

Slouching toward wisdom: 'Middle Ages' finds mark

No whining schoolboys in this ensemble drama

By Suzanne Gill

Producer Stan Rogow calls the 1990s "the '60s without drugs." Pointing to political changes at home and abroad and the expectation of more change to come, Rogow observes, "It's not unlike something that was happening in the late '60s, only now it's happening for a lot more people."

It was that idea and a conversation Rogow had with former NBC entertainment chief (now head of Paramount studios) Brandon Tartikoff that led him to develop *Middle Ages*, an ensemble drama debuting Monday, Aug. 31, on CBS. The series moves to a Thursday time slot on Sept. 3.

The producer of *Shannon's Deal*, *Playing for Time* and *The Clan on the Cave Bear*, Rogow, like Tartikoff, is a man in his 40s. When Tartikoff, who midwived hits from *Hill Street Blues* to *Fresh Prince*, suggested a series about "guys our age," Rogow took umbrage.

"I said, 'I'm not interested in guys our age. Look at the way I dress, look at what I do for a living. It's not interesting to me.'"

In fact, *Middle Ages* includes people of all ages who are trying to keep their dreams from being buried in the debris of daily life. Peter Riegert (*Local hero*) and William Russ (*Wiseguy*) play lifelong buddies who've arrived at mid-life and are assessing their options.

Riegert, a family man and traveling electronics wholesaler, is suddenly haunted by his memories of a beautiful young woman who took drugs and jumped off a building 20 years earlier. Laughing, the vision tells him she can fly and so can he. But can he? While he is still wondering, the real woman (Ashley Crow) in his life reminds him that her existence, too, is something less than a fairy tale.

Russ is more impulsive, and, seeing the sexy 20-year-old lead singer he always wanted for his rock 'n' roll band, decides to quit his desk job, return to music and ask the young woman to marry him.

There's humor in *Middle Ages*,

and hope, but only about as many car chases, shootouts, bikini-clad women and sunny days as there are in an ordinary life. Set in Chicago, the show captures both the energy and the dinginess of that great, sprawling city.

James Gammon co-stars as Riegert's single, 60-ish father-in-law, Dave, who is laid off by the

same firm that employs Riegert. Dave survives a dark night of the soul to discover that he still has choices before him: He decides he'll drive a cab.

Ruby Dee plays a domestic laborer whose dignity and practical wisdom come to Dave's aid.

Like *Northern Exposure* before it, *Middle Ages* has an intriguing and eclectic musical score. All in all, *Ages* isn't as sprightly as *Exposure*, but that's probably a function of maturity: This series has more meat on its bones.



Weeknights on NBC, Branford Marsalis (left) and Jay Leno star in *The Tonight Show*.



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