

Lawyers in love

'L.A. Law' rests its case on intelligent writing

By WINSTON P. LLOYD
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Some would have you believe that "L.A. Law" is nothing more than "Dr. Ruth in a \$500 suit." That's from a letter to the editor in next week's "TV Guide."

Yes, they do get a little risqué, but as series producer Steven Bochco said, they don't act like "children run amok." In fact, "L.A. Law" is an elaborate combination of crime drama, personal drama, comedy, and soap opera.

Always a critic's favorite (it sweeps the Emmys every year) the legal drama got off to a fairly good start in the ratings, thanks to the Cosby-Cheers-Night Court lead-in. This season it has consistently penetrated the top 10.

The writing seems often to avoid the tried and true plot lines in order to give the audience a different twist on an old idea. It is easy to write about a minority being screwed by the system, but do we expect to see a minority (James Earl Jones, last week) trying to exploit the idea of racism in order to win a case? Or a very moral cop who bends the laws in favor of justice, but at the cost of the actual letter of the law?

One of the main themes of "L.A. Law" seems to be that the letter of the law must be followed and the system must be allowed to run its course. You not only can't fight city hall, but it's morally wrong to even attempt to circumvent the system.

In one of last season's episodes, Ann Kelsey (Jill Eikenberry) successfully defended a murder suspect. After the trial, she wanted nothing more than to have the case reopened, and to convict her client. These characters can do wrong. But her husband, the idealist Stuart Markowitz (Eiken-

berry's real-life husband Michael Tucker) talks her out of pursuing it.

This season, Mike Kuzak (Harry Hamlin), in an effort to avoid a mistrial and further cost and misery for his client, covered up the fact that the opposing counsel was not actually a lawyer. A well-organized, logical decision... but not to the review board of the California State Bar. He was suspended for a month.

Even Assistant District Attorney Grace Van Owen isn't immune. When she got a murder conviction based on illegally-obtained evidence, she tried to reopen the case. The police didn't agree, and when they allowed a new case, they also allowed the newly released felon to be killed, by the people they got him to rat on.

These are the stories that make "L.A. Law" much more intelligent than other shows on TV, according to John Eason, a senior business major. Although it's only fiction, "at least it's related to reality," he said. And that's one of the ways "L.A. Law" excels. The character descriptions are realistic and it doesn't jump out and grab your throat with its "realism" by its depiction of the human condition. If you wanted to be obvious, you would have your characters smacking their food, talking, and tapping forks on china during a dinner conversation about the institution of marriage. Like "thirtysomething."

But "L.A. Law" is not trying to be cute. It may be quite cerebral at times, but it can also be silly. The producers haven't restricted themselves to only "realistic" situations. Look at the caricature of Roxanne's (Susan Ruttan) new husband. He's a joke, but his purpose is to develop the person-

ality of Roxanne, and probably her relationship with her boss Arnold Becker.

Now, to erase the need for anyone to continue watching "Knots Landing," here is a guide to the happenings at Los Angeles law firm Mackenzie/Brackman & Associates.

Mike Kuzak (Harry Hamlin): Mickey was originally the main thrust of the stories, sort of the resident Perry Mason, but as often happens with an ensemble cast, others are becoming popular. As of the last new episode, Kuzak was out of work after being suspended for questionable ethics. He lives with Grace Van Owen, with whom he has had a very on-again, off-again romance.

Grace Van Owen (Susan Dey): Watch one episode and forget all about the "Partridge Family." She's an assistant district attorney who is always losing to James Earl Jones, a sneaky defender. Lucky for Grace, he's only on the show once in a while. Van Owen's conscience has one of the loudest voices on the show, and Dey does a good job showing her inner turmoil.

Arnold "Arnie" Becker (Corbin Bernsen): He's the good-time lawyer. Mainly concentrating in domestic matters, he has now put out a successful video tape on how to get a divorce. Next week the firm asks for a piece of the action. Becker seems shallow but it's weighed against caring for his shy secretary, Roxanne, and for the retarded office gopher, Benny (Larry Drake). Overall, he is the "coolest character on the show," says L.A. Law fan Alex Barnett, a junior Econ/History major from Raleigh. Barnett cites the time Arnie came to grips with one of his shallow relationships. After selling himself in a charity auction,

Arnie starts a relationship with his purchaser, realizing later that she only cares about the physical part. He complains that she doesn't care about him (my goodness, she wears his newly-pressed shirts) and that "everytime you put your foot on the dash of my Porsche, you scuff the leather."

Douglas Brackman (Alan Rachins): This poor guy could have come right out of "The Young and the Restless." After the death of his father he decided to start sleeping with his stepmother, then his half brother (maybe only stepbrother) caught him, and attempted blackmail. Then his wife, Sheila, decided to sleep with his half brother, because she found out about his (Douglas's) affair with a bailiff of his court. The affair was revealed to the half brother when the bailiff's legs came out from under the desk where Douglas was seated. So much for "cerebral." Then there was something with a marriage counselor and the wife and... you get the idea. Needless to say, the guy is divorced (with the help of Arnie). And he's not as sleazy now, and Barnett says he seems "more human since the divorce." Since the AIDS tests, too, I suppose.

Ann Kelsey and Stuart Markowitz: They give you an idea of Michael J. Fox and Sigourney Weaver together. The two lawyers turned a good friendship into a successful relationship, and then a happy marriage, only to find tax-specialist Stuart to be less than fertile (you see, taxes are bad for you). They have spent the last few months trying to conceive and then adopt, and last time, in a very emotional airport scene, they finally got a girl.

Victor Sifuentes (Jimmy

Smits): He's Hispanic and one of the better lawyers. His ethnic background provides a plot device that would be easy to exploit, but the excellent writers have avoided the idea for the most part. He's currently seeing the producer of the divorce video, much to Becker's interest.

Abigail Perkins (Michele Greene): A petite and vulnerable new lawyer who is taking steps to overcome both handicaps. She carries a gun, which she has had to use with deadly efficiency. She also quit Mackenzie/Brackman after not being asked to be a partner. Abbie has just opened her own office and is in financial trouble, but Markowitz is sending cases her way.

Jonathon Rollins (Blair Underwood): A hotshot right out of school, the other lawyers were upset at his high starting salary. He's so cocky his first shot at litigation had to be saved by Sifuentes, then by himself, when he realized that a jury can't like an arrogant counselor. He is black but once again the writers have tried not to write the cliched stories.

Along with the previews at the beginning of the next episode, you should be easily caught up in this intelligent show. It's a refreshing change from many of the other static fare passing itself off as drama. You'll see little gun play, no car chases, and some occasional sex, along with a lot of ethics, law, and emotional problems to think about. And when the writing falters, there is still the energetic direction. This creative direction is unneeded but adds great style to something which could be photographed like a soap opera, but instead uses classy creativity.

An experiment delving into MTV's hot sweaty world

By BILLY STOCKARD
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MTV. Veg-TV. Music Television — 24 hours a day. As an experiment I spent an afternoon watching nothing but this fascinating channel and I concluded that it's truly original, imaginative TV. I saw some groups that I hadn't ever heard of before — I expanded my musical horizons. Wedged in between the commercials, there's actually something for everybody (well, almost everybody).

The first video I saw was Winger's "Seventeen." A lot of people have strong feelings about this heavy metal music; a lot of people would probably have strong things to say about these videos. Whatever else can be said, though, I can tell these Winger folks really get into their music. This video has a lot of shadows and bright red lights. The members of this group perform onstage, sweating and

jumping and shaking their long hair, and gradually they find a way to take off some part of their clothing. The scenes jump from shots of the band to the one girl whose face is never completely revealed. I got the feeling that Winger was singing to her or at her, but I'm not sure I believe she's 17, judging from what she does reveal.

As I said, there's something for everybody. The next performer I saw was none other than Michael Jackson with "Leave Me Alone." Michael goes on an ego trip in this video (what a surprise). The video starts off with newspaper headlines featuring stories about him, and from there, Michael throws himself into a whirlwind of different activities, like floating down a stream into a huge mouth that keeps opening and closing. Where Winger had its attention on that 17-year-old girl, Michael empha-

zizes dogs dressed up in men's suits and riding down roller coasters. This is creative, although the constant flowing motion and changing is just like Peter Gabriel's "Sledgehammer." Michael does have a way of getting attention, doesn't he?

Next in line was R.E.M. Wow! Talk about creativity. I'm not really sure (in fact, I'm really confused) but R.E.M.'s "Stand" seems to emphasize nature and people's understanding of where they are. Is that about right? I'm open for other interpretations but people are dancing all over the globe talking about "standing in the place where they live." This video was shorter than the others. Whatever the case, I'm beginning to realize that videos aren't nearly as mindless as some critics claim. Anyway, R.E.M. certainly makes its stand.

After some commercials (which

are incredibly frequent), Bobby Brown came on with "My Prerogative," a stage performance video, complete with the screaming fans. The whole band gets into helping Bobby keep things going, but just watching him dance is enough to hold a video together. He's certainly not boring. The sweat and exposure of bodies in other videos was missing, and, while some people think less is more, I guess that's anybody's prerogative.

The next 30 minutes offered up Ratt's "Way Cool Jr.," which ends with a nude girl walking away with a guitar strapped across her behind; Eddie Money's "The Love In Your Eyes," which is different because it is entirely in black and white; and even Tone Loc with "Wild Thing." This video sort of reminds me of Robert Palmer's videos. That may sound lame, but aren't those the same emotionless, dancing women?

Steve Winwood's "Holding On" closed out my MTV afternoon. This video is full of flashing cameras and posing people. Winwood just walks around rather seriously in a long white coat. What is he trying to say? What are these people "holding on" for? Once again, I've been stumped by a video.

The abundance of commercials are also interesting. They include bizarre cartoon sequences, 10-second films, ads that contained only words, plus truly original ways to advertise the MTV's title.

Never let it be said that all videos mean nothing. I'm not quite sure what they do mean but there are probably people that do. Since MTV came along, there have been faces matched with some of the voices I hear on the radio. I enjoyed myself the other day; the next time I have a chance, I'm going to turn on MTV again... maybe then I'll be able to understand it.