

Fox's 'Danger Theatre' not for all tastes... and proud of it

By Carl Spinks

James Thurber once wrote a story about his favorite party pastime, a word game called Ghosts. His wife, however, did not share Thurber's giddy enthusiasm for the game, he noted, and "wished it were in hell with Knock, Knock, Who's There?"

It's hard to find a clear consensus on anything. From traditionally taboo topics such as politics and religion to unexpected hornets' nests like fantasy Super Bowls and "Well, I wouldn't call that green in a million years," only one bet is safe: people will disagree.

Television is no exception. Even though producers do costly research to find the lowest common denominators and safest (i.e., blandest) on-camera personalities, likes and dislikes on television are hotly debated. Want to polarize a party? Lament the passing of "Twin Peaks." Longing to irritate a newshound? Opine that venerable David Brinkley doesn't know Bosnia from Bosco, then stand back and let the games begin.

Now careening into the fray is Fox's new "Danger Theatre," premiering Sunday, July 11, and this one's sure to register high on the argument meter.

Some will see it as a vigorous spoof of bygone cop/adventure/dogooder shows such as "Knight Rider" and "Hawaii Five-O," programs filled with square-jawed heroes, beady-eyed villains and deathless dialogue such as "Not so fast, pal!" and "Book him!"

Detractors, however, will quickly peg the series as just another dumb sitcom, indistinguishable from, or even worse than the shows it aims to parody.

Robert Vaughn ("The Man From U.N.C.L.E.," "Superman III") brings his usual stolid, gray-at-the-temple authority to his duties as host of the series. Each week, Vaughn babbles ominously about the mean streets of contemporary America, the hooded gunmen lurking at every door and the helpless plight of peace-loving citizens scared to death by the may hem they see around them. He also makes periodic gaffes, such as solemnly intoning "crimes of fashion" for "crimes of passion" (a cue-card error), or eagerly inquiring about the post-show party when the episode is only half over.

Vaughn's gloomy pronouncements serve as introductions for each week's installments of two miniature series: First up is "The Searcher," starring Diedrich Bader as the leather-clad, motorcycle-riding title character. Endowed with an impossibly deep, gravelly voice and a clumsiness normally reserved for animated characters, our hero stumbles through his macho paces, more or less saving the day but never getting the girl.

"Tropical Punch," the second of the show's recurring story lines, stars Adam West ("Batman") as stumbling, stout-hearted Mike Morgan, a captain on the police force of a crime-ridden Hawaiian city. Aided by his assistants, Detective Tom McCormick (sort of

a blow-dried Barney Fife, played by Billy Morrisette), and rotund Al Hamoki (Peter Navy Tulasosopo), Morgan blusters his way through solving crimes, relentlessly drawing his gun and spouting an endless litany of tough-guy nonsense. These guys make "Police Squad" look like Interpol.

"Danger Theatre" is the brainchild of director Penelope Spheeris ("Wayne's World," the upcoming "Beverly Hillbillies") and Robert Wolterstorff of "Quantum Leap." Besides her duties as executive producer, Spheeris also directs several episodes.

So what's the verdict on "Danger Theatre?" Is it a keen-eyed, on-target spoof of by-the-numbers action shows, or a numbing half-hour of real stupidity, a no-brainer that makes "Mannix" seem like "Masterpiece Theatre?"


Here's the rub: it's both. For fans of "Airplane" and the "Hot Shots" movies the show will likely be a pallid but pleasing imitation. But viewers more inclined to PBS than "Police Squad" will find themselves quickly scurrying to another channel.

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