

TV Sunday

TV's Second Season

By MICHAEL GILTZ

TV's midseason shows used to be called "replacements" — the second string backups for whatever new series failed to click.

You didn't like that new cop drama? Well, here's another new cop drama we didn't think was half as good. No more.

Nowadays, it seems like the networks are saving the best for last.

That's why Fox announced "Malcolm in the Middle" during the fall preview season but waited to launch it in January. Its reward? critical raves and the biggest premiere numbers for that network since "The Simpsons" in 1990.

If "Malcolm" stays on a roll (and Fox doesn't cut the legs out from under it the way they did "King of the Hill"), it will join a long list of mid-season superstars: "Seinfeld," "Third Rock From the Sun," "The Practice," and even "All in the Family" all debuted during the winter.

"Malcolm" will be joined in the next few months by more than a dozen comedies and dramas and a whole lot of indecision. Why? First, a lot more of the fall crop has survived than any of the networks expected. (CBS probably already had a replacement for "Family Law" all picked out until that show turned into a hit.)

Second, the game shows meant to smother "Who Wants to be a Millionaire" are doing gangbusters.

"Greed" is a modest, less-embarrassing timeslot filler for Fox than those police chase videos; and "Twenty One" looks like a certifiable hit for NBC.

Watch for "What's My Line," "The 64,000 Question" and Britain's "Mastermind" come summer.

But every hit game show means one less slot for original programming. That's why for most of the shows waiting in the wings, a firm time slot or air date is still a work-in-progress.

Hopefully, the shows cov-

Why do the networks bother with the fall season? The best new shows seem to be arriving in the dead of winter. "Seinfeld" and "The Simpsons" debuted in January. Are there others like them in this batch of brand-new shows?

"God, the Devil, and Bob" (NBC) sounds like a modern twist on the Book of Job, with the Devil (Tony-winner Alan Cumming) choosing a Detroit auto worker as the person who must demonstrate humanity is worth saving.

God is voiced by James Garner, with French Stewart of "Third Rock" as the hapless Bob.

Secret weapon: Nancy Cartwright (the voice of Bart Simpson) switches gender to voice Bob's rebellious daughter.

"Clerks" (ABC) is based on the profanity-laced indie flick by Kevin Smith. But turning the story of four guys in the dead-end world of convenience stores and New Jersey isn't as odd as it sounds.

Smith has already penned a line of comic books based on the movie; he also set his critical hit, "Chasing Amy," in the world of graphic novels.

Look for less cursing and — the network must hope — no jokes about God. (Smith last helmed the controversial religious flick "Dogma.")

"Baby Blues" (WB) is that rare primetime cartoon you might want to watch with the kids. It's based on the relatively gentle comic strip that looks at parenting with a caustic, albeit warm-hearted look.

"Sammy" (NBC) is certainly not for the little ones, with David Spade of "Just Shoot Me" the creative force behind this autobiographical series. In it, he plays the star of a sexy sitcom whose

ered below won't be a work-in-progress as well. Here's what to look for:

MORE ANIMATION

Toon Town — the fictional city in "Who Framed Roger Rabbit" — must be enjoying record low unemployment. Four new animated shows join the burgeoning cartoon ranks of primetime — far more than every before in history:



Kristy Swanson is sitting pretty with a new series, "Grapevine," after she missed the gravy train when her movie, "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," was transformed into a hit show.

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MORE SEXY YOUNG PEOPLE

Two of the better shows from the fall season were part of the teen flood: the terrific "Freaks and Geeks" on NBC and "Popular" (a slow-building performer for WB). Most of the others quickly failed, but more keep coming.

"Brutally Normal" (WB) is a single-camera (read: ambitious) sitcom about three boys coming of age. No period piece (like "Freaks," which is set in the '80s) and no earnestness (like "Dawson's Creek").

So what's the hook? Fantasy sequences à la "Ally McBeal." And if they're anything like the fantasies of most teenage boys, maybe this should have been on cable.

"MYOB" (NBC) stars a street-savvy runaway (Katherine Towne) who moves in with her lonely-hearts aunt living in a small town. Cultures clash.

Think of Jen's cantankerous relationship with her grandmother on "Dawson's Creek" but with less angst and more punchlines.

MORE ODDS AND ENDS

"Grapevine" (CBS) had a summer run in '92, but that won't stop people from labelling it a "Sex and the City" for Miami.

Originally a "Love, American Style" omnibus about lovers who cross paths with our heroes, it may now focus more on the central cast.

That cast includes Kristy Swanson, who knows something about second chances: her movie "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" was a flop, but as a series (starring Sarah Michelle Gellar) it's become one of the best shows on television.

"The Others" (NBC) was probably in development long before "The Sixth Sense" clicked at the box office. But that won't stop this drama about a mysterious group of psychics exploring the paranormal from hoping viewers want more creepy fun.

"I Dare You" (UPN) showcases daredevil stunts, with Evel Knievel Jr. as host. Hey, just because Fox swore off crashing jumbo jets in the desert doesn't mean everyone else has to as well.

"Titus" (Fox) has what seems like the most original idea of midseason. It's a sitcom — starring an adult — and based on the routine of a stand-up comic!

Since "Titus" isn't one of 20 sitcoms doing the very same thing, that actually seems a little fresh.

Based on the jokes of Christopher Titus, it costars Stacy Keach as his dad.

Halfway through the TV season and the networks swear they'll get it right this time. Among the new series: (clockwise from top left) a cartoon version of the teen-angst movie "Clerks," a young cop show, "The Beat," from Tom Fontana; "Titus" stars stand-up comic Christopher Titus and Stacy Keach as his father; and (below) David Spade retells his youth in the "toonish" "Sammy."



father pops up to cash in on his son's sudden fame.

One plus for viewers: two voices come courtesy of Maura Tierney and Andy Dick, stars of the late, lamented "NewsRadio."

MORE LAW AND DISORDER

"Battery Park" (NBC) is the latest half hour comedy from Gary David Goldberg, the producer behind "Spin City," "Family Ties," and "Brooklyn Bridge." It's pitched as a distaff "Barney Miller," with Elizabeth Perkins as the captain of detectives working in New York City.

"Falcone" (CBS) has had more troubles than a criminal featured on "America's Most Wanted." First, the relatively violent drama — based on the film "Donnie Brasco" — was pulled from the fall schedule. (Yet another tragic school shooting gave the network cold feet.)

Now scheduled for mid-season, this story about undercover agents infiltrating the mob has watched "The Sopranos" get better reviews than "The



Godfather."

CBS obviously wants to give "Falcone" as much space between it and Tony Soprano as possible. Unfortunately, that may mean delaying it for the next five years.

"The Beat" (UPN) has the best pedigree of any show on UPN, the network that has "We Love Stone Cold Steve Austin" tattooed on its Nielsen rating reports.

Another cop show (set in New York, naturally), it comes from Tom Fontana and Barry Levinson

("Homicide," "OZ").

Stylish and offbeat, it has the schizophrenic quality of CBS's "Now and Again" — switching gears from "Miami Vice" glitter to "Cops"-like realism with nary a second thought.

MORE HOSPITALS

"Wonderland" (ABC) is about the cases dealt with in a psychiatric hospital (set in New York City, naturally). Shot like a documentary, it's written, directed and produced by Peter Berg of "Chicago Hope."

"City of Angels" (CBS) has its debut tonight. Like every TV show or movie with a predominantly black cast, this innercity hospital drama is being unfairly positioned as yet another make-or-break test.

If it succeeds (like "The Cosby Show" or "Waiting to Exhale") the show will be seen as an exception. If it fails (like "Beloved" or any number of dramas) it will be seen as proof positive that "black" shows don't work.

A sexy cast led by Blair Underwood and Vivica A. Fox should help.