

## NBC's "Machine" smarter than you think

### Unlikely premise yields watchable series

By Steven Alan McGaw

Somewhere, maybe in some small Eastern European country, there's a heavily guarded vault. Inside are reels and reels of vintage video tape, preserving forever a vital part of our viewing heritage: the Really Bad part. Not just poor programming, of course, that's too large and varied a category. Instead, this vault is devoted to the preservation of the preposterous, those historic TV movies and series with premises and plotlines so outlandish a child wouldn't believe them. Children didn't believe them, in fact, and so we bid an abrupt adieu to shows like "Manimal," "Cop Rock" and "The Powers of Matthew Star."

After decades of stuff like "Hull High" and "The Immortal," audiences have become jaded to dubious programming. They feel they can "see it coming" and change the collective channel. While this is often a smart move, it can deprive viewers of a worthwhile show and deny the program a fair shot. Viewers are always well-advised to watch any program...once.

One viewing is all it should take

to garner a following for NBC's "Mann & Machine," a new adventure-drama series premiering Sunday, April 5. Produced by the prestigious team of Dick Wolf ("Law & Order," "Miami Vice") and Bob DeLaurentis ("St. Elsewhere"), the series has enough talent, taste and intelligence, both before and behind the camera, to make its unlikely, even silly-sounding premise palatable.

The premiere episode, titled "Prototype," sets up the story. In a not-too-distant future, police officers are aided and protected in their dangerous work by human-looking artificial intelligence units. Call them robots, call them cyborgs, call them a nuisance, says hard-bitten Bobby Mann, a second-generation cop with old-fashioned ideas.

When his mechanical partner is destroyed in an ambush, Bobby is quickly assigned a newer model, one allegedly far superior to the old one. Designed to look like a young woman (and cleverly named Eve Edison), Bobby's new partner is truly a high-tech marvel; her "brain" is downloaded daily into the

police department's main computer. And she's learning, Bobby is told. Day by day, observant Eve is learning to be human.

The dialogue between Bobby (played winningly by David Andrews) and Yancy Butler's wonderfully poker-faced Eve is the center of the series' charm. Bobby reluctantly accepts his role as partner, teacher and first friend. Eve, meanwhile, is already more human than her makers suspect. She's not just assimilating human traits because she's programmed to do so, she wants to. Another plus is the delightfully combative relationship between Bobby and his sharp-tongued captain, played by S. Epaphia Merkerson.

Crisp dialogue and skillful acting alone aren't enough to keep "Mann & Machine" from succumbing to the inherent silliness of its premise. Intelligence and a measure of taste and sensitivity do the job, helping to avoid obvious pitfalls and guiding the show to several wise decisions.

There's no denying that Yancy Butler is attractive, and the script acknowledges this. It avoids, however, the incessant leering so common to prime-time TV, especially when the female character in question is innocent or unaware. In one scene, Eve begins to disrobe before Bobby has left the room. Instead of gawking, he leaves, later admonishing Eve to practice modesty. Similarly, Eve's innocence is never used as a springboard for mean or inappropriate humor.

The makers of "Mann & Machine" are also to be commended for casting an African-American woman as a police captain. The decision, and Merkerson's fine performance, presents viewers with a genuinely new character, and a welcome change from the stock library of loud-mouthed, cigar-chomping men.



Do it for someone  
you love...  
Stop smoking

AMERICAN LUNG

This space donated  
as a public service by the publisher

**NATIONAL CHIMNEY  
AND FIREPLACE CO.**  
6773 CORNELL, TAYLOR, MI  
**291-6923**

#### COMPLETE MASONARY REPAIR & INSTALLATION

• CHIMNEYS & FIRE PLACES  
BUILT, REPAIRED  
& CLEANED  
• PORCHES  
• TUCK POINTING  
• ROOFING  
• SERVING THE  
TRI COUNTY AREA

• FREE ESTIMATES  
• SENIOR SAVINGS  
• PROFESSIONAL WORK  
• ALL WORK  
GUARANTEED  
ASK FOR DETAILS  
• WE WILL BEAT ANY  
COMPETITIVE PRICE