

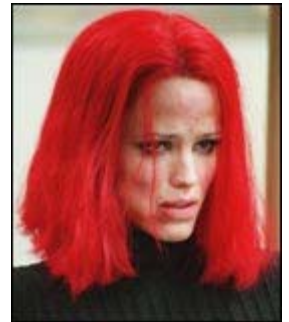
TELEVISION REVIEW

UNDERCOVER GIRL

Spooks are in fashion this season as the networks unveil a raft of spy shows; *Alias*'s seductive Jennifer Garner may be the most fashionable of all.

By [John Leonard](#)

What they are probably wondering in networkland is whether the World Trade Center and Pentagon terror-bombings will be good or bad for the three new CIA shows. Good: There is every indication of more money for more spies in the immediate future, and fewer scruples about their behavior. Bad: Where was the intelligence we already paid for when we really needed it? Besides, who will want to watch a lot of play-acting so soon after the mangled steel and the broken bodies? That said, the new CIA show I enjoy the most, ABC's *Alias*, now has the trickiest wire to walk.



(Photo credit: Touchstone Television/Byron J. Cohen)

This is because *Alias*, unlike *The Agency* on CBS or *24* on Fox, plays with itself. Sydney Bristow (Jennifer Garner) thinks she's been working undercover for a secret division of the CIA ever since college. She periodically disappears from grad school to fly off in a red wig to locales like Hong Kong. But when her boyfriend winds up dead, she begins to wonder about her boss (Ron Rifkin) and her career choice (*Crouching Tiger, Bald Eagle*). She'll then discover that her very own exceedingly estranged father (Victor Garber) not only works for the same clandestine outfit she does but also works against it. So we are promptly plopped into deep-cover, double-identity, mole-in-a-hole counterspy games.

Moreover, for all its paranoid style, Freudian dynamic, and martial artsiness, there is as well a satirical insouciance about *Alias*, a sort of *Girl From U.N.C.L.E.* meets *Run Lola Run*, which was perhaps to be expected from J. J. Abrams, the executive producer who is also responsible for *Felicity*. And as *Felicity* depends on Keri Russell, so *Alias* depends on Jennifer Garner, a survivor of two failed series and *Pearl Harbor*. In a fantasy, it's necessary to have someone about whom to fantasize. And when Garner -- a loose-limbed, big-grin wonder, part Julia Roberts with the dynamite dimples, part Angelina Jolie before she lost her sense of humor at Angkor Wat -- backflips in shackles to crush the thorax of a Chinese communist sadist who has been messing with her perfect orthodontia, I am, like, awesomely smitten.

Whereas **Law & Order: Criminal Intent** will depend on our patience with the stutters, tics, and **oddball** cockings of Vincent D'Onofrio's busy head. As a Major Case Squad Kemo Sabe paired up with cupcake Tonto Kathryn Erbe, D'Onofrio is not merely a know-it-all with the Marlon Brando shakes, he also reads perp minds. This doesn't leave his boss, Jamey Sheridan, nor assistant D.A. Courtney B. Vance much to do but growl and shrug. Instead, we spend lots more time than has been usual with the *L&O* franchise inside those perp minds, as if nostalgic for *Columbo*. At least the Major Cases themselves -- about an art-forgery tax scam, the murder of an abortion doctor, the buying of a pardon -- are more interesting and less lurid than those on *Special Victims Unit*. But given the availability of so many *L&Os* on so many different days and nights of the week on so many different channels with so many different casts going all the way back to before Jerry Orbach, maybe it's time they got their own satellite dish.

Two years after the first ten hours of **New York: A Documentary Film**, Ric Burns returns to public television with the last four and a half, "The City of Tomorrow" (1929 to 1945) and "The City and the World" (1945 to Rudy Giuliani). The likes of Robert Caro, Marshall Berman, Pete Hamill, and the splendidly opinionated historian of the city, Mike Wallace, return to remark on wonderful footage of Fiorello La Guardia and Robert Moses, Central Park and Harlem, the construction of the Triboro Bridge and the destruction of Penn Station. The usual impersonators -- Philip Bosco, George Plimpton, Susan Sarandon, Eli Wallach -- read from diaries and editorials. And we also hear from the sadly dead: Bella Abzug, Brendan Gill, Allen Ginsberg, Alfred Kazin.

Once upon a time, before Masterbuilder Moses in his Port Authority fiefdom ordained the removal of entire neighborhoods to ease the flow of motor traffic unto gridlock and road rage, our streets were playgrounds for the children of the working poor. Just this grace note is enough to make *New York: A Documentary Film* the place this week to rest your grief.

TV Notes

The Oyster and the Wind (september 29; 9 to 11 p.m.; Channel 13), Walter Lima Jr.'s film version of Moacir C. Lopez's novel about a possessive and tormented lighthouse keeper (Lima Duarte); his fierce, beautiful, and mystical daughter (Leandra Leal); a deranged young handyman (Florian Peixoto); and what happens to them on their island is the gorgeous if overwrought highlight of this year's Cantos Latinos programming for Hispanic Heritage Month on public television. From Brazil, in Portuguese, with English subtitles that almost aren't necessary.

The Believer (September 30; 8 to 9:45 p.m.; Showtime), the Grand Jury Prize winner at the 2001 Sundance Film Festival, stars an astonishing Ryan Gosling as a young and argumentative yeshiva student who turns into a neo-Nazi skinhead, only to kill himself when the *New York Times* blows his cover. Written and directed by Henry Bean, co-starring Theresa Russell, Billy Zane, and Summer Phoenix, it was inspired by the true story of Daniel Burros, who was arrested in 1965 at a Ku Klux Klan rally and then revealed to have become a bar mitzvah in a synagogue in Queens. In an uncompromising movie full of scenes hard to watch, the hardest of all is a court-ordered "sensitivity-training session" in which the skinheads must talk to Holocaust survivors.

Secrets of Silicon Valley (September 30; 11:30 p.m. to 12:30 a.m.; Channel 13) is Alan Snitow and Deborah Kaufman's jaundiced view of the underbelly of the New Economy, where the immigrants, minorities, temps, and other serfs who actually assemble our computers can't afford to rent in Silicon Valley, have no say on dangerous conditions in the plants, and had better not try to organize. Meanwhile, we get to watch the Masters of the Tech Universe at play in a killer soapbox derby.

Alias

Sundays, starting September 30; 9 to 10 p.m.; ABC.

Law & Order: Criminal Intent

Sundays, starting September 30; 9 to 10 p.m.; NBC.

New York: A Documentary Film

Sunday, September 30, 9 to 11 p.m.; Monday, October 1, 9 to 11:30 p.m.; Channel 13.

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