

SIX FEET UNDER (published in The Courier-Mail)

(new series starts Monday August 25, Channel 9, 10.45pm)

There's one certainty about life -- it will end in death. It might not be a particularly comforting thought, but this inevitability is the stuff of many a work of art, be it film, stageplay, literature, fine arts, or with Six Feet Under, television. Not many TV series could reasonably be held up as works of art, but this darkly comical slice of life set in a Pasadena family-run funeral parlour stands out as superior to most of its kind.

Series Three starts this week, and while that's probably the best news the show's patient followers will hear all month, many people have never seen it. Often the answer to why is along the lines of, "It's on too late and I'm in bed by then."

It's a similar situation with The Sopranos, Six Feet Under's stablemate from the innovative U.S. cable channel, HBO. The subject matter in both is undoubtedly adult and the language not for the easily offended. Hence, Channel 9 plays them in 10.30pm or later timeslots, so basically, you have to make an effort to see them. They're worth it though: Six Feet Under leads this year's Emmy nominations with 16, with the Mafia antics of The Sopranos garnering 13 just behind The West Wing's 15.

It's difficult to pin down just what is so compelling about the Fisher family funeral directors, but addictive they most certainly are. The show is the brainchild of Alan Ball, Academy Award-winning writer of the feature film, American Beauty, who's written and directed several episodes.

The tagline for the series is, "Your whole life is leading up to this", and the now-entrenched device is that every episode begins with a death. It sets up a palpable tension as you're aware that someone is going to bite the dust, sometimes in a bizarre manner. One memorable demise was a woman standing on the upper level of an open-topped double decker bus. A low-lying sign hit the woman's face and the resulting corpse on the mortician's table was like something out of a schlock-horror movie.

At the other end of the sensitivity spectrum was the episode which began with a baby's death. Filmed from the baby's point of view in its cot, the parents lovingly cooed and said goodnight, a black and white mobile gently swayed overhead, then everything went black to signify the baby's eyes closing. The ensuing scenes where mortician Frederico Diaz (Freddy Rodriguez) lovingly prepared the body (thankfully, we never saw the baby) were all the more moving because Frederico's wife was about to give birth.

Although the funeral directors' clients are an intrinsic feature, it's the personal dramas that give the show its must-see factor. From the debut episode, it was clear these were characters who were real, challenging, and even though occasionally strange, resisted being "quirky" in the way that David E. Kelly (Ally McBeal) might've made them if he'd been the creator.

Nathaniel Fisher Senior (Richard Jenkins) was actually the show's first on-screen casualty. Taking a drive in the company's new hearse, he was wiped out by a bus and brought home for his final send-off. Jenkins does return occasionally for fantasy or flashback sequences, but the shock death of the Fisher patriarch was a notable series opener.

In that episode, Nathaniel Junior, or Nate as he's called (Emmy nominee Peter Krause), was coming home from an extended stay away only to learn of Dad's unfortunate accident, and after many years of avoiding the family business was forced to accept responsibility and join the firm. Younger son David (Michael C. Hall), an uptight, closeted homosexual, was busy concealing his relationship with Keith (Mathew St. Patrick), an African-American police officer.

Demure Ruth Fisher (Emmy nominee Frances Conroy) was crushed at the death of her husband, but we soon learnt she'd been having an affair with her hairdresser (Ed Begley Jr.), while 15 year-old daughter Claire (Lauren Ambrose) found out about the family tragedy while high after smoking crystal meth. Add to the mix Nate having had sex in an airport closet with a woman he'd met on his plane -- regular character, Brenda Chenoweth, played by Rachel Griffiths -- and you had an explosive cocktail that stood as a seething microcosm of American society.

Some critics have labelled the goings-on as soap opera, and while there's no denying the series sometimes deals with soapie-style subject matter, it hasn't yet fallen into the associated traps. The characters remain believable as do their motivations, and those who act unpleasantly, such as sex addict Brenda who jumped anything that moved even when she was engaged to Nate, still manage to be sympathetic.

It's a case of a genuine black comedy meeting gut-wrenching drama with the added element of existential angst. All that death around has to have an effect and be a constant reminder that time on this earth is limited, and it's a wonderful opportunity for the writers to explore much of the mystery and fear that surround shuffling off this mortal coil. Sometimes, the corpses in the morgue even get to say lines as they express the thoughts of the other characters in fantasy sequences.

Facing his own possible end, Nate Fisher finished last series about to have a life-threatening brain operation, so that's where Monday's Series Three opener picks up. The episode does no favours to first-time viewers by filling them in, and having said that every instalment begins with a death . . . well, this one doesn't. While on the operating table, there's a medical crisis during which Nate has an out-of-body experience visitng various realities of what his future life might be. If that sounds slightly off-kilter, it's only what regular viewers have come to expect -- thought-provoking unpredictability.

Meanwhile, the now openly gay David and partner Keith attend couples therapy to deal with their flagging relationship, Claire meets a new guy while delivering a body to the crematorium, and Ruth has a need to be needed by her children.

Perhaps the last aspect which should be mentioned is the suitably macabre opening music by American Beauty composer, Thomas Newman, over surreal morgue scenes. Towards the end of these credits, a large raven flies over a spookily bare hill save for one tree. It's a disquieting sequence which can make us ponder just when our time is going to come and what it has all really meant. Not many TV shows can put viewers into a head space like that.

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