

## TV's most sought-after address? 'Melrose Place'

by Suzanne Gill

Wanted: Millions of young viewers to frequent bohemian Hollywood apartment complex with pool. Shown by appointment on Wednesday nights. Vicarious pleasure guaranteed.

That's *Melrose Place*, the *Beverly Hills, 90210* spinoff that won the ratings race in its second week on the air. The Fox series, airing on Wednesdays, features an ensemble cast of eight attractive actors playing a group of men and women in their 20s who live in a Los Angeles Courtyard apartment building.

*Melrose* is but the first of a glut of such property set to hit the market this summer and fall. But if creator Darren Star and Executive producer Aaron Spelling (*Beverly Hills, 90210*) have their way, you'll already have a long-term agreement with their show, which debuted July 8, that precludes success for the competition.

It doesn't take an accountant to see how calculated the series' early success has been. First, brooding lead actor Grant Tinker was introduced to audiences as Jake Hanson, the older man who taught *90210*'s also-brooding ladies' man Luke Perry everything he knew—a sort of resume by inference. In May, Show appeared on two episodes of *90210* and an equal number of national magazine covers. The Fox network made it clear that we could address any further inquiries to *Melrose Place*.

Who is lucky enough to share an address with Jake? Also paying rent are: an aspiring designer (Josie Blissett) and her medical-intern husband (Thoms Calabro, at 33 the oldest cast member), a Southern bombshell (Amy Locane), an aerobics instructor (Vanessa Williams—no, not the former Miss America), an entry-level office worker (Courtney Thorne-Smith) fresh out of college, a social worker (Doug Savant) and an aspiring writer (Andrew Shue).

After these announcements, the publicity machine shut down, waiting for demand to build. Interviews were kept to a minimum, and no advance copy of the show was available for screening by critics, who usually help to spread the word about new series. One national magazine even contacted Los Angeles-based reporters with offers of cash for interview tapes. Meanwhile portraits of the cast—by top art photographer Annie Liebowitz—went on display at The Gap stores everywhere.

The plan was a success. Viewership of the 90-minute premiere was exceeded only by that of the second episode, which drew more viewers than the competition on ABC, CBS and NBC, which were covering the third night of the Democratic National Convention.

If *Melrose Place* continues to establish itself in these still-early weeks, it may doom the competition, which ranges from libidinous *Freshman Dorm* to soft-porn *200 Malibu Road*. On Fox alone, the fall-season competition includes a campus drama, *Class of '96*, and *The Heights*, a drama about a garage band.

"Our show is setting the standard for what these other shows are

about," says Star, who based *Melrose* on his own early experiences living in Los Angeles.

One of the show's most unusual elements is the presence of a gay character, Savant's Matt Fielding. Spelling thinks it's important for his young audience to see others accepting a gay friend on his own terms, and the actor agrees, adding, "I think we have an opportunity to present a very positive role model for a lot of gay teens."

Locane is not so sanguine about her character, Southern vixen Sandy Louis Harling, who works as a cocktail waitress while waiting for her big break in show business.

"I really don't like anything about Sandy," the New Jersey-bred actress insists.

Shue is more excited about his character, Billy Campbell, who is Thorne-Smith's roommate.

"I'm going through the same things that my character's going through, as far as making career choices, figuring out who I want to go out with, who my friends are gonna be...things like that," Shue says. He's pragmatic about the chances of success for any of the look-alike shows.

"I haven't seen any of the other shows, (but) I've read a couple of the scripts. I have a feeling they're all going to be a lot alike. I think it will come down to the specific writing, and the actors in each one. I can't imagine that they will all last."

By the end of September, the casts of at least some of these shows should expect to be checking the Help Wanted section.

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