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TELEVISION REVIEW; How to Fight Lawlessness? Subdivide Crime Shows

By CARYN JAMES

The meager promise of franchises is: no unpleasant surprises. Drive down the street, get the same burger and a slightly different view out the window. That makes the "Law & Order" theme music, which has spread over four versions of the series, the special sauce of crime shows.

Franchising is perfectly suited to network television, which loathes risk to begin with, and the wonder is that the two replicant series -- "Law & Order" and now "C.S.I." -- are so much better than their derivative beginnings would suggest.

"C.S.I.: Miami," which starts tonight on CBS, is a spinoff of the enormously successful "C.S.I.," the show that made crime scene investigation seem like a sexy profession. The new version follows the same formula in a different city, with alligators instead of the neon of Las Vegas, the Everglades instead of the desert and David Caruso instead of William Petersen as head of the crime scene team. But like the original, it relies on high-tech science, with special effects that can follow a bullet through a body. And it has a similar focus on a brilliant central investigator who tantalizingly stays a step ahead of the rest of us.

Although the revolving door of "Law & Order" suggests that franchises are actor-proof, they're not; they just rely on smart casting. Mr. Petersen's understated, enigmatic performance is the key to the cool tone of "C.S.I.," and the show has become more compelling as his character, the brainy and emotionally buttoned-down but appealing Gil Grissom, has gradually revealed more of himself. At the end of last season, Grissom discovered he is slowly but inevitably losing his hearing, setting up the kind of personal crisis that should be intriguing to watch Mr. Petersen play out.

On "C.S.I.: Miami" Mr. Caruso is Horatio Caine, the head of the Miami

crime scene unit, and his calm intensity sets a hotter but equally effective tone, as if Caine barely holds his explosive investigations together under the blazing sun. If Gil Grissom's brain controls his instincts, Horatio -- called "H" by his colleagues -- often relies on gut feelings. He is also exceedingly polite, saying "please" every time he asks some computer expert to enlarge the image of a mangled body part.

The first episode suggests that the gruesome mangling has just begun. A private plane carrying eight people crashes in a swamp, and soon we see a member of Caine's team retrieve a severed arm and put it in an orange plastic bag. A less squirm-inducing twist follows: why did one passenger's body fall five miles from the spot where the plane went down?

Caine is potentially Mr. Caruso's best role since he left "N.Y.P.D. Blue," but there is an "N.Y.P.D. Blue" problem here, too. Kim Delaney, who played Detective Diane Russell on that series, was added to the "C.S.I." cast after the pilot was made, and everything about her no-nonsense character and tough-talking performance adds a déjà vu quality this show doesn't need (even though she and Mr. Caruso never overlapped on "N.Y.P.D. Blue").

Her character, Megan Donner, had been the head of the Miami C.S.I. unit but quit six months earlier when her husband died. When she looks at a photograph of him, you really expect to see Jimmy Smits, whose character left Diane a widow on that other show.

Now Megan has returned to the unit, where Horatio has her old job. This sets up possibilities for a power struggle and a romance that seem all too orchestrated. And what's with those high-heeled boots she wears to investigate in the swamp?

In the pre-Delaney pilot, Emily Procter's character, Calleigh Duquesne, promised to be a more unusual female lead, a smart, Southern ballistics expert. Now she's standing in the background with other members of the team, including a coroner (Khandi Alexander) who has the annoying habit of talking to the corpses as if she expects them to talk back.

Still, "C.S.I.: Miami" is a sleekly told mystery with loads of atmosphere, a volatile hero and so many possibilities for more franchises that jokes about "C.S.I.: Boise" began as soon as this series was announced.

LAW & ORDER

Special Victims Unit

NBC, Friday nights at 10, Eastern and Pacific times; 9, Central time

The new season of original-flavor "Law & Order" doesn't begin until next week, but two of its spinoffs return soon. (The fourth version, the nonfiction "Crime and Punishment," began this summer as a replacement series and will be back at some point.) "Special Victims Unit," about sex crimes, begins with an uncharacteristically weak episode, because Sharon Lawrence's over-the-top guest performance as the world's best-groomed serial killer is impossible to believe. But this dark, unsettling series remains gripping largely thanks to Christopher Meloni's multifaceted performance as Detective Elliot Stabler, whose sly questionings of suspects become minidramas in themselves.

LAW & ORDER

Criminal Intent

NBC, Sunday nights at 9, Eastern and Pacific times; 8, Central time

This variation on the formula, in which we see the crime first then watch detectives track down the criminals, is uninspired, but it benefits from a ripped-from-the-headlines playfulness. The new season begins with the series at its best. Bodies are found behind a crematory, and it turns out there is an ingenious motive. Since the series began, Vincent D'Onofrio has toned down the scenery-chewing and relaxed into his role as Detective Goren, a more cerebral Columbo.

C.S.I.: MIAMI

CBS, tonight at 10, Eastern and Pacific times; 9, Central time

Directed by Joe Chappelle, written by Steve Maeda; Jerry Bruckheimer, Carol Mendelsohn, Ann Donahue, Anthony Zuiker and Nancy Miller, executive producers. Produced by Alliance Atlantis in association with CBS Productions.

WITH: David Caruso (Horatio Caine), Kim Delaney (Megan Donner), Emily Procter (Calleigh Duquesne), Adam Rodriguez (Eric Delko), Rory Cochrane (Tim Speedle), Khandi Alexander (Alexx Woods), Tim Sampson (Jim Tigerfish), Michael McGrady (Detective Eddie Delacroix), Sam Anderson (Scott Sommer), Julie Dretzin (Christina Colucci), Anne Bentancourt (Mrs. Colucci), William Haze (Handsome Agent), David Labiosa (Reynaldo Cabrera), Bhetty Waldron (Nurse) and Michael Canavan (Pilot).

