

ABC's 'Jacksons' good, no thriller

Music, parents' portrayals prove highlights

By Steven Alan McGaw

"The title of our miniseries tells the story," says Stan Margulies, executive producer of ABC's five-hour musical drama, *The Jacksons: An American Dream*, airing Sunday and Wednesday, Nov. 15 and 18. Together with partner and former Motown Records executive Suzanne De Passe, Margulies believes he has helped to create a program that "reinforces the age-old belief that a strong family can make any dream come true in this country, given talent, hard work and ambition."

Joseph Jackson's original dream was a successful musical career for himself. An able guitarist and vocalist, Joe planned to move to California and take his stab at show business, but the plans were scuttled by the unexpected pregnancy of his girlfriend Katherine. The couple married and settled in Gary, Ind., where Joe took a job at a steel mill.

But his dream didn't die. As the family grew, Joe saw in his talented children the potential for stardom. A guitar for Tito was the first of many instruments and pieces of equipment Joe brought into the

house, transforming the living room into a rehearsal studio. Relentlessly, Joe pushed his boys (the girls got their chances later, after the breakthrough of the Jackson Five) through practice after practice, often bringing one or more to tears, but never losing sight of his dream.

Lawrence-Hilton Jacobs, long relegated to straight-to-video action films, makes an unforgettable Joe Jackson. Through Jacobs' forceful, carefully crafted performance, we see Joe as a man whose thwarted ambitions and need for a better life blinded him to how hard he was pushing his children.

Angela Bassett is warm and sympathetic as Katherine, whose support bound her family in difficult times. The children are played at different ages by three sets of actors. The stand-out performances include Falyn Bryant's sensitive portrayal of eldest daughter Rebbie, and Damon Morris as the oldest of the show's three Jermaines. Wylie Draper draws the difficult task of portraying the adult Michael and offers only a glimpse of the singer's strange, ultrasensitive relationship

with his family and the world around him.

In the supporting ranks, Vanessa Williams makes a classy, eye-catching De Passe, and Holly Robinson does her own singing in an elegant cameo as Diana Ross. Billy Dee Williams brings both glamour and warmth to his small, flashy turn as Motown founder Berry Gordy.

Still, the miniseries is not without its flaws. The work contains isolated moments of TV-style drama—Joe ridiculing a prepubescent Marlon in rehearsal, Katherine's anger and tears at learning of Joe's infidelity—but the only continuing emotions in the piece are love, hope and the ambition to sing, sing, sing. Didn't anyone ever question the worth of their pursuits? Were there no encounters with racism or incidents of dissent as the other performing family members increasingly became Michael's sidemen? And were the Jacksons exempt from the normal agenda of spats, squabbles and divisions that plague other families?

Omissions such as these render *The Jacksons* merely a pastel diorama of the Jacksons' lives, short on excitement and long on caution, an inoffensive, entertaining, cartoon that trivializes both a powerful moment in popular music and the very real drama of family life. The miniseries' message seems to be tap your toes, sing along and don't look too hard. It's as simple as A-B-C.

