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TV Sunday

By MICHAEL GILTZ

The fifth season of "ER" was the first weak one in the show's history. The departure of George Clooney was the big news. But that wouldn't have seemed so worrying if the people left behind weren't saddled with episodes more suited to a daytime soap.

Noah Wyle's Carter ogling Lucy Knight's underwear and Anthony Edwards' Mark Greene facing stalker Mare Winningham were just two ill-advised plot twists.

Since this season meant the end of the road for Julianna Margulies and Gloria Reubens, "ER" seemed headed for a sad, slow decline.

But like other truly great shows — "All in the Family," "M*A*S*H," "Law & Order" — "ER" has managed to reinvent itself with a batch

of new characters and returning favorites.

"ER" has always been about the doctors more than the patients. So if we think we know how they're always going to behave, the show dies.

These new characters change that.

They're slowly being fleshed out, but just their addition to the ER makes every incoming case a battleground. Old favorites want to maintain their turf; newcomers want to show they've got what it takes.

Unlike a soap, these additions to the cast aren't villains or heroes — just new people with new ways of working. They add a little danger, a little sex appeal and a lot of chaos.

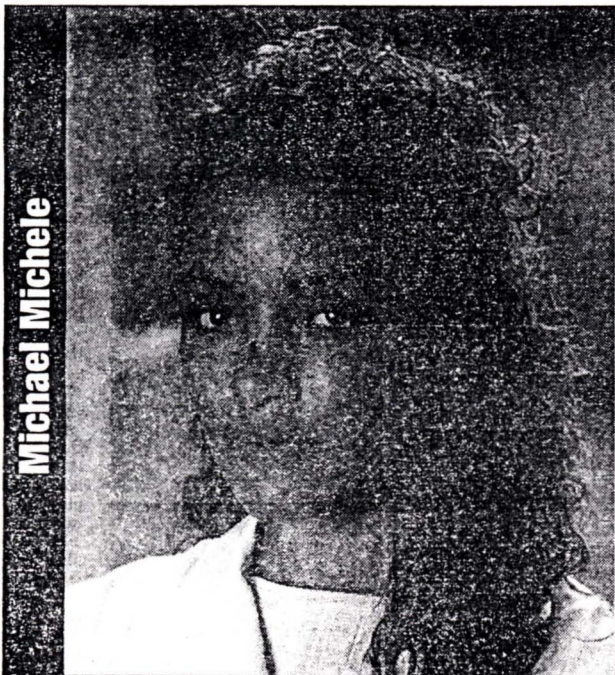
Here are four scene-stealers who make "ER" worth watching again.

"ER" was practically on life support last season. George Clooney split and old standbys were saddled with goofy and embarrassing storylines. But a quick injection of new characters and sharper stories have brought...

'ER'

BACK FROM THE DEAD

Michael Michele



CHARACTER: Dr. Cleo Finch
AGE: 33

HOMETOWN: Evansville, Indiana, where Michele was a local star for playing on the Lady Bulldogs high school basketball team.

Michele is mum on plotlines, but don't be surprised to see her hoop skills featured on an upcoming episode.

CHARACTER'S DEFINING TRAIT: Independent and strong-minded, though apparently far more by-the-book than the pediatrician she's replaced. (Namely Doug Ross, whose motto was "Why bend a rule when you can break it?")

SPORT OF CHOICE: You name it, but basketball and running remain favorites.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT: Snagging a lead role on "Homicide: Life on the Street" in its final season.

Michele had been pursuing a role on her favorite TV show for years, even firing her agent when he couldn't snag her an audition.

UPCOMING PROJECT: A featured role in the "Homicide — The TV movie," set for February.

PERSONAL TRAUMA

STORY: "I was trying to do wheelies on a moped in Hawaii," says Michele, from her place in Los Angeles. (A die-hard New Yorker, she likes to think of herself as "on location" when in California, and you can hear Michele's voice echo in her near-empty apartment.)

"I fell off the side of a cliff and had to get stitches on my thumb. My mother blacked out in the emergency room because she couldn't handle all the blood.

"I was in Maui, and the hospitals were open — almost as if you were going to some type of resort. It was just bare bones.

"They were trying to resuscitate this woman who was on her honeymoon and had hurt herself on a surfboard, and right next to her they have this screaming child — myself — they were trying to stitch up while her mother was passed out."

Ming-Na



CHARACTER: Dr. Deb Chen
AGE: 31

HOMETOWN: Macau, China

CHARACTER'S DEFINING

TRAIT: No-nonsense. Dr. Chen butted heads with Carter during the first season, something he could use more of now that Benton is out of his sphere.

SPORT OF CHOICE:

Unknown.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT: Playing June in the hit movie "The Joy Luck Club"; fulfilling a childhood dream by voicing the title role in Disney's animated movie "Mulan."

UPCOMING PROJECT: Another voice-over, this time on "Final Fantasy: The Movie."

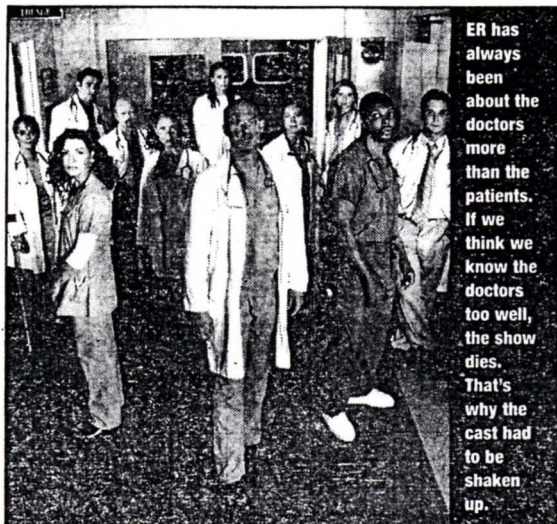
PERSONAL TRAUMA

STORY: Ming-Na was set for

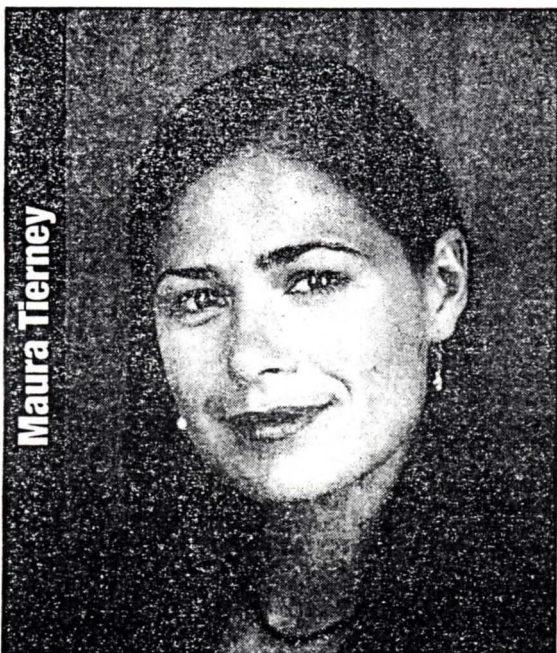
only three episodes in the first season of "ER," but the writers kept extending her storyline. She'd starred in "The Joy Luck Club" and offers were coming fast and furious, so Ming-Na jumped for something more permanent and ended up on "The Single Guy," a reviled NBC sitcom.

Finally escaping after two years, Ming-Na landed a lead role in Mike Figgis' follow-up to the Oscar-winning "Leaving Las Vegas." She gave a very good performance, but the movie — "One Night Stand" — didn't last even that long in theaters. Now she's back on "ER," just in time to staunch the bleeding from lost opportunities and wasted time.

TV Sunday



ER has always been about the doctors more than the patients. If we think we know the doctors too well, the show dies. That's why the cast had to be shaken up.



Maura Tierney

CHARACTER: Yet to be named.

AGE: 34

HOMETOWN: Boston, Massachusetts, where her dad Joseph Tierney was a bigwig in local politics.

CHARACTER'S DEFINING TRAIT: TBA.

Tierney appeared briefly during the Thanksgiving episode when Carol Hathaway gave birth to twins. Look for her to be more businesslike and apparently frumpier than her "NewsRadio" persona.

SPORT OF CHOICE: Running, though her husband — actor Billy Morrisette — gave her boxing gloves for her birthday a few years ago.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT: Playing Lisa Miller on NBC's critically acclaimed, but somehow still under-

preciated "NewsRadio."

UPCOMING PROJECT:

Doing one of the voices for the David Spade sitcom "Sammy."

PERSONAL TRAUMA STORY: Take your pick:

■ Getting caught in an earthquake on the third date with her future husband ("We got tossed together, and that's when we finally got passionate," she has joked);

■ Getting caught in an even greater disaster when they were both cast on a sitcom called "The Ralph Macchio Project" (they were both happily fired after six episodes);

■ Or NBC's cavalier treatment of "NewsRadio," a show that was moved around constantly and kept on pins and needles every year before being canceled.



Goran Visnjic

CHARACTER: Dr. Luka Kovac

AGE: 27

HOMETOWN: Sibenik, Croatia

CHARACTER'S DEFINING TRAIT:

Dreamboat looks and that accent.

SPORT OF CHOICE: Fencing.

CAREER HIGHLIGHT In Croatia, it was an acclaimed performance of Hamlet at 21. (He'll reprise it there next year after filming ends for the season.)

For the rest of the world, it was his turn in the politically charged war film "Welcome to Sarajevo" (1997).

UPCOMING PROJECT: The film drama "Committed," co-starring Heather Graham of "Boogie Nights."

PERSONAL TRAUMA STORY: Visnjic fought in the Serbo-Croatian war — re-upping for three months when his tour of duty ended just as battle commenced. But it wasn't a trauma, really. Visnjic felt it was his duty.

The only difficulty came for his brother; family members are discouraged from serving at the same time, so Visnjic's signing on for another stint kept his brother on the sidelines for a while.