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'Powers That Be' takes comedy inside the Beltway

John Forsythe stars in political satire

By Suzanne Gill

Based on the track record of its executive producer, *The Powers That Be*, debuting Saturday, March 7, on NBC, will either die ignominiously in four to six weeks or become a staple of contemporary culture, airing on the network for a decade or more. The prime-time mover in question is none other than Norman Lear, a 70-year-old gadfly whose successes have changed the course of television comedy and set a standard even he may not be able to equal.

Twenty-one years ago, Lear stood domestic situation comedy on its ear, replacing suburban picket fences, mom's pearl choker and dads who knew best with a loud-mouthed bigot whose castle was a row house in Queens, his throne a threadbare wing chair six feet from the television. The premiere of *All in the Family* was a cultural event anticipated and dissected by millions. It was an emblem of the 1970s, a decade of confusing moral issues and self-help. And it gave its blessing to the family dinner table, a better place to argue than the streets.

Since *All in the Family*, every Lear hit has broken barriers. *Murder, She Wrote* was the first series about a strident feminist. *Sanford and Son* and *Good Times* were the first to portray blacks in an idealized urban environment, while *The Jeffersons* showed blacks getting a well-earned taste of the good life. *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* was both soap opera and parody. The flops, too, have been famous for their daring, from *A.K.A. Pablo* to *Sunday Dinner*.

Yet Lear insists he doesn't perceive a change in television since he began writing for the medium some 40 years ago.



Joseph Gordon-Levitt plays Pierce, Senator Powers' neurotic son, in NBC's *The Powers That Be*.

"My grandfather taught me life is about throwing pebbles in the water. You don't ever see the water rise, but you have the faith that it does. Any physicist will tell you that it does. For all the talk about changing the face of television, it still seems to me like throwing a pebble in the water. I've never seen the tide rise at all."

Perhaps that's what keeps Lear going at an age when the youthful fire to change the world is generally expected to have cooled. His latest foray is an election-year satire that's intended to pay dividends of renewed interest in political leadership.

The Powers That Be stars John Forsythe as Senator William Powers, a five-term Eastern Democrat who's being pressured to run for president. Holland Taylor (*Bosom Buddies*) plays the chilling woman behind the man, a Lady Macbeth who slaps her hapless maid in front of a tickled studio audience, then drags her offstage for more verbal and physical abuse.

Valerie Mahaffey plays their nervous daughter, billed as a recovering anorexic, who's married to a wimpy congressman (David Pierce). Peter MacNichol is Powers' barbed, image-conscious press secretary, and Eve Gordon (*Coming of Age*) is Powers' mistress. As if this weren't enough, the one-hour pilot introduces Powers' gate-crashing illegitimate Jewish daughter (Robin Bartlett) conceived while he served in the Korean War.

There's hardly anyone to root for here; the ensemble cast is a collection of hollow stereotypes orbiting a gutless central character. Stick around, begs Lear, and watch the well-meaning senator develop a spine. But evolution takes time, and this series may not have until next month.



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