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TV's message: We're broke

TELEVISION | Shows laugh and cry with us about our great national malaise

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November 5, 2010

BY [PAIGE WISER](#) TV Critic/pwiser@suntimes.com

Whatever happened to TV as escapism? Traditionally, we have turned to the small screen as a way to forget our pathetic problems, not be faced with them in high definition.

But the poor recession even is affecting our precious TV leisure time, and the sets haven't looked so realistic since "Sanford and Son" ran a junkyard.

MTV's "16 and Pregnant" has spun off into "Teen Mom," with the drama of underprivileged single moms taking the place of the overprivileged blonds of "Laguna Beach."

A selection of other titles on the current schedule:

"Downsized"

"Outsourced"

"Fairy Jobmother"

"Design on a Dime"

Even "The Apprentice" has acknowledged the economic downtown, with candidates who have been laid off or have failed companies. (Fittingly, the show hasn't been a ratings success; next season will be another installment of "Celebrity Apprentice.")

Is Debbie Downer the head of programming these days?

"TV producers are more in tune now that people are in bad shape," says Elayne Rapping, a pop culture expert with a particular interest in TV. "I don't think it's changed the TV landscape forever, nor has it changed it completely. There will still be an awful lot of shows with incredibly, obscenely ostentatious lifestyles."

With so many cable channels, there's just plenty of room for Dumpster divers, too. On the WEtv reality series "Downsized" (debuting at 8 p.m. Saturday), a family of nine has lost its house and is short on rent. Patriarch Todd Bruce's construction business has collapsed; wife Laura Bruce is a first-grade teacher, but the salary is so small "sometimes I forget I get a paycheck," she says.

The series is heart-tugging. To make up the missing money, one son sells his beloved baseball glove; three other kids Dumpster dive for recyclables.

"Ultimately it's about that hope and that instinct that you can survive whatever is put in front of you, as long as you can draw strength from your family," says Todd. "Enjoy all the blessings you already have."

On Lifetime's "The Fairy Jobmother," the struggling families have a coach: Hayley Taylor, who comes across as Supernanny Jo's Auntie Mame. She enters the home of a young family that is borderline squalid and demands, "Why are you not pounding the streets looking for work?"

Shoulder shrugs, all around.

In short order, Taylor shapes them up, quizzes them through interviews and literally has them pounding the streets for job openings. The ending is inspiring, but it's hard to forget the clueless slackers they were before -- and how many more of them are out there.

In some cases, the networks are choosing to take a lighthearted look at the recession. But the fish-out-of-water comedy "Outsourced," in which a young executive travels to India to oversee phone operators for a novelty catalog, is having the opposite effect.

An online petition reads, "In the worst economy in almost a century, NBC comes across a brilliant idea -- mock the millions of American workers who lost their jobs to low-wage scabs from India! Let NBC know that displacing American workers is not funny, and has contributed to the destruction of our economy."

There is humor to be mined from our lower incomes -- "The Middle" and "Raising Hope" have a "we'll get through this together" kind of attitude that's not always realistic. (On "The Middle," a tornado miraculously drops a brand-new dryer on the Hecks' front lawn.)

But maybe the most dramatic example of Recession TV has been "The Real Housewives of New Jersey." After Teresa Giudice was seen paying scads of cash for furniture and lavishing her daughters with marabou-trimmed hoodies, it was revealed that she and her husband filed for Chapter 7 bankruptcy, citing \$11 million worth of debt.

And maybe that's the lesson here: Escapism to recession -- it can turn on a dime.

[10 Lessons from the Downsized TV Show](#)

From My Dollar Plan

["The Fairy Jobmother" Contest](#)

From TV Verdict

The views expressed in these blog posts are those of the author and not of the Chicago Sun-Times.

outsourcesucks wrote:

seany wrote: @palin, corporate greed, republicans, jobs to china. blah, blah, blah, go to a college campus n spout this bs, people their will be impressed. its a wonder I always think how as a nation can we be so stupid then I read comments like yours lol.. Anywhoo I wonder how in the heck can NBC give a run to a show about Outsourcing during the worst economy in years ? I mean a somewhat good concept but very bad timing and unfortunately the five or so minutes of hearing the non funny tired stereotypical Indian jokes about goats the show still sucks to high heaven. Yet no outrage for a show about American jobs being shipped away. I'm sure republican voters would complain if it was a show about a black President fo sho lol.. I can see it now " Get rid of that dang on stealing our country show but we love the stealing our jobs show yayyy !!!! cause all leaders say it's funny and they love our country yet sending our means to live overseas is nothing to worry about yayyyyy. We Love you Karl Rove do us in the booooootayyy like you like to do all guys .. yayyy rear loving rove your our leader. " PS the Real

Sarah Paling loves watching black males exposed pp's in naughty movies ... After reading the last sentence about Sarah Palin loving black male pp's, a white male tea party member has spontaneously combusted somewhere i'm sure.

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kdizzll wrote:

All banks have to do to tank our economy is not lend money, money is debt.

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jp wrote:

There's no escapism because we will not be able to escape the collapse of our economy. Will we be able to make sure everyone's basic needs are taken care of, though?

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craigeej wrote:

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