Wrestling for ratings

isty, the P.R. person, was ready for me. “You’re going to need this,” she said as she handed me a Chinese fan. With that she led me to the sound stage where an episode of Learning the Ropes was being taped before what the announcers would say was “a live studio audience.” Before a “willed audience” would have been more accurate. All this was to have taken place at the air-conditioned CFTO studios. But bussing the live audience in windowless vehicles past locked-out technicians would have taken away from the spirit of the occasion.

So off we went to the state-sided warehouse behind the MacDonald’s and across the parking lot from where Producers Group International set the scene for the actors, audience, and NABET techs. Between each scene Proctor and Gamble among other companies plan to tie in their products to the series. With all this the series still isn’t guaranteed a profit until the ratings are in.

But the scripts are in. And, given the potential for silliness as crippling as a figure-four leglock, they’re not so bad. It’s not worth cancelling a night out to catch an episode. But the writing and execution is as good as or better than a number of second tier sitcoms that have held their own; series like Who’s The Boss, Webster, and My Two Dads.

Alzado’s acting already equals that of Alex Karras of Webster and his outgoing personality holds the promise of an extended emotional range.

On the one hand the series treats pro wrestling not quite a legit occupation. Thus the need for secrecy as the Masked Wrestler. But on the other hand it treats the actual bouts as if they were real. In the taping I attended Alzado accidentally injured Gorgeous Jimmy Garvin because he wanted to win too much.

But what the hell, as one commentator put it, exposing wrestling as fixed is like Miracle On 34th Street exposing Santa as a fake.

If anything, the series doesn’t have enough dramatic conflict, the kind that bites as in All In The Family, or the sexual tension and conflict of Cheers.

Perhaps Precious, in an off-stage remark, put it best. She and Gorgeous Jim are good guys. They have howled out. But they were genuine. All they were right at the punch lines.

They laughed when Yannick Bisson tried to pick up a co-ed with the line like “your hair… and teeth… are like waves of glistening dew.” He then explains his technique to a friend: “Nothing to it… Just pick out a feature and add water.” A half beat later the audience laughed.

Lyle Alzado is anxiously calling the hospital about a fellow wrestler he unintentionally injured. “I’m calling to inquire about a patient… Gorgeous Jimmy Garvin. No I’m not

his wife… I’m a friend… My name? The Masked Manic” (Clicks phone hook) “Hello…? Hello?”
And the audience chuckled.

Episodes tend to have two plots. One deals with Alzado’s TV family and the human relationships therein; the other has to do with Alzado’s moonlighting wrestling career.

The show shares one device with Cheers. Diane Chambers has academic pretensions and so do the writers who could write in all sorts of literary and philosophical allusions in a setting that is anything but erudite. In Learning The Ropes there’s the earnest teacher, Alzado, in the locker room trying to educate his fellow wrestlers.

There you see brutes in trunks spouting philosophy. It works.

Still, no matter how large he may be, a vice-principal moonlighting as a professional wrestler makes little dramatic sense, but it makes a hell of a lot of commercial sense. Both CTV and a growing list of U.S. independent stations have a healthy respect for the size of the wrestling audience. This is the first sitcom to attempt to tap into it.

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Perhaps Precious, in an off-stage remark, put it best. She and Gorgeous Jim are good guys now, but when they were buddies on the NWA circuit some enthusiasts in search of existential justice would collect spitballs in beer cups so as to hurl it at Precious. “Yes,” reminisces the manager, “it was more fun being bad, but it’s easier being good.”

Ed Unger •

Lyle Alzado plays a vice-principal/pro wrestler in Learning the Ropes. (You should see his wrestling outfit!)
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