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NEW YORK NOW:

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## Comfort in Catharctic TV

Amid tragedy, these series may provide viewers with an escape from the thoughts of this country's vulnerability

By Noel Holston  
Staff Writer

ARE YOU READY for some mayhem? And I don't mean the Sunday afternoon, NFL variety. Sunday night marks the arrival of three of the most unabashedly violent broadcast-TV series in memory: ABC's "Alias" and NBC's "Law & Order: Criminal Intent" and "UC: Undercover." A week or two ago I would have guessed that the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, endlessly replayed on television, had rendered these and other new "action" entertainments superfluous, even distasteful. Now, with the horrific images no longer ubiquitous on our screens and the wheels of retribution grinding slowly, I'm not so sure. Perhaps these series will be embraced, not rejected, because they offer catharsis, a vicarious revenge against surrogate villains, that renders credibility and logic moot.

"Alias" is one of the three new shows that involve secret intelligence organizations. Creator J.J. Abrams, who's also responsible for The WB's "Felicity," jokingly has referred to it as "Felicity Joins the CIA." His heroine, beautiful Sydney Bristow (Jennifer Garner, "Dude, Where's My Car?") is a graduate

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### Photos



Cast of "Law and Order: Criminal Intent" (NBC/Chris Haston)

### REVIEWS

Alias. Espionage action-thriller about a beautiful college student who secretly works for the CIA. ABC series premieres Sunday, Sept. 30, at 9 p.m. on WABC/7.

Law & Order: Criminal

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student at a university in the Washington, D. C., area. She's also a veteran CIA agent, recruited in her freshman year.

When we first see Sydney, she's tied to a chair and facing torture by a smiling, bespectacled Asian who looks like a refugee from an old World War II propaganda movie. "Alias" updates her dilemma periodically as flashbacks explain how she got into it. Turns out she's not in the real CIA at all. She was duped into joining SD-6, a rogue unit within the agency that will stop at nothing, including murdering her loved ones, to protect its secrets. She was captured by terrorists during a mission she undertook on her own in hopes of regaining her ruthless bosses' trust.

If this was all there was to "Alias" it would be a fair-to-middling double-agent series. The pressures on her are credible, the production is stylish and the casting is shrewd: Victor Garber ("Titanic") as Sydney's deceptive dad; Carl Lumbly ("Cagney & Lacey") as a seemingly kindhearted fellow agent; Ron Rifkin ("L.A. Confidential") as SD-6's leader, a real snake, are all good.

But "Alias" suffers from a split personality. It's half John LeCarre, half comic book. In the field, Sydney, who looks about as formidable as your average Vogue cover girl, becomes a spike-heeled super-spy who shoots and karate-kicks her way through a horde of terrorist storm troopers as if they were targets in a video game. She's preposterous, and so is half the show. But viewers who just want to see bad guys die may not mind.


"UC: Undercover" adds an overlay of "Mission: Impossible"-style high tech to a genre that reached its zenith in "Wiseguy," CBS' great mob-infiltrator drama, in the late 1980s. "UC" purports to be about a special unit of the U.S. Department of Justice, some of whose operatives specialize in sophisticated electronic surveillance and tracking while others do the down- and-dirty work of assuming false identities and ingratiating themselves with criminals.


Sunday's episode is framed by a pair of elaborate action sequences.


Intent. Latest "L&O" spin-off gives criminal perspective on cases. NBC series premieres Sunday, Sept. 30, at 9 p.m. on WNBC/4.


UC: Undercover. Crime drama about special Justice Department investigative unit. NBC series premieres Sunday, Sept. 30, at 10 p.m. on WNBC/4.

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The first is a dizzying ground-air pursuit of a gang of elusive bank robbers, led by a master criminal named Sonny Walker (William Forsythe). The second is an extended shoot-out that rivals the finale of "L.A. Confidential" for ammunition expenditure. In between, we see two agents infiltrate Sonny's inner circle with ludicrous ease. Jake (Jon Seda, "Homicide: Life on the Street") becomes his new driver, while Alex (Vera Farmiga, "Fifteen Minutes") persuades Sonny to hire her as his accountant.

"UC" strains for the sort of street meanness of movies such as "Reservoir Dogs" and "The Usual Suspects." It mostly comes off like a flashy update of the '70s Aaron Spelling potboiler "S.W.A.T." But Sunday's episode does move briskly, and Seda is an appealing lead. Anybody who hangs around long enough to see the jeopardy he's in at the end of the hour will have a hard time ignoring next week's continuation.

Dick Wolf's second "Law & Order" spinoff, "Criminal Intent," differs from the original in two significant ways. It's less believable and more violent. Instead of beginning with the discovery of a murder, it shows the act. In the pilot shown to advertisers and TV critics earlier this year, it was the graphic, drowning murder of a woman in a bathtub. For reasons unknown, NBC chose another episode for the series launch. It couldn't have been for taste. In it, the leader of a gang pulling a carefully plotted diamond heist executes one of his men and a pair of young lovers who stumble onto the job in progress. Another installment available for preview opens with the throat cutting of a Catholic church's janitor -- in the sanctuary.

We're dealing with particularly nasty criminals here, and "Criminal Intent" is a pretty nasty show. It wears its harshness and cynicism too proudly. The "hero," a New York police detective played by Vincent D'Onofrio (who won an Emmy for his great performance on "Homicide: Life on the Street" as a man twisted like a corkscrew by a subway train), is jaded and cocky. "His brains were blown out," he tells a lower-ranking cop at Sunday's murder scene. "Which means he could still pass the sergeant's exam."

The show's creators also would have us believe D'Onofrio's character is a deductive reasoner to rival Sherlock Holmes. He's forever making huge leaps of logic in complicated cases, and, of course, they pan out.

D'Onofrio and his partner, played by Kathryn Erbe ("Oz"), are supposedly part of a "major cases" squad that is said to handle cases that can't be solved by traditional means. That means they play

rougher with suspects and do their best to rattle them in interrogation before their attorneys arrive. D'Onofrio shakes up one of the jewel thieves by convincing her that the ringleader, her lover, has given her AIDS.

With so many Americans saying today that they would give up some of their civil liberties in exchange for greater security, the tactics of the cops in "Criminal Intent" may go over big time. Whatever you think of the constitutionality of their methods, these detectives get results so absurdly quick it insults real, meticulous police work.

Like the other two shows, however, "Criminal Intent" may be a fantasy we want right now.

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