

'I'll Fly Away' comes full circle on PBS

By JOHN CROOK

A poignant drama series that many critics hailed as being "too good for network TV" returns, however briefly, starting this week. "I'll Fly Away: Then and Now," an original TV movie that ties up loose ends in the now-canceled series, airs Monday, Oct. 11, on many PBS affiliates. Beginning the following Monday, PBS will rebroadcast all 38 episodes that aired during the series' two seasons on NBC.

"I'll Fly Away" focused on two families in the mythical Deep South town of Bryland as the turbulent 1960s were dawning. Sam Waterston starred as small-town prosecutor Forrest Bedford. Regina Taylor played Lilly Harper, housekeeper and caregiver for his three children (Jeremy London, Ashlee Levitch and John Aaron Bennett). All principals were able to recreate their roles for the TV movie with the exception of London, who was replaced by his identical twin brother, Jason, due to a scheduling conflict.

"I'll Fly Away: Then and Now" opens in modern-day Atlanta, where Lilly, now in her 60s, is living comfortably. During a weekend visit from her 12-year-old grandson,

a Californian fixated on rap music, she chafes at the boy's total lack of interest in their family's history.

Finally, Lilly firmly sits him down with a scrapbook and begins to relate her experiences in the civil rights movement to the reluctant boy. She describes the tragic murder case that forced her family to flee Bryland in 1962, and forever changed the lives of the Harper and Bedford families. At the conclusion of the film, Lilly returns to Bryland to learn the fate of her friends and former employers. This return visit is not only a sequel but a prequel to the series, setting the stage for the following 38 episodes.

The movie was shot on location in Georgia and directed by series executive producer Ian Sander. It also includes taped interviews with cast and crew members, who offer their views about the importance of the series, both historically and personally. More interviews will be featured at the end of selected episodes throughout the season.

Commenting on the series' impact, Waterston says, "I think it's great that this drama takes on the history of the civil rights movement, which is one of the thorniest issues that the United States has had to

deal with...and keeps on affirming that there is a way through the problems.

"It reminds people that the result of the struggle, which looked nasty and horrible at the time, was a tremendous benefit to society; that we can move forward and have moved forward; and that giving up and bailing out is not such a good idea."

Waterston, Taylor and the series all were nominated for Emmys during both seasons of the show's NBC run. While they struck out both times, the two actors have won Golden Globes and American Television Awards for their work, and the show itself has received a battery of other awards, including the prestigious Humanitas Prize and a Television Critics Association Award.

"It was a great shame that the show didn't go on for two or three more years," says Waterston, "because the story is so interesting and absorbing in its detail. It records historic acts by people who are completely unknown, and I don't think that there's anything more interesting than the evolution of a culture."

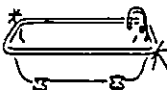
"If every person who wrote in and got excited about keeping it on the air sends their local PBS station \$10, public television would be able to do more quality shows like 'I'll Fly Away' on its own," he adds.

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