

## TELEVISION

## What it takes for a successful spinoff

*Pulling a 'CSI.' Many try, few make it. Here's why.*

By Ed Robertson

The May sweeps are well underway, and we all know what that means. Besides season finales and special episodes, it's the time of year when hit shows try to extend their legacy by spinning off pilots featuring secondary, recurring or related characters.

"CSI" did this just last spring with great success, using the season's penultimate episode to introduce David Caruso as another forensic genius whose crack team of science geeks also trips up bad guys with the help of cool-looking gadgets.

Instead of Las Vegas, Caruso's squad is based in Dade County, Fla. The segment served as the pilot for "CSI: Miami," which has since become the top new drama of the year.

Three other shows will also try to pull a "CSI" over the next few weeks.

This past Tuesday's "JAG" wrapped up a two-parter introducing "Naval Criminal Investigators" played by Mark Harmon and "Man from U.N.C.L.E." alumnus David McCallum. If the episodes score well with viewers (last week's opener finished in the top 20, with a solid 15 share), bet on "NCIS" joining the CBS lineup in September.

Likewise, the two-part season finale of NBC's "Crossing Jordan," part one of which aired earlier this week, is also a pilot for a possible spinoff starring Jerry O'Connell.

Over on the WB, the May 13 segment of "Gilmore Girls" hopes to spawn interest in a series about Jess Mariano (Milo Ventimiglia) and his estranged dad (Rob Estes of "Silk Stalkings").

Given the breakout success of "CSI: Miami" this season, you'd think there'd be a lot more spinoff attempts on the horizon than there actually are.

Take a look at the history of television, however, and you'll learn that the number of spinoffs is surprisingly low and their success rate only marginally better than that of new TV shows in general.

'Ninety-nine percent of failures come from people who . . .'

INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY

Of the thousands of network television shows broadcast in primetime since 1948, only a handful--101, by our count--were spinoffs of previously established shows.

That's less than 1 percent. Of these 101, only 34 proved to be successful in their own right by enjoying a network run of at least three seasons.

Now consider that roughly seven out of every 10 television series that premiere each year never live to see a second season. While the track record of spinoffs is better than average, it certainly isn't by much.

To pull off a "CSI" a spinoff has to have a number of factors working in its favor, not all them under the control of its creators. What follows are the four most important.

### **(1) Strength of character**

The character that is being spun off not only has to be interesting in his own right, he must have enough substance so that he is still capable of growing outside the context of the original show.

Frasier Crane from "Cheers" was ripe material for his own show, but neither Norm nor Cliff was. Norm was more a caricature on "Cheers," in that once you removed him from his natural element (sitting at the bar, drinking beer and being a wise ass), there really wasn't much to him.

By contrast, Frasier as a character had a built-in depth that the successor show "Frasier" has continued to explore, often brilliantly, for over 10 years.

Similarly, "Rhoda" worked as a spinoff from "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," while "Phyllis" didn't.

Rhoda Morgenstern (Valerie Harper) was Mary's lovable, vulnerable best friend, and audiences were delighted when she finally landed her own show.

On the other hand, Phyllis Lindstrom (Cloris Leachman) was an annoying, self-centered shrew best taken in small doses. As good as Leachman was, not even she could make Phyllis the kind of character that engenders viewer loyalty. "Rhoda" lasted five seasons on CBS but "Phyllis" was gone after two.

### **(2) A strong production team in place**

Successful spinoffs are almost always the creation of writers and producers from the original show.

This was the case with "Rhoda," "Maude," "The Jeffersons," "Good Times," "Lou Grant" and more recently "Frasier," "Law and Order: Special Victims Unit," "Law and Order: Criminal Intent," "Xena: Warrior Princess" (the offspring of "Hercules: The Legendary

Journeys”), “Angel” (a “Buffy, the Vampire Slayer” spinoff), and “The Simpsons” (which originated from “The Tracey Ullman Show”).

### **(3) Strength of the genre**

It matters a lot if the show is in a red hot genre.

With all due respect to David Caruso, any competent actor with a little TV savvy could have played Horatio Caine, and “CSI: Miami” would still be a smash hit.

Police procedurals are hot these days, as they have been since 9/11. The fact that the original “CSI” is now top among network dramas doesn’t exactly hurt, either.

Buddy Ebsen reaped similar benefits from the cop show craze in the ‘70s, turning a one-shot character originally introduced on “Cannon” into the long-running private eye series “Barnaby Jones.”

Other examples: “Gomer Pyle, USMC,” which sprang from “The Andy Griffith Show,” and “Green Acres” (which came from “Petticoat Junction,” which itself came from “The Beverly Hillbillies”). All rode the wave of gentle, bucolic sitcoms that dominated TV in the ‘60s.

### **(4) Strength of the network**

As a rule, if the network of the original show is at or near the top, the spinoff will probably succeed. CBS breathed down NBC’s neck last year, finishing a close second on the strength of “CSI.” That, plus the interest of cop shows in general, boded well for “CSI: Miami” heading into September.

When “Frasier” premiered in 1993, it not only took advantage of NBC’s lofty status at the time, it also had a great time slot, safely nestled between “Seinfeld” and “L.A. Law” as part of the network’s dynamite Thursday night lineup.

Then, covering both sides of the spectrum, there’s “Happy Days,” which launched two mega-hits in “Laverne & Shirley” and “Mork & Mindy,” only to misfire badly with “Joanie Loves Chachi.”

Penny Marshall and Robin Williams aside, the difference in fates had much to do with the network’s status at the time of the spinoff.

ABC and “Happy Days” were both No. 1 in 1976, paving the wave for “Laverne” and “Mork,” but those days were gone when “Joanie” came along in 1982. Not only was “Happy Days” in a slide, CBS had long since supplanted ABC as the top-rated network.

Based on the above criteria, the “NCIS” spinoff from “JAG” stands a decent shot at success, assuming it gets

the green light. The formula is strong, CBS is No. 1, and “JAG” has performed solidly all year. Let’s see if history bears this out.

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