

# 'Jericho' sets post-nuclear drama in a small town

By Mike Hughes  
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TV dramas keep revisiting the same ideas.

The usual cops, crooks, lawyers and doctors are re-worked and recycled. Lately, however, there have been some solid exceptions.

That includes the notion suggested at one story meeting: How about a series set in the aftermath of nuclear explosions?

That became "Jericho," a quick ratings success for CBS. It's on at 8 p.m. Wednesdays on Channels 12, 7.

"It seemed like a big, obvious idea that no one had done in a long time," said producer Jon Turteltaub. Or that no one had ever done. There have been post-nuclear movies and even a short-lived situation comedy called "Woops," but apparently no drama series.

## Finding a home

The next trick was finding a network that was interested. "We thought CBS would be the last place we'd take it," Turteltaub said.

Others had tried new concepts, but not CBS. Of its 14 dramas this fall, all but two — "Jericho" and "Ghost Whisperer" — were based on cops, crooks, courts or soldiers.

Many people were surprised that CBS even tried "Jericho," with its serialized form. "It's really, first and foremost: 'What is the story you're telling?'" said programming chief Nina Tassler.

And "Jericho" seems to



CBS/Robert Voets

Jake (Skeet Ulrich, left) and Emily (Ashley Scott) star in CBS' post-nuclear drama "Jericho."

have the right story. In its first season, it edged near Nielsen's top 30; it gets hammered by ABC's "Dancing With the Stars," but has chased NBC's "30 Rock" out of Wednesdays.

That may be spurred by news reports from North Korea and elsewhere, making a post-nuclear story seem believable.

## Storytelling is key

Still, the key is storytelling. The "Jericho" idea was suggested by Jonathan Steinberg and Josh Schaer, then was handed to Stephen Chbosky.

It was an offbeat choice. Except for the "Rent" movie, Chbosky's screenplays have been for small films ("The Four Corners of Nowhere," "The Mysteries of Pittsburgh") headed to art houses.

"We ... went to Steve,

who is a terrific ... character writer, because characters are what matter," Turteltaub said.

It had been decided that this should be set in a small town, away from the blasts. "We've seen cities blown up a lot," Turteltaub said.

Most characters would react nobly; some would not. "We've seen in (Hurricane) Katrina how, when the government institutions fall apart, individual people stepped up," said actor Gerald McRaney.

He plays Mayor Johnston Green, with Pamela Reed as his unflinching wife. "If you're going to be a tough mayor, you probably have a tough wife," Turteltaub said.

One son, Eric (Kenneth Mitchell) has been the responsible one. The other, Jake, got in trouble and

disappeared for five years.

Jake, the central character, is played by Skeet Ulrich. "Skeet has a quiet modesty that I think works beautifully," Turteltaub said.

## Eclectic characters

In midcrisis, Jake met Heather Lisinski (Sprague Grayden), a quietly competent teacher. He re-met Emily Sullivan (Ashley Scott), whom he loved in high school.

Then there's Stanley Richmond (Brad Beyer), a farmer who was Jack's best friend in high school. And Stanley's sister Bonnie, a deaf teen; she's played by Shoshannah Stern, the deaf actress from "Threat Matrix" and "Weeds."

There are more: Gray Anderson is the mayor's political enemy. Dale Turner is a low-income teen. And Robert Hawkins is an outsider who seems to know more about what's going on. "We wanted a mystery figure who keeps your story larger than life," Turteltaub said.

Turteltaub's world is usually lighter. His dad, Saul, produced such sitcoms as "That Girl" and "What's Happening"; Jon directed "While You Were Sleeping" and "National Treasure."

In the "Jericho" world, he has few laughs, but some upbeat moments.

"This is the kind of tragedy that can not only destroy, but also rescue," he said. "Stanley's farm was almost (bankrupt). But now there's no one to take it away."

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