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 Tom Dorsey

Can 'Notes From the Underbelly' deliver?

In the early 1950s, women didn't have babies. At least not on TV shows anyway.

The stork brought them or they just magically appeared. The word pregnant wasn't in the TV dictionary. If you were on a TV show and you got pregnant, you were off that show the minute you "showed."

People didn't have sex in those TV days. You never even saw the parents' bedroom on shows. If adults were pictured in a bedroom, they had to have at least one foot on the floor. Nobody was allowed to lie down on the job.

Then, in 1953, Lucille Ball, who was a TV pioneer in so many other ways, used her clout to convince CBS not only to admit she and her sitcom character were with child but to make it part of the storyline that season.

The birth was written into the plot of "I Love Lucy" with the arrival of "Little Ricky" on the show and Desi Arnaz Jr. in real life. The network censors still wouldn't let anyone say she was pregnant. They could only say she was "expecting."

Fast-forward through the sexual revolution, the pill and everything else. The only question now is whether writers can figure out a way to work a star's real-life pregnancy into the plot. Today, even Xenia the Princess Warrior can be pregnant on the tube.

With the debut of "Notes From the Underbelly" tonight at 10 on ABC, pregnancy is the plot in back-to-back episodes of the spring tryout series.

This is a comedy aimed at women in their 30s and older because fewer and fewer women are having babies in their 20s. Most are delaying the decision to 30 and later, sometimes much later.

"Notes From the Underbelly" occasionally lets a little sentimentality slip into the script, but it's mostly a sassy and sometimes sarcastic look at being preggers.

The sarcasm comes from Andrew (Peter Cambor), who narrates the show and is married to Lauren (Jennifer Westfeldt). He's a landscape architect -- or just a garden guy to be truthful. She's a schoolteacher.

It's Andrew who feels his biological clock ticking to start with. He would be 33 when the baby was born if they started one right now, so he wakes his wife up with the idea on her 30th birthday.

It's not the alarm-clock greeting she was expecting. She's a reluctant mom-to-be. What about all the things we were going to do that we haven't done before we had a family? she asks. Yeah, but I'll qualify for an AARP card at the same time the kid's in college even if we get going right now, he answers.

So they begin. He wants a home video of her using the pregnancy test kit. She slams the bathroom door on that idea.

Most of the show is about how their friends see them and how everything begins to change when she gets pregnant.

She desperately tries to keep it a secret tonight while switching to decaf coffee and trying to figure out what she'll do when she goes drinking with her divorce-lawyer gal friend who firmly believes marriage and babies should be left to the birds and the bees.

Then there's another couple who is pregnant and doing everything but announcing it from a public address system. They're the gushy, gooey types that Andy and Lauren promise never to become.

Tonight, the couple also goes to an over-the-top baby shower, and the reality begins to hit home for the papa-to-be. He develops a bad, but not terminal case of second-thought jitters.

The sitcom's timing is about right, though, since the TV season runs nine months. Can you keep a show going that long on a one-note theme? Or will the show, like pregnancy, seem like it's never going to end?

And what about the second season, if it ever gets that far? Well, there's always baby makes three, or four or even more.

Is "Notes From the Underbelly" funny or any good?

It's nicely done, and the actors are fine. The script is crisp, even if there are no new jokes left about pregnancy. So after a few episodes, what's left to say?

Maybe the writers will concoct something very creative, but that's almost more challenging than having a baby. Almost.

In the news

Tom Selleck is talking about joining NBC's "Las Vegas," according to The Hollywood Reporter. He would play a new character created to fill the void left by the departure of James Caan.

Court TV has dropped Catherine Crier's show after seven years. The channel is switching to more entertainment shows, says Broadcasting & Cable magazine.

"The Sopranos" season debut Sunday on HBO was down almost 2 million from its 2006 premiere and 6 million off its all-time high of 13 million viewers, says USA TODAY.

CBS is partnering with Jermaine, LaToya and Tito Jackson to produce "Pop Dynasty," an "American Idol" clone looking for the next pop superstar, according to Variety.

Also tonight

"The Brick Awards," at 9 on CW, honor kids 12 and younger for community service.

"ER" is back on NBC at 10 with new episodes through next month.

"Naked Science," at 10 on the National Geographic Channel (Insight 450), explores whether the asteroids that killed the dinosaurs might have also created them.

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