

## Romance is standard fare at 'Jack's Place'

### Hal Linden stars in ABC comedy-drama

By Suzanne Gill  
Love is silly. Shameless. Hopeless. For that matter, so is "Jack's Place," an unabashedly romantic comedy-drama debuting Tuesday, May 26 on ABC.

Hal Linden stars as Jack Evans, a piano-noodling Los Angeles restaurateur. Finola Hughes ("Cats," "Soapdish," "General Hospital") and John Dye ("Makin' the Grade," "Billionaire Boys Club," "Tour of Duty") co-star as Jack's cocktail waitress and bartender, respectively.

Chelsea (Hughes) is a whiz at baseball trivia, but romance generally leaves her stranded: She just can't read a man's signals after he's gotten to first base. Greg Toback (Dye) is a single father and something of a movie buff behind the bar. He likes Chelsea, and she pretends not to notice. They're both nice people. In fact, you won't meet anything but nice people on this show — except for a few ex-boyfriends who turned out to be cats.

Swirling around this core cast are the patrons and ancillary staff of Jack's Place, from the temperamental French chef who believes love and cooking don't mix to the long-lost daughter who comes looking for her father. Each hour-long show has three story lines, of which one is a boy-meets-girl romance. Guest stars will include Linda Purl, Michele Greene, Hobert Guillaume, Mickey Rooney and Trevor Eve, a British actor ("A Doll's House," "Parnell and the Englishwoman") who does an American dialect better than most and displays talent as a sketch artist as well.

"Jack's Place" isn't bad, but it would look better if one were tipsily infatuated with it, as executive producer Scott Brazil surely is. Brazil is a product of the esteemed MTM studios, where he worked on "The White Shadow" and won Emmys for "Hill Street Blues," but his last two drama series, "TV 101" for NBC and "WJOU" for CBS, flopped after they promised

quickness yet proved merely derivative. It's a curse that's hard to shake. On paper, "Jack's Place" sounds charming — an affectionate anthology of romance in a neighborhood bistro run with a personal touch — but on screen it falls somewhat short.

Indeed, "Jack's Place" might look better if it looked worse. This upscale "bistro" has no red-checked tablecloths, no candles on the tables, no sawdust on the floor. Set and produced in a city where every good and trendiness is the only constant, Jack's Place has the visual appeal of a page from *The Wall Street Journal*. If there's to be any romance here, Jack's patrons will have to bring it with them.

Ten years after ABC retired Barney Miller, Linden is making his second attempt to return to series television. ("Blake's Magic," with Harry Morgan, ran briefly in 1986 on NBC.) Handsome as ever in a Hart, Shaffner and Marx wardrobe, he looks far too debonair to be the Mr. Lonelyhearts of the prime-time set. British-bred Hughes, a kind of soft-focus Joan Collins, needs to watch her diction. Her "last call" sounds like "law school" — hardly the invitation one wants to hear from a cocktail waitress.

"Jack's Place" joins the ABC schedule where "Civil Wars" failed, representing a programming about-face from a cynical, experimental divorce-court drama audiences rejected to a proven format — swimming in a sentimental sauce. With its solid appeal to viewers over 40, "Jack's Place" may be helped in the ratings by rumors of a backstage romance between Hughes and Dye, but it will likely prove to be nothing more than a summer flirtation for the network.

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