

Learning the Ropes Wrestling for ratings

Misty, 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 "wilted 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 stale-aired warehouse behind the MacDonald's and across the parking lot from Ikea where Producers Group International set the scene for the actors, audience, and NABET techs. Between each scene Producers group president Charles Falzon, replete in shorts and tee shirt, acts the warm-up man, explaining the technicalities to the live audience while giving away prizes for answers to questions such as "which rabbit was framed in the latest Walt Disney movie."

And in the 30-plus degree heat the people stayed to watch former all-pro NFL lineman Lyle Alzado play a high school vice-principal who moonlights as a professional wrestler. Alzado's single-father character has two standard issue sitcom teenage kids, Nichole Stoffman, graduate of *DeGrassi Jr. High*, and Yannick Bisson who was picked for the part because he has heartthrob potential, and he can deliver a funny line.

And then there are the wrestlers. Walking around the set are actors who play wrestlers and wrestlers from the National Wrestling Alliance Circuit who try to act. All of them are big. In costume it was hard to tell them apart. For instance there was "Cheetah" playfully clawing a 10-year-old between scenes. Cheetah is played by Jefferson Mappin, whose credits include Charles the Wrestler in a Stratford production of *As You Like It*.

In this episode the real wrestlers trying to get a toehold on acting were Jimmy Garvin and his blonde-tressed, sequine bra'd female manager, Precious.

Charles Falzon claims that his stable of writers, most of whom are graduates of Ryerson, enjoy writing for the show because it's not confined to one or two locals. And sure enough there arrayed before the sweltering audience on the bleachers are sets depicting the high school hallway, Lyle Alzado's sitcom home, and a wrestling area hallway and locker room. There's



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

also a hospital set for this episode. The actual wrestling scenes were taped earlier.

Those people on the bleachers near the living room set were about a basketball court away from the high school hallway. But those far from the action could follow the proceedings on monitors. So for much of the time the live audience for a TV show was in fact watching television. And for much of the time it was laughing along with the program.

These weren't the belly laughs that one imagines the first audiences for *All In The Family*

must 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: "Nothin' 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 the writers 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 spout 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.

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 leg-lock, 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 as 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.

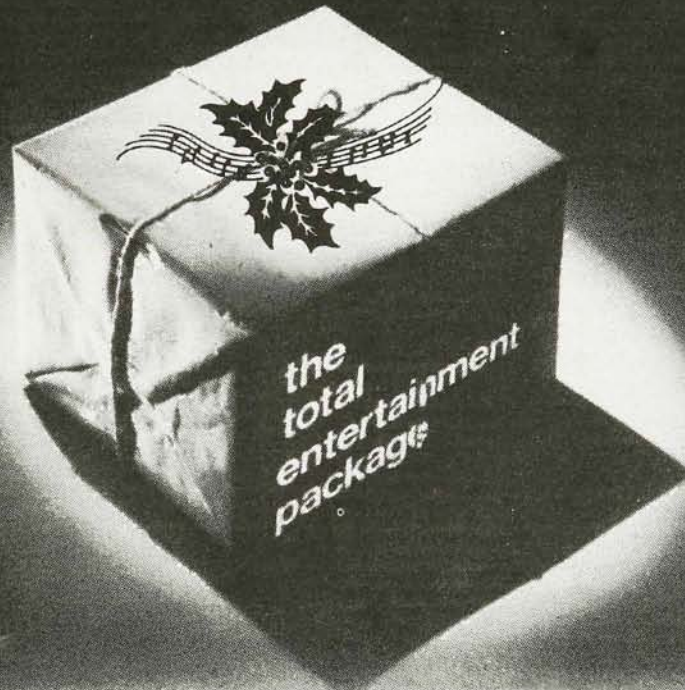
If anything, the series doesn't have enough dramatic conflict, the kind that bites as in *All In The Family*, or the sexual tension and conflict of Sam and Diane in *Cheers*. Everybody from the wrestlers on down are, well, nice.

Perhaps Precious, in an off-stage remark, put it best. She and Gorgeous Jim are good guys now, but when they were baddies on the NWA circuit some enthusiasts in search of existential justice would collect spittle 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 •

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