

After 'Cheers,' 'Frasier' begins something new in Seattle

By JOHN CROOK

Among the new shows NBC is launching this fall, few are generating as much positive word of mouth as "Frasier," the "Cheers" spin-off premiering Thursday, Sept. 16. Small surprise, then, that the last thing the cast wants to discuss is the A-word: "AfterMASH."

Like "Frasier," that 1983 comedy followed a monumentally successful series ("M*A*S*H") and featured some of the same creative forces that had kept the original show near the top of the Nielsen for a decade. While other spinoffs have been far more serious artistic disasters (remember "The Tortellis"), perhaps none has fallen as far short of expectations as "AfterMASH," which lasted barely a year.

"This is our show, this is not 'After' anything," says "Frasier" star Kelsey Grammer. "We have a new show, based on a character that's been around for a while."

Judging from the pilot episode, directed by "Cheers" veteran James Burrows, "Frasier" is indeed a refreshing creation in its own right. His marriage to starbuck Dr. Lilith Sternin-Crane now dissolved, Frasier Crane (Grammer) has returned to his hometown of Seattle to start a new life. Tired of his psychiatric practice, he accepts a new challenge as a radio-show therapist, assisted by Roz Doyle (Peri Gilpin). While Frasier gets his fill of neurotics over the phone lines, his private life is scarcely less cluttered with zanies and dysfunctionals.

His married brother, Niles (David Hyde Pierce from "Powers That Be"), is the chilly embodiment of their late mother's philosophy that "a handshake is as good as a hug." Martin (John Mahoney, "In the Line of Fire"), their father, is a proud ex-cop who bitterly resents the fact that a hip injury has forced him to move in with Frasier. Worst of all, for Frasier, his father brings along his best friend—Eddie, a strange little terrier who loves to sit idly and stare at Frasier. Caring for Martin while his son is at work is Daphne Moon (Jane Leeves, "Murphy Brown"), a blissfully ditzy Manchester, England, lass who confesses to being "a bit psychic."

David Lee, who wrote the pilot with co-executive producers David Angell and Peter Casey, emphasizes that "Frasier" will not be another generic workplace comedy. Generally, what we're going to deal with is the relationship between an adult child and his father.

"The thing that we think the great chuck of Americans our age are going through right now, after having children, ...is what do you do with your parents," he explains. "(The show) was going to be a workplace comedy...and we decided that had a lot of similarities to other shows. Then we became much more interested in the emotional appeal of what parents and their children go through as they get older."

Grammer himself has gone through a lot in recent months, serving as tabloid fodder with much-publicized drug and marital problems, and he professes to get a big boost from the audience's fondness for Frasier.

"I think the audience is dying to see this show. A number of people at an airport or something will come up to me and go, 'Good luck with the new show, can't wait to see it,'" he relates. "I think maybe there is a residual excitement that they're not going to lose everybody, like I'm the Methadone clinic of 'Cheers' addicts or something. I think the best thing that Frasier always carried was that he changed every year, that he was moving, always."

"It's 'After' nothing. It's the beginning of something new."

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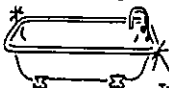
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