Tubular Science

Tune in for previews of hot new TV science shows!

By BRUCE BOWER

Hi, everyone. I'm Celia Lloyd, and you're watching *Excess Hollywood.* We're the nightly television show that rocks your world with the latest superficial dish on the entertainment industry. If a celebrity says it, we take it seriously. Tonight's top story: Midseason surge of the science series!

TV executives have taken to heart a programming proposal offered by Leon Lederman, physicist and winner of the Noble prize—oh, sorry, Mr. Smarty-Pants Set Director is shouting in my headset that it's No-*belle* prize. It seems the esteemed No-*belle* guy wants Hollywood's television honchos to develop shows about scientists and what they really do. And voilà, here comes a batch of science-y shows to replace the latest bumper crop of prime-time ratings losers. Professor Lederman says the new programs will boost science's credibility and popularity with all those folks out there who don't know their asteroids from a hole in the ozone.

At a press conference today, ambiguously gendered media mogul RuPaul Murdoch welcomed TV's torrid embrace of science. The leggy tycoon said, and I quote, "From *Perry Mason* to *Law and Order,* television has nurtured the public's widespread love of lawyers and the good works that they perform. It can do the same for scientists."

CBS launched the TV science trend last month by announcing that it would replace *The Nanny* with *Leave It To Beaker.* Other networks then rushed their own science programs into production. Let's find out more about the exciting lineup of new shows and the networks on which they'll appear:

Leave It To Beaker (CBS). Benson "The Beak" Beaker is a precocious third-grader at Quantum Elementary School. His unusual science experiments in the basement of his parents' suburban house create hilarious problems that he solves with help from older brother Drip and live-in housekeeper Chochka, a recent immigrant who mangles the Eng-

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lish language in amusing ways. The Beak just wants the attention of his dad and mom, Deke and Betty, a couple of uptight yuppies who are obsessed with running an Internet chat room for computer addicts. Let's run a clip from the show:

Betty: Deke, there's smoke coming out of the basement and green slime oozing up the steps. My new carpet!

Deke: Beak! Get your mainframe up here right now, young man.

The Beak: Aw, Dad. I was just cloning degraded genetic material that mutated in the nuclear waste dump behind school. I collected it during recess, honest. When Drip gets home from his date, he'll find some funky toxic splotches festering on his pillow.

Chochka: I no clean soxes of Uncle Fester. (Nervous nasal laugh.)

Streets of Santa Fe (ABC). [This science drama contains adult language and partial nudity. Viewer discretion is advised.] By day, Buddy Bodhisattva quantifies complex biological interactions at New Mexico's Institute of Highfalutin' Obtuse Processes (IHOP). At night, the high-strung mathematician moonlights as a detective on the Santa Fe Police Department. He and his partner, laconic detective second-class and freelance shaman Carlton Kumbaya, work homicide. Buddy uses his advanced knowledge of chaos and complexity theory to track down murderers. Carlton is left to deal with clues, witnesses, and other reductionistic anachronisms of Western thinking.

In his few spare moments, Buddy seeks solace and instant gratification from his girlfriend, an exotic dancer named Abyssinia Lader. In the first episode, Buddy and Carlton search for a serial killer of local art shop owners. In this clip, the detectives check out the latest victim, whose blood-spattered body lies in a tony modern art gallery:

Carlton: Hey, man, check it out. Someone slashed that Mondrian painting on the far wall to shreds. I wonder if the killer had a past traumatic experience with non-objective art. Or maybe brightly colored geometric patterns trigger violent epileptic seizures in our man, during which his brain compels him to murder pretentious people with humanities degrees.

Buddy: Stow the linear thinking, Carlton. Given the complex web of interacting forces in the life of your average homicidal maniac, we'll never be able to predict when his murderous urges will emerge. But if my new computer model works out, I'll generate a three-dimensional display of this crazed dirtball's dynamic action potentials and all of his magazine subscriptions since 1984.

Carlton: I told you to stay away from my peyote buttons, man. Those are for religious ceremonies only.

The clip segues to a scene in which Buddy and Abyssinia recline in bed, the darkened room creating silhouettes of their bare upper torsos.

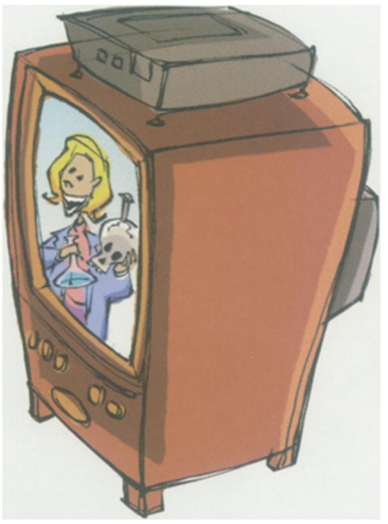
Buddy: You are the yin to my yang, Aby. Our mathematical possibilities are endless.

Abyssinia: How come you only want to see me late at night in sleazy motels with easy access to the Interstate? Are you ashamed of me, Buddy?

Buddy: No, baby, no. It's just that I'm bummed out by this case I'm working on with Carlton. It's got us stumped. You know, the art dealer murders.

Abyssinia: What does that have to do with meeting me in these run-down dives? I perform in one all evening, usually to more applause. A lady likes some pampering.

Buddy: Aby, Aby, my strange, oscillating little attractor. Let me explain. A butterfly beating its translucent, multicolored wings in a Brazilian rain forest can



set off a chain of events that results in a tidal wave scattering retirement condos in South Florida like so many mah-jongg tiles. Life is a nonlinear web of interrelated forces that in our case converge on Billy Bob's Ride-On Inn.

Aby: Wow. You're so complex. I hope the IHOP customers leave you good tips.

Dolly the Werewolf Slayer (UPN). Werewolves are killing the sheep of Scotland and callously upsetting the region's delicate balance of nature. A team of agricultural scientists creates a second clone of Dolly the sheep, beefs up her DNA so that she can talk, and sends her out to lecture the bloodthirsty beasts about the need for biological diversity in complex ecosystems. But watch out—this sheep packs heat. She'll shoot excessive growlers and droolers full of silver bullets before you can say, "Pass the mint jelly." Dolly and her sidekick, Babe the genetically engineered talking pig, scour Scotland's moors and discos by night in search of hairy, scary creatures with toothy grins—they're everywhere.

New-and-improved Dolly (Babe affectionately calls her "Ewe Two") also kicks up her front legs and fights kung-fu style. In a pinch, Babe turns tail and passes climate-endangering gas at attacking werewolves, cunningly exploiting their heightened sense of smell to paralyze them. Here's the clip:

Dolly: The moors are quiet tonight, Babe. Why don't you shear my legs while I watch CNN? That Wolf Blitzer uncurls my fleece.

A snarling, slobbering werewolf jumps out from behind a tree. He attacks.

Dolly: Species preservation is more important than your animal urges, fella! No lamb chops tonight, but how about a karate chop in the kisser? Hiiiya!

The werewolf blocks Dolly's karate chop and throws her to the ground.

Dolly: Babe, where are you? I need help.

Babe: Pfffffft.

When Researchers Attack (Fox). They're bad boys—whatcha gonna do? On this reality-based show, host Peter Graves screens videos taken by graduate students and FBI agents of senior scientists creatively abusing and humiliating the lesser beings that they're forced to work with. Computer-generated black bars cover perpetrators' eyes to ensure their anonymity and to keep you guessing.

Watch as a distinguished anthropologist presenting a paper at a scientific meeting is repeatedly interrupted and then shouted down by a rival in the audience. Chuckle as a leading biologist shreds his hair, insults his secretary, and plots revenge upon learning the identity of a peer reviewer who trashed his latest research submission. Cover the kids' ears as an eminent geneticist goes off-the-record in a telephone interview with a journalist and employs a vivid string of expletives (sorry, some had to be bleeped out!) to describe the quality of work by other DNA researchers. Get ready for a clip:

Graves: Here's a psychology postdoctoral candidate who got more than she bargained for when presenting her research to the tenured toughs at a major university. (He smiles knowingly. His hair is perfect.)

Grainy footage shows a nervous-looking young woman stepping to the lectern in a small auditorium. She adjusts her glasses warily and looks out at a modest gathering of grad students and professors. With a quiver in her voice, she begins to explain her research project.

Several senior researchers have staked out the front row. Among them sits the perp—a master of disaster who regularly reduces scientific pip-squeaks to mortified silence with a few razor-sharp queries. Arms folded, the big shots whisper among themselves and laugh loudly as the presentation proceeds. The perp stretches, looks back at the audience with a smirk, and stands up to deliver a question.

Perp (rolling his eyes): All right, do you mean to tell me . . .

Before he can proceed with his verbal mauling, the presenter slumps to the floor. She's out colder than an undergraduate at an introductory philosophy lecture.

Woman in the back: She's fainted! Do something!

Two male grad students drag the presenter off the stage and stumble toward the campus infirmary.

Perp (to his front-row mates): I like brief presentations. They're superior learning experiences.

Graves: People who climb ivory towers should try to avoid taking a header.

The Steve Gould Show (Discovery). Who says the variety show is extinct? It's simply evolved. Harvard paleontology professor Gould hosts a weekly science review that will drive you cladistic.

Here's the lineup for the first show: Bass drum and kazoo band from Harvard's geology department performs classical music, including highlights from Stravinsky's "Rites of Spring"; comedy and ventriloquism from artificial intelligence guru Marvin Minsky and Chipper, a wisecracking desktop computer with movable eyes and mouth; Steve chats with Topo Gigio and explains how the mousy little puppet evolved from an ancient line of rubbery rodents; and for the youngsters, heavy metal music and lab demonstrations from four physics graduate students who call themselves "Little Galileo and the Superstrings." In a regular closing segment, Steve trades hilarious barbs with a panel of evolutionary psychologists, who are joined this week by comedian Don Rickles. The clip, please:

Panelist A: Steve, you Marxist biophobe, you wouldn't recognize a mental adaptation sculpted by natural selection if it bit you on your cortical sulcus.

Panelist B: Good one, heh, heh.

Steve: So funny I forgot to laugh, Darwinian fundamentalists. Punctuate this!

Rickles: Hey, shaddup you hockey pucks. I thought my agent booked me on the new *Hollywood Squares*, not *Planet of the Stiffs*.

LabWatch (WB). David Hasselhoff plays molecular geneticist Rafe Testosteroni, superintelligent (and shirtless) director of a top-secret science place in Los Angeles known as The Top-Secret Science Place. With the power of—you guessed it—science, Rafe and his buff colleagues banish yucky pollution from prime surfing beaches, thwart blubbery biological terrorists who plan to contaminate suntan lotion supplies with acne-inducing chemicals, and blast icky infectious viruses plaguing health-club shower stalls. Pamela Anderson plays bikini-clad biologist Genie Helix. Richard Dean Anderson reprises his McGyver role in recurring cameo appearances. Music videos in each episode present quick shots of whirling centrifuges, rhythmic computer printouts, and other action-oriented features of lab life accompanied by tunes from Backstreet Boys and Celine Dion. How about a short clip:

Rafe: If I don't run a PCR on this MTV right away, you can bend over and kiss the planet good-bye. Quick, Genie, hand me some electrophoretic gel.

Genie: We're fresh out. Will my styling mousse do?

Rafe: (Adjusts his sunglasses.) Cool.

Can you stand it, America? I'm getting goose bumps. Well, okay, my flesh is crawling.

Tune in tomorrow for our next top story: An interview with Richard Simmons about his new aerobic exercise and stress-reduction videotape, *Sweatin' to the Existentialists*. Talk about big fun in a meaningless universe. It's absurd, but then, *c'est la vie, mes amis*. Until then, this is Celia Lloyd for *Excess Hollywood*. Remember, when it comes to entertainment, *ex*-cess is the secret to *suc*-cess. □

Behavior

Stressful aftermath of early losses

It's bad enough for a child to have a parent die or to grow up in a troubled, unsupportive family. However, either experience may also set the stage for elevated blood pressure and hormonal responses to stress later in life, a new study suggests.

"For a child, loss of a parent and lack of a good attachment with parents may conceptually be very similar and thus may exert similar [health-damaging] effects on developing physiology," contends psychologist Linda J. Luecken of the Duke University Medical Center in Durham, N.C.

The researcher recruited 30 college students who had each, by age 16, lost one of their parents due to an accident, crime, or illness. Another 31 college students had been raised by two parents who were still alive and married. Students in both groups ranged in age from 18 to 27.

Luecken continuously monitored the volunteers' blood pressure beginning 5 minutes before and ending 20 minutes after they completed each of two stressful tasks. She also measured the students' salivary concentrations of cortisol, a stress hormone, before, during, and after the tasks.

In one task, volunteers gave an impromptu, 3-minute speech on any of three controversial topics—affirmative action, abortion, or same-sex marriages—while facing a video camera. They were told that recordings of the speeches would be evaluated by experimenters. In the other task, students viewed a 7-minute scene from the movie *Terms of Endearment* that shows two boys confronting their mother's impending death.

Participants also completed a 90-item questionnaire that explored their perceptions of their own family relationships. Those who reported either a parental loss or poor family relationships exhibited consistently higher blood pressure than their counterparts, although readings were still within the normal range for resting blood pressure. Cortisol elevation during the speech occurred more often in students who had a deceased parent; comparable cortisol hikes appeared during the movie in students with frayed family ties.

Parental loss or long-standing emotional separation from parents may frequently lead to the weakening of young children's biological stress-response system, Luecken theorizes in the November/December PSYCHOSOMATIC MEDICINE. —*B.B.*

Antipsychotics and brain changes

The use of antipsychotic drugs, rather than the action of a distinct disease process, appears to bloat the volume of several innerbrain regions in people diagnosed with schizophrenia, according to a team of neuroscientists.

The researchers, led by Raquel E. Gur of the University of Pennsylvania Medical Center in Philadelphia, administered magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans to 96 psychiatric patients with schizophrenia—a severe disturbance of thought and mood—and 128 people who had no psychiatric ailments. Of the patients, 21 had never taken antipsychotic medication, 48 had received only haloperidol or other traditional antipsychotics for about 3 years, and 27 had used both traditional and newer medications, such as clozapine, over a similar period.

The volume of the basal ganglia was markedly greater in medication-treated patients than in both drug-free patients and healthy volunteers, the scientists report in the December AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHIATRY. The basal ganglia consist of clumps of tissue involved in the regulation of movement and thinking. They showed the greatest volumé in patients who had taken high doses of traditional antipsychotic drugs.

Medication-free patients differed from healthy volunteers only by having a smaller thalamus, Gur and her coworkers say. Disturbances in this structure, which helps to focus attention and filter sensations, have already been implicated in schizophrenia (SN: 10/29/94, p. 284). —*B.B.*