

'Home Improvement' power up to the Nielsen top ten

Tim Allen plays a tool-happy everyman

by Suzanne Gill

Sometimes, a wrench is just a wrench. But on ABC's Tuesday-night comedy "Home Improvement," tools get top billing.

After getting burned two years ago with "Chicken Soup," an attempt to translate New York comedian Jackie Mason's nightclub act to a sitcom living room, ABC has apparently hit the nail on the head with this retooling of series star Tim Allen's one-man stage act into a weekly comedy. In the early weeks of the 1991-92 television season, the show has become a top-rated hit, drawing a larger audience than "Full House," which precedes it, and proving itself a worthy lead-in for "Roseanne," the No. 2-rated series on television.

Allen had an auspicious introduction to national audiences in the Showtime special "Men Are

Pigs" and has literally brought the tools of his trade with him to "Home Improvement." If a man's home is his castle, this series maintains, then the garage is his throne room.

Allen plays family-man Tim Taylor, inveterate putterer and host of a television show-within-a-show titled "Tool Time." Here, Taylor and his skeptical helper, Al (Richard Karn), demonstrate household projects, and Taylor shares his wisdom about all things masculine—an act he can ill afford. Both on and off the air, his neanderthal grunts and wools and appeals for "more power!" (measured in horses) invariably fail him when crisis strikes, and he must turn to Wilson, the neighbor across the back fence, for help. Unseen from the eyes down, Wilson borrows heavily from poet/culturalist Robert Bly and pop psychology

generally to dispense little chestnuts on the male predicament for Taylor.

The only break-out hit of the new season, "Home Improvement" has truly been in the right place at the right time. Not only does it enjoy a showcase timeslot (compare it to NBC's "Eerie, Indiana," which has sunk to around 90th place opposite the second half-hour of "60 Minutes"), but goes straight to the heart of the average man, congratulating him for doing his chores while letting him laugh at handier-than-thou series like PBS' "This Old House."

Carving out a niche at round number eight as measured by the Nielsen calipers, this series makes every other new show look like an also-ran. Its nearest competition, at about number 28 overall, is ABC's "Step By Step," followed closely by "Nurses," "I'll Fly Away," "Homefront" and "Royal Family." "Baby Talk," "The Torkelsons," "Sibs," "Teech," "Brooklyn Bridge," "Drexel's Class," "Herman's Head" and "Roc" are also making respectable showings. "Good & Evil," the first big network series to be canceled, was by no means last at around 77.

In this self-appointed back-to-basics decade, "Home Improvement" lets men see themselves in Allen's character and lets women see their husbands—foibles and all—through the eyes of his wife, Jill, as played by Patricia Richardson. Jill has a more realistic charm than most rail-thin, over-achieving TV moms, and she is evenly matched with Allen in the verbal sparring that is a feature of each episode.

But the same themes are addressed better later in the evening by both "Roseanne" and "Coach." Allen's series is distinguished—from "Coach" in particular—by the central character's persistent childlessness, from his tool play and his sublimation of libido into horsepower, to his inability to muster more than an it-was-an-accident apology for repeated thoughtless behavior.

Just once, couldn't he put down that nail gun and come out acting like a man?



Veronica Hamel (left) and Susan Ruttan star in NBC's *Deadly Medicine*, debuting Monday. Hamel plays a pediatrician whose nurse (Ruttan) may be committing murder.

© 1991 Ewing Inc.