



## SO GOOD IT'S SCARY

Even longtime viewer Stephen King is spooked by *24*'s surprisingly real take on terrorism

Most viewers of *24* will want to know one thing above all others: Is the upcoming season of Fox's groundbreaking experiment in serial TV (father of *Lost*, grandpappy of *Heroes* and *Jericho*) as good as last year? Let me put it to you this way: There are more thrills and suspense in the first four hours than most series can pack into a single season. Or an entire run of show, for that matter. I got those four episodes from EW Central Command and planned to dole them out over the course of maybe a week. Instead I ended up watching all of them that same night. Day 6 (at least so far) is like a book you can't put down...even though there are times when you may want to.

The reason is simple enough. This time the story spun out by Joel Surnow, Howard Gordon, and their co-conspirators seems, if not real, then dismayingly possible. Season 5, distinguished by Gregory Itzin as President Slimeball (and let's not forget Jean Smart as his long-suffering, screw-loosey wife), was almost extinguished by the creaking plot. Sentox? Really? It doesn't sound like nerve gas; it sounds like something you buy at the drugstore to combat athlete's foot or hide those embarrassing facial blemishes.

This time the threat—and no,

I'm not going to tell you what it is—seems *too* plausible. When I got to the shocker that ends episode 4, I could understand Jack Bauer's expression of disbelief; it's a perfectly human reaction to what has just happened. And yet at the same time I'm sitting in my office chair and thinking, *This could really happen. And at some point, it probably will.* I suppose my reaction was intensified by having just finished Nelson DeMille's excellent novel *Wild Fire*, which deals with a similar scenario, but mostly it was that clear and persuasive sense of plausibility. *24* doesn't always achieve that, but when it does, it's the best thing on TV. Really, no one does the old "We're surrounded by enemies!" bit better than Fox. Bill O'Reilly's going to love this baby.

*24* is a perfect example of why some serial TV works and some doesn't. The audience will come along for the ride, but it requires certain things as a quid pro quo. One is an element of believability (which ABC's *Invasion* never supplied). Another is what producers sometimes call "a clear through-line." What this high-toned bit of jargon actually means is simplicity (NBC's *Kidnapped* threw that out in the first five minutes of its abortive run). Another is a high emotional temperature (which ABC's *The*



Jack (Sutherland) has seen better days, but 20 months in a Chinese prison will do that to a guy

*Nine* managed for exactly one week before lapsing into soap opera torpidity). Continuing stories have to run hot. How *24* has managed this kind of heat for six seasons is beyond me.

Last—and here's the genius part—continuing series must provide some degree of closure; the audience must feel they are getting somewhere. One of the reasons *Lost* may have suffered in the ratings this season (although suffering in TV is relative, and many struggling shows would kill to have *Lost*'s ratings) is because it somehow misplaced that sense of things rushing toward some sort of conclusion. Even Fox's

*Prison Break* (a column on this wonderful and hilarious show is forthcoming) provides that sense of closure; at the end of the first season, the main characters broke out of prison (well, duh). Now that the actual prison break's over, season 2 should be titled *Show Me the Money*.

I would argue that *24* is a genuine New Thing Under the Sun, not really a serial at all, but the world's first überseries. Each season is, in effect, a 24-week "episode" in the adventures of Jack Bauer...and while we're on the subject of Jack, let's not forget Kiefer Sutherland, who is now probably the best male actor

on TV (although young Mr. Skeet Ulrich from *Jericho* is a comer).

*24* also remains fresh, I think, because it is regularly watered by the blood of supporting characters—the sort who used to be considered eternal. This grisly but effective ritual began with the murder of Jack's wife, Teri Bauer (Leslie Hope), in season 1 and reached its apogee last year, when writers and producers knocked off lovable teddy bear Edgar Stiles (Louis Lombardi). And just when you thought there was no one else worth mourning...along comes another of these shockers this year.

Is *24* my idea of perfection

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in long-form TV? Indeed not. Just the most successful so far. That doesn't protect it from the occasional loopy plot twist (Kim Bauer and the cougar, case closed), the rather more frequent detour into the TV equivalent of Disney World (I couldn't believe who's president this time), or the sense—it usually sets in between episodes 16 and 20—that the writers are stretching their material until it's almost thin enough to read a newspaper through. There's also a queasily gleeful subtext to *24* that suggests, "If things are this bad, why, I guess we can torture anybody we want! In fact, we have an obligation to torture in order to protect the country! Hooray!" Yet Jack Bauer's face—increasingly lined, increasingly haggard—suggests that extreme measures eventually catch up with the human soul.

One note to *24* writers and producers: Mary Lynn Rajskub (sulky as ever, but looking remarkably pretty this year) is still one of the best things about the show. So let me close by doing my best John Wayne imitation: "If ya hurt the little lady, you're gonna answer to me."

And I mean it.

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