

Baby 'Battle'

Sci-fi series flies into political mine fields

By MICHAEL GILTZ

WHAT prime-time show regularly tackles hot-button issues like torture, abortion, genetic engineering, religious fundamentalism and the war on terror? "24"? "The West Wing"?

How about "Battlestar Galactica," the SCI FI hit airing Fridays at 10 p.m. that's swiftly become one of the most complex, dark and political shows on TV.

Creator Ron Moore — who worked on shows like "Star Trek: The Next Generation" and "Roswell" — admits the science-fiction setting is a blessing.

"You can get away with things in the science-fiction universe that contemporary drama can't touch," says Moore.

"We'd be in endless arguments over the content of the show if we were actually dealing with Republicans and Democrats and Christians and Jews and Muslims and the war on terrorism," he says. "But give it a sci-fi spin, and you get a nice big pass."

On the show, humans are battling Cylons, which can look just like them but are not "really" alive. The show depicts the sexual abuse and torture of Cylons ("You can't rape a machine," one human says blithely.) And the entire story begins with a 9/11-style attack that wipes out virtually the entire human population.

"Battlestar Galactica" also messes with viewer expectations. Mary McDonnell plays President Roslin,

the Secretary of Education who became president after everyone else in succession was wiped out by the Cylons. She seemed a classic liberal, but circumstances have forged Roslin into a steely leader convinced of her messianic destiny.

Recently, she outlawed abortion (much to her own dismay) because humans are "down to their last 54,000 people and need every baby."

Then there's the fascinating twist that the humans worship multiple gods while the Cylons are monotheistic.

The result is a fan base that crosses the political spectrum. And sci-fi's traditionally liberal fans have come nose-to-nose with "Galactica's" core fans of the original series, who tended to be Republican.

"I see more conservative fansites and commentary than I think is usual for science fiction," says Moore, a political-science major in college who likes to tweak both sides. "I think the show is at its best when it makes you vaguely uncomfortable and makes you sort of wonder if you're rooting for the wrong side."

Tricia Helfer — who plays Number Six, a beautiful Cylon — finds herself fielding questions from fans about monotheism, polytheism, the influence of Buddhism on the show and other wildly complex issues.

"Sometimes on my Web site I get asked questions I can't even begin to answer," laughs Helfer. "I've gone to conventions and sometimes I worry I'm letting them down."

President Roslin (Mary McDonnell) has had baby issues — among a galaxy of other problems — this season on "Battlestar Galactica." The science-fiction series has lifted many hot-button political issues from here on Earth.

