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| **FEATURE ARTICLE** | | | |
| **Chris Jackson is an Associate Professor at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. She teaches writing, literature, and music history.**              **"**  Television’s view of law and order is **changing**. The pendulum of popular taste has begun to swing away from reality-based television toward **nostalgia** from thirty years ago. The times, they are a-changin’--back.  **"**                                    **"**  In television, imitation is the sincerest way to **make a buck.** Shows about the complexities of behavior and challenging norms will give way to shows about **reconstructed life,** 1960s and 70s style, in cities high on urban renewal.  **"** |  |  | **From Baltimore to *Providence*: It’s Farther than You Think**  By Chris Jackson  **T**hey’re over. Two *NBC* *season finales* in one night have knocked me flat. *Homicide: Life on the Street* just aired its last ever episode. This penetrating, insightful show about Baltimore homicide detectives has for seven years featured the best writing and acting on television. An hour earlier, *Providence* gently drew tears from the collective psyche with its close to the first year. *Homicide* is no more; *Providence* has a guaranteed home in next season’s television land. Put those two facts together, and what do we have?     You heard it here first, folks. Television’s view of law and order is changing. The pendulum of popular taste has begun to swing away from reality-based television toward nostalgia from thirty years ago. The times, they are a-changin’--back.     The show *Homicide: Life on the Street* dramatizes the complex effects of violent criminal behavior on police investigators. Quick cuts and triple shots of the same gesture intensify the chaos. As may happen with real law enforcement officers, the detectives’ lives are torn apart by the inhumanity they face daily. Alcoholism and depression are common. The characters are either not married or have been divorced numerous times. If married, their home lives are troubled. Their hearts empty from their profession, they have nothing to give wives, husbands, or children.     This last *Homicide* episode lays out several thorny conflicts. Lieutenant Giardello (Yaphet Kotto) realizes that his promotion to captain is meaningless. John Munch (Richard Belzer) gets married. Munch and his fiancee state marriage vows over shots of a white-sheeted corpse on a gurney. Their marital bliss is short-lived as Munch shows up at the bar on his wedding night. Tim Bayliss (Kyle Secor) has a case he can’t resolve. Due to red-tape delays, the court lets a suspected serial killer go free. *Justice is a bitch*, Meldrick says (Clark Johnson). Later, Tim recalls his early days with partner Frank Pembleton (Andre Braugher). Tim tells Munch, *See,* *Frank said that I would never be a good homicide detective because I didn’t have the killer’s instinct. Frank was wrong*. The suspected serial killer is found dead, with no clues on the crime scene. The viewer draws his own disturbing conclusion. Betrayed by the court system, Bayliss enacted his own justice. *Life is a mystery. Accept it.*     Tom Fontana wrote this episode. He also created that rock-hard, now cancelled HBO prison show *Oz*. Before that, Fontana worked on *Saint Elsewhere*. He wrote alongside John Masius. Masius went on to add *Touched by an Angel* to his resume. While Fontana fades, Masius prospers.     One Friday night about a month ago, I made a long-distance call to relatives. *We’ll call you back*, they said. *We’re watching* ‘*Providence*.’ The series had arrived to terrible reviews. Critic Ken Tucker called the main character *Dr. Feelbad* (*Entertainment Weekly*, 8 January 1999). But I grew up in East Providence, and I was curious. The next week, I set the VCR.  *Providence* is a stress-reducing bubble bath, and the tub is crowded. Created and directed by John Masius, *Providence* now falls consistently in the Top Thirty. It’s a hit.     The show opens to a woman singing *In My Life*: *There are places I remember .* Providence never looked better. When I was a kid, the gray Industrial Trust building dominated the landscape like an old elephant. Homeward-bound from college, I drove 95 south through Massachusetts. From the northeast, the crooked building looked ready to fall over.  This show bathes the old Industrial Trust Building in a heavenly glow. Aerial shots of the suburbs are slow-moving and serene, as if filmed from the basket of a hot-air balloon. This is the Providence of myth, suffused with the quality of safety that moved founder Roger Williams to lead settlers to the banks of the Providence River.     Syd Hansen is a West Coast plastic surgeon who finds her boyfriend in the shower with another man. Aghast, she seeks haven with her family in Providence. In one episode, the boyfriend shows up to woo her back. He arrives for their date in a limo. When she refuses his offer, the boyfriend rides up front with the hunky limo driver. That old nautical saying is common in Providence--any port in a storm.     Syd’s mother (Concetta Tomei) is a whisky-voiced angel, literally. Her ghost appears to Syd in dreams, dispensing advice on life and love. (*My Mother, the Car*?) Syd’s father Jim is a vet, played by Mike Farrell, AKA B.J. Hunnicutt on *M\*A\*S\*H*. No doubt a future episode will feature a visit from Uncle Hawkeye, come to play cards and swig cheap gin all night with his former buddy.     The unemployed Syd doesn’t mope around the house eating Ring-Dings. She finds a position ASAP in a downtown clinic, a former church. No HMO scandals or malpractice suits here at Saint Somewhere. Dr. Syd doubles as Mother Theresa, saving an adorable adolescent here, a wonderful baby there. She even makes housecalls!     A decade of razor-sharp medical and crime shows has taught us to expect the worst in the TV universe. This show confounds our expectations by being too nice. Potentially criminal behavior is washed away before two scenes can pass. A pre-teen patient who visits Syd is reluctant to leave a urine sample. Aha, we think. Drugs. The kid returns with a contaminated sample. It turns out that the kid is reporting his mother’s symptoms as his own. She is too busy working to seek medical attention herself. His filial duty even extends to retrieving her urine sample. *I fixed the toilet handle so it couldn’t flush.*     Syd messes up giving a spinal tap to an infant. Aha, we think. Malpractice. Instead the father says, *We don’t want you here*. His rejection bothers her, so she researches the baby’s symptoms to uncover an obscure genetic disease and saves the day. The family is so grateful. When Syd reports a wife abuser to the authorities, we think, aha, he’s going to stalk Syd and seek reprisal for her meddling. Instead, he goes peacefully with the cops. Nine-on-one? Uh, never mind.     Syd has a romance with Paul, son of a reputed Mafia boss. A friend in the DA’s office warns that she too might be under surveillance. Syd dreams that she is on trial. Angel Mother is the judge, a tough talker like Judge Judy, with absolute control. All the family members testify against Syd. Judge Mother says, *I find you guilty*.     In her waking life, Paul sends a limo for her. Aha, we think, guilty as she is, she will end up with cement overshoes. The limo dumps her, not in the Providence River, but at, gasp, an Italian restaurant, where she and Paul dance to Andrea Bocelli singing *Time to Say Goodbye.* The DA has exiled Paul from Providence for his own protection, so his father’s criminal activities won’t tempt him. In *Providence*, when the law plays a role, it’s like the police hauling Beaver Cleaver down from the billboard. Instead, the family is the seat of law and norms. Unchallenged authority resides in the father and deceased mother.     Losing the Mafia son upsets Syd. Weeping, she asks her father, *Dad, I see happy couples together. What’s wrong with me?* Because Father knows best, Jim says, *Well, kitten,* (maybe he didn’t really say *kitten,* maybe I just misheard) *the trick is to keep an open heart to be ready for the next time*. It’s great to know that Jim is still B.J., the open heart man.     This show has bedroom scenes, but they all end in pillow fights. We haven’t seen this many glowing windows outside a house since *The Waltons*. Jim suffers from full-nest syndrome, a house full of grown children who have all screwed up their adult lives.     The younger sister Joanie bakes dog goodies and sells them at her *Barkery*. (*Happy Days*? *Joanie Loves Chachie?*) She is also an unwed mother. Murphy Brown’s son Avery, who so shocked Dan Quayle, disappeared two episodes after Murphy gave birth. This baby girl, Hannah, gets maximum screen time. We see Hannah eating her breakfast, Hannah being read to at bedtime. But she is cute.     Robbie, the brother, works at a bar called "O’Neill’s." (*My Three Sons*?) He carries the whiff of prison on him, or maybe just reform school. He says if he had come home and found his girlfriend in the shower with another woman, he would jump in with them. *That’s the difference between you and me, Syd.*     As if the Hansen family didn’t have enough demographic appeal, we have teen angst from the high-school student Lily. One day, Lily hauls her delinquent self into Syd’s clinic. Dr. Hansen acts as any M.D.--she invites Lily to live with them. The girl’s primary sin is that she smokes. (Interestingly, so does Angel Mother.)     Marketers don’t know how to present a show that is too nice. Episode previews intimate, Lily burns the house down! Yes, Lily’s smoking causes one attic curtain, an old one at that, to flare up. The next week, she is a full-fledged part of the family, with Jim/B.J. helping her build a Rube Goldberg contraption.     Another week, Lily makes all the Hansens breakfast and volunteers to sit for Hannah. Aha, we think. She plans to rob them and steal Hannah. Instead, the time for her to be turned over to a foster home approaches. She wants to stay with them. They all love her and want her. She’s one of them.     Here’s what ticked me off about the season finale. Angel Mother tells Syd she is leaving. *You are the mother now*, she says. Angel Mother packs her bags and flies off. In real life, while all the Hansens wait for Lily to celebrate her new Hansen-hood as a nonsmoker, Lily’s creep of a boyfriend takes her for a ride in a stolen car. A police car smashes into them. Big explosion. Lily lingers long enough for Syd’s heart-wrenching goodbye. Lily exits. Angel Mother returns. *You still need me, Syd*.     Why kill off the poor kid? I come to this chilling conclusion: As an outsider, Lily threatens the sanctity of The Family. Think of the symbolic value of her name. She has to be sacrificed so The Family can be resurrected, reunited in their bond of grief. On another level, the death of Lily reenacts the clash between *Homicide: Life on the Street* and *Providence*. Those horrible, nihilistic values of *Homicide,* as represented by the police car, wipe out Lily, the positive flower of family nurturing. Subversive, but there it is.     Remember that cloying bubble-gum musical trio Hanson? We didn’t think so. These Providence Hansens might also mmm-bop their way into oblivion, but I don’t think so. In television, imitation is the sincerest way to make a buck. Shows about the complexities of behavior and challenging norms will give way to shows about reconstructed life, 1960s and 70s style, in cities high on urban renewal. Get ready for *Cincinnati*, *St. Louis*, and *Boulder* (no, scratch that), maybe *Phoenix*. The series *Law and Order* remains, but for how long?     In 1999, a real political scandal has outdone even the wildest *SNL* sketch. Bombing in Kosovo continues. Boris Yeltsen staggers during public appearances. Teens shoot their classmates. A child beauty queen’s murder remains unsolved. The viewing public is hungry for a little nostalgia. But is the sensibility from thirty-year old shows the answer?    **Would you like to to comment on this article? Please submit your comments** [**here.**](http://docs.google.com/newsnviews.htm#Submit%20your%20own%20comments)   |  | | --- | | ***Other related Picturing Justice Articles of Interest*** |  |  |  | | --- | --- | | - | [**The Music of Inner Justice in Ally McBeal**](http://docs.google.com/ally-music.htm) **by Chris Jackson** | | - | [***Homicide***](http://docs.google.com/articles/homicide.htm) **by   Webitor John Denvir** |  |  | | --- | | **Related Web Sites - *Homicide and Providence*** |  |  |  | | --- | --- | | - | [**Ultimate *Homicide*: Life on the Street Page**](http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Bungalow/1350/) **- Fan website** | |  | [***Homicide* Official Site**](http://www.nbc.com/homicide/) **- NBC** | |  | [***Providence* Official Site**](http://www.nbc.com/NBCtvcentral/promo/promotional-shows.nbc?show=providence/new_index) **- NBC** | |  | [***Providence***](http://www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/Network/2228/) **- Fan Site** | |

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