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TELEVISION

To Die for Love

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"**New Amsterdam**," a Fox drama set in New York over a period of some 400 years, is getting a great send-off. The first two episodes, on Tuesday and Thursday from 9-10 p.m. ET (before moving on March 10 to Mondays from 9-10), will come on after "American Idol." Most actors in a series would die for a lead-in like that.



Fox

 Nikolaj Coster-Waldau in
 'New Amsterdam'

The hook for "New Amsterdam," however, is that its hero, John Amsterdam (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau), *can't* die. As a Dutch soldier in 1642, he was fatally pierced with a sword while defending an Indian maiden in the colony that was to become New York City. Her return gift to him was a magical breath of smoke that conveyed immortality, until -- can't you guess? -- he finds his true love.

As hokey as this may sound, it gives the series a huge range for invention. Although most of the action is set in the present, where John Amsterdam is now a homicide detective, his knowledge of things past opens the door for flashbacks to earlier eras. In the first episode, for instance, paint mixed with gold-leaf under the nails of a murder victim leads us back to the 1930s, when our detective was courting the artist who made the concoction. When he finally finds her in the present, the contrast between the former lovers, her face ravaged by age and his still fresh, is unexpectedly poignant.

As much as we mourn the loss of our own youthful faces, or wish never to lose them, John is forever reminding us that living for four centuries is no fun. It's made him tired and cynical, he says, an existence where "time has no value." At one point, we see him on a date, moving in for the big bedroom takedown for the umpteenth time, bored out of his mind because he knows the routine so well and has long ago lost the thrill of the chase that so inspires mortal men. How many times has he grieved for a lost one over the centuries? His faithful dog is named "36."

PERFECT NO MORE

Yet things are about to change even for our hero. Chasing a suspect on a contemporary New York subway platform, he sees a stream of women getting off a train and falls to the platform unconscious. One of those women has begun in him the process of physical decay. But which one -- and do we want him to find his soul mate even if it means the first step on an inevitable path to death?

The underlying theme here, once the fantastic elements are stripped away, is loneliness. That (plus the interesting face of its star) gives "New Amsterdam" a true and very tender heart.

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Are we ready for a television series about a woman with breast cancer? The Canadian import "**Terminal City**" (Thursdays, 9-10 p.m. on the Sundance channel) is a chance to find out. The series takes the edge off its daunting theme by playing as a black comedy about television fame in the face of adversity... or something like that. But be warned: Although "Terminal City" can be mesmerizingly good -- and even funny -- it has a kick on it like a mule. If you let yourself get dragged in, don't complain about the consequences.



Maria del Mar in 'Terminal City'

As the series begins, the life of the Sampson family is about to be turned upside down. The phone is ringing but mother Katie (Maria del Mar) never wants to answer it because, as she and her tender husband Ari (Gil Bellows) know, the voice at the other end is likely to bring bad news about the lump in her breast.

Eventually, though, she goes to the hospital for a biopsy, and there blunders before the cameras of a reality show called "Post-Op." Katie gives such a charismatic and candid account of her illness that she gets hired as the show's new host. Thus does our patient find herself in situation both ludicrous and empowering: She may have a life-threatening illness, but she's going to take the fight to a new level, kicking and screaming for all the world to see.

Instant celebrity is no cure, of course. When she bares a breast for the camera, or smokes marijuana with bald women on an oncology ward, the audience applauds her gutsiness and the ratings soar. Slowly, though, black comedy gives way to something just plain dark. Katie's producer, Jane (Jane McLean), sees before anyone else that her star may be dying for fame.

Twisted humor begins to curdle at home, too. Grandfather Saul (Paul Soles) is a Holocaust survivor now obsessed with Israel, but little grandson Eli wants to become a Catholic. What begins in Woody Allen territory eventually slides into something devastatingly sad. Another son, an adolescent, is obsessed with an attractive older woman he meets on a bus and strays into danger there, too. The lovely teenage daughter is most obviously worried about her mother, but her grief mutates into predatory sexual behavior. The harder Ari tries to hold his family together, the more everything slips out of his control.

"Terminal City" is an odd show, and not only due to the cancer subject. Its characters, and good acting, suck you in and hold you tight. The series generates the same impulse that makes us rubberneck at the scene of car accidents, and also draws us to it as lovers of art. On another level, it is awful. Not because of the way it ends, but because the spectacle of disintegration it presents is so flamboyant and, ultimately, dishonest.

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Then again, honesty is not always the best policy. "**The Real Housewives of New York City**" begins on Bravo this week (Tuesday 11-midnight, and from 10-11 p.m. on following Tuesdays), and it is crammed with reminders that some things are better left unsaid, beginning with the references by some of the housewives to their "chicness" or their "socialite" status as members of high society. The bloggers are going to have a field day laughing at that, and as the cast of "The Real Housewives of Orange County" has already discovered, the bloggers can be cruel indeed.



Both "reality" shows feature women who are eager to show off their expensive lifestyles. Yet while the crassness of Southern California was predictable, on the East Coast it may invite a



more brutal level of scrutiny. Presumably, the notoriety about to be achieved by the New York "Real Housewives" will soothe the wounds inflicted by unkind comments from viewers -- about their child-rearing techniques, their clothes (but why spend money on a pair of Sheraton card tables when your friends only know about Versace?) and naked social ambition.

'The Real Housewives of New York City'

Besides, striving works. Jill, for instance, has already moved from a "Jewish ghetto" on Long Island to the Upper East Side. Ramona, the sex kitten of a certain age, has got a summer house in the Hamptons and a tennis pro who gives lessons with his shirt off. The efforts of chef Bethenny to reel in balky boyfriend Jason will earn her lots of sympathetic audience love. LuAnn is a former beauty-pageant contestant who married a French count. And then there's the divinely bizarre Alex, whose husband is so in synch with her desire to storm the barricades of society that the only thing separating them, it seems, is the minuscule blue sheath he sports on the beach at St. Barts.

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