

TV Sunday

It's all rise for the Supremes in 'First Monday'

Court in the act

By MICHAEL GILTZ

THE new Supreme Court drama "First Monday" previews on CBS on January 15 and then moves to its regular timeslot of Fridays at 9 — a timeslot the show's creator Donald P. Bellisario both loves and hates.

Make that hates. "I hate it!" laughs Bellisario, on the phone from L.A., where he's still editing the pilot after some reshoots and then plunging into episode nine of a 13-episode order. "I hate it! I'd rather be on Sunday at 8 or Monday at 10 or Tuesday at 9. But hey, Brandon Tartikoff started me off on 'Quantum Leap' on Friday night at 9. I told him it wouldn't work there and it didn't and when he moved me, 'Quantum Leap' got seen, worked and went on for five years.

"Les Moonves took 'JAG' [CBS] and they put it on Friday at [when it switched from NBC to 9 and when it moved to Tuesday night it took off. I don't know; maybe it's a good luck charm for me. Start on Friday at 9 and then move."

Bellisario is riding high with "JAG," a quiet success story for CBS that was lodged in the Top 20 but has enjoyed its biggest ratings yet thanks to the military drama's rock solid entertainment value and obvious patriotic appeal post 9/11.

Besides, "First Monday" is loaded with stars like James Garner (who plays the crusty chief justice), Charles Durning, and Joe Mantegna, along with six other justices, a passel of clerks, wives, and children. In other words, it's an expensive enough investment that Bellisario is confident CBS will give it a shot on a higher profile night if it doesn't click.

"This show has about 24 regular and recurring cast members," he says. "To put all that in 44 minutes or less, which is all you have — boy, I miss the full two-hour pilots. This is the first one-hour pilot I've done."

The timeslot means nothing to Garner. Famous for his legendary legal battles to get his fair share of profits from shows like "The Rockford Files," Garner still



The new CBS Supreme Court drama "First Monday" (left) is loaded with stars such as James Garner (above right) and Joe Mantegna.

takes a blithe disregard for contractual details and timeslot positions.

"I don't have anything to do with that," says Garner. "It wouldn't make any difference if I offered my opinion. 'Rockford' was on Friday nights as I recall. So it can't be too bad a night. But I wouldn't know a good night from a bad night on television."

Garner plays the very conservative Chief Justice Brankin, a double pleasure for Bellisario because "Maverick" is his all-time favorite show.

"Jim Garner is probably the most liberal man I know," laughs Bellisario.

Garner, who quotes from "The Portable Curmudgeon" and calls the Supreme Court election ruling "the biggest thievery in history," readily agrees.

"I sometimes get upset about my character," says Garner, who finds himself arguing positions he would never consider in real life. "I'm a card-carrying liberal. [But on the show] I'm generally on the other side of what I really think."

But what Bellisario will strive for is a real balance on the issues — something

he knows will make the show that much more compelling. Each week, Mantegna — the newest justice and often the swing vote — will wrestle with issues like confidentiality for pregnant teenagers and hear both sides debated.

Another quick way to air both views is the show-within-a-show called "Curveball," a faux cable issues show that uses real people like the Rev. Jerry Falwell and Johnny Cochran to debate the issues facing the fictional court.

Finding the balance has been fun for him, and that involves matching the current Court's makeup but avoiding a one-on-one link between characters and real-life figures. On the show, for example, the black Justice is a liberal in the Marshall tradition, not a conservative a la Clarence Thomas. More difficult has been finding the right balance among the stereotypically left script writers of Hollywood.

"I find myself getting all my liberal, mostly Jewish writers to rethink the issues," says Bellisario, who claims he has yet to rethink a position on a major issue. His easy humor has seen Bellisario

through rough times. The 65-year-old writer/producer grew up in a coal mining town in Pennsylvania, where his dad owned a bar.

"It was a tavern called Al's Place," says Bellisario. "It was filled with miners who were on their way into the mine and would stop by for a shot and some snuff on their way down. God, they used to drink really bad wine."

"But by the end of World War II it was all over with and my dad was really poor. There were about 10 bars in town by then and my dad was a compulsive gambler and had lost most of his money. The union wars went on and the mines went away and the town died."

Bellisario eventually broke away and entered advertising. But he chucked it all in after significant success to make it in the movies. He moved to L.A. and turned to TV because he had no money and that's where easy money could be found.

"In two years, I went from writing a spec script to creating 'Magnum PI,'" says Bellisario. His hits have been quiet successes like "Quantum Leap" and "JAG," shows that were underestimated by both their own network and the competition.

That won't happen with "First Monday," a high-profile drama and one of the biggest financial gambles of the spring. "This one may be overestimated," he jokes. "If people take time to learn the characters — because there are so many of them — they'll fall in love with it."

But after creating such lasting hits as "JAG" and "Magnum," surely the pressure on Bellisario is purely creative and not financial?

"Oh no. You've never been through a Hollywood divorce," says Bellisario, who is married for the third time.

"I feel plenty of financial pressure. Why do you think I'm still doing this at my age?"