

'Billy' gets a green light from ABC

Connolly starts fresh in new series

By Suzanne Gill

When "Head of the Class" needed a substitute for Howard Hesseman in its final season, producers Michael Elias and Rich Eustis hired Scotsman Billy Connolly to mentor the misfits of academe.

At the time, Connolly was gaining a national reputation as a funny but foul-mouthed stand-up comedian, but fortunately for Elias and Eustis, he was much more — an experienced musician, writer and comic actor with credits stretching from the Scottish Opera to the West End. When "Class" ended its run last spring, the producers dismissed their younger stars and hung on to Connolly.

And so "Billy" landed on cat feet in the ABC Friday-night schedule two weeks ago, marking the start of a particularly strong-looking spring season for the network. With some fanfare but very little hype, the series slipped unpretentiously into the schedule.

It is the kind of series that belies the desperate notion that there is a "formula" for success in situation comedy. The premise, about a marriage of convenience between a struggling single mom and a college professor in need of a green card, is contrived, unoriginal and even illegal. None of that mattered to its test audiences, nor does it matter on the home screen.

Everything about "Billy" looks "broken in" and comfortable. The cast looks at home on the set, the set isn't a distraction and the story lines jump right into the middle of the family's life, without self-conscious exposition. Add to this Connolly's occasional ad libs, and "Billy" has an unforced spontaneity that's truly lifelike.

"The qualities that are written for me in the show just suit me lovely," says Connolly in his native burr. Though his character, Billy MacGregor, is technically married to divorcee Mary Springer (daytime drama veteran Marie Marshall), she considers him a boarder. Her children, a teenage boy (Johnny Galecki) and two younger girls (Clara Bryant and Natanya Ross), accept him as a sort of black-sheep

uncle. Connolly especially likes the give-and-take between his character and Galecki's 14-year-old David.

"I like the way MacGregor handles the situations, especially with David. Little kids are easier to get along with, but you can't pull the wool over his eyes at all. So that's a bit I really enjoy."

The head of an off-screen household that includes five children between 2 and 20, Connolly

downplays his experience at parenting.

"I'm not one of those guys you see in commercials fawning fatherly on their children. But I'm a pretty good monster from time to time; you know, growling behind you up the stairs and all that."

"I have a kind of Victorian side, (too), and I say, 'Where are you going? Where have you been?'"

As for the expletives, he's managed to delete them from his television persona because, he says, he accepts the "parameters" of the medium.

"In the last episode we did, there was a big ad lib where I'm speaking to people who want to be citizens of America. And when I came off, Rich Eustis said, 'That was 16 minutes and three seconds and you didn't swear once!'"

WEDNESDAY



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