.

NBC deserves credit for putting "Eerie, Indiana" on the map this fall; the series is strong enough to overcome its ill-advised lead-in, "The Adventures of Martin and Brian," and entertaining for unwritten viewers of all ages. It may even change the way you look at your own hometown.

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