

one HELLUVA SHOW

On 7th Heaven the kids don't have sex and the parents always know best. So why is everybody watching?

"WELL, I HOPE YOU LEARNED A LESSON TODAY..."

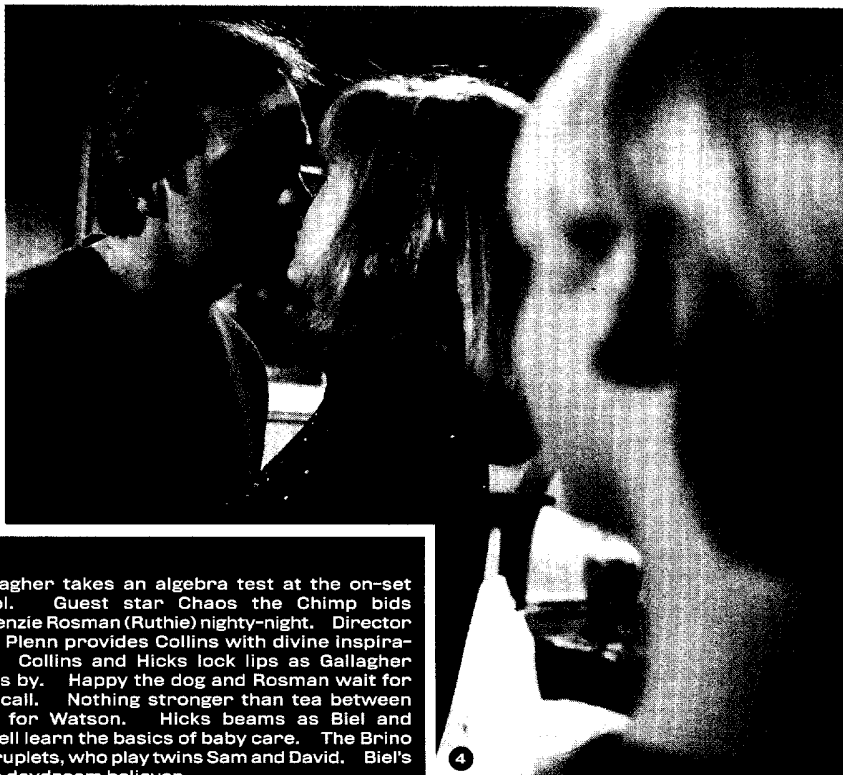
How long has it been since we've heard that immortal phrase, the motto of every square-jawed TV dad whose offspring ever threw a ball through a kitchen window? Never, perhaps, have we been more in need of it than in today's TV world, populated as it is by the hyperhormonal inhabitants of *Melrose Place*, *Felicity* and *Dawson's Creek*. People tell lies on television, they snoop around and steal one another's boyfriends — and who is going to show them their mistakes? Chandler? What we're witnessing is the fallout from TV characters' being plucked from the nuclear family and repositioned as fractured families (*Party of Five*), surrogate families (*Friends*) or workplace families (*Ally McBeal*). If you aren't getting moral instruction from your sitcoms, where can you turn? Nowhere, perhaps, but to the WB network's Monday-night drama *7th Heaven*, a surprise hit about a family of nine in which *no one has sex except the parents*.

And even *they* do it only with each other! Eric Camden (Stephen Collins), a minister at a prosperous suburban church of some indeterminate denomination, and his wife, Annie (Catherine Hicks), personify perfect values for their family and for the 12.5 million viewers who tuned in during the February sweeps, making *7th Heaven*, which had already replaced the morally clueless *Dawson's Creek* as the network's most popular show, the first WB show ever to break into the weekly Top 50.

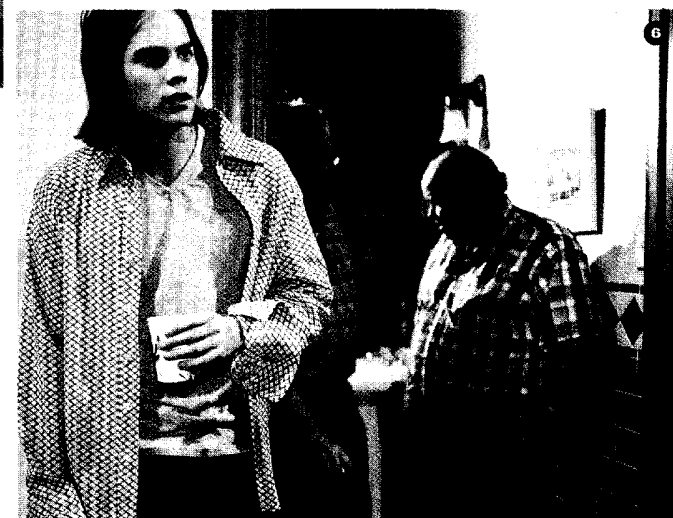
Since so many people are just discovering *7th Heaven*, episodes from the first series are being rerun in prime time on Sunday nights, even while new episodes appear on Monday nights at 8. And unlike CBS' equally inspirational *Touched by an Angel*, whose viewers on average are approaching the age when seeing angels is a statistical likelihood, *7th Heaven* is equally popular with kids, young adults, older adults and teen-agers, even though the majority of teen-agers who watch *7th Heaven* would pretend they were in the shower if a friend called dur-

BY STEW HARDESTY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GAIL ALBERT HALABAN





Gallagher takes an algebra test at the on-set school. Guest star Chaos the Chimp bids Mackenzie Rosman (Ruthie) nighty-night. Director David Plenn provides Collins with divine inspiration. Collins and Hicks lock lips as Gallagher stands by. Happy the dog and Rosman wait for their call. Nothing stronger than tea between takes for Watson. Hicks beams as Biel and Mitchell learn the basics of baby care. The Brino quadruplets, who play twins Sam and David. Biel's a true daydream believer.





1 Chaos, Collins and Rosman go bananas. Happy stands in as wardrobe assistant, while Gallagher gets dressed. Biel rehearses with a baby doll. "We're not like our characters at all," she says. "We're way more stupid than they are."

ing the show. "There's a lot of times when teen-agers are like, 'Eww, you're on *7th Heaven*?' " says Beverley Mitchell, 18, who plays ditsy, boy-mad middle daughter Lucy Camden. "I think a lot of them are embarrassed to say they watch it. But I know most of them do."

There are many theories about why *7th Heaven* has emerged as such a ratings heavyweight now, in its third season. But they all begin with the now legendary meeting between creator Brenda Hampton and producer Aaron Spelling, in which she began her pitch with the provocative question "What if there were a functional family in America?" At the time, Hampton, an experienced writer for shows like *Mad About You* and *Blossom*, was single and childless, in her mid-40s. (She has since married and adopted a 12-year-old Vietnamese girl.) But growing up in the '60s, she watched plenty of family shows and knew how kids were supposed to behave. Her improbable fantasy won over Spelling, the gnomish mastermind behind shows like *Charlie's Angels* and *Beverly Hills, 90210*. But as a realist, he thought Hampton's show barely had a chance, even after he sold it to WB. "No one around here thought this sweet little family show was going to work," he says. "There was a lot of hesitation about it." Programmers accordingly stuck the show in a Monday-night slot and neglected to promote it for the next two years. Though still a sore point with some of the people involved ("We've always been treated as the dirty little secret," Hampton says dryly), this slot may have been the thing that saved the show, allowing it to find its audience in its own unassuming way.

The nature of *7th Heaven*'s appeal remains somewhat mysterious, even to those closest to it. "It's not high concept," Collins, 52, admits. "You can't make people understand it — they have to experience it." In true Spelling fashion, the plot devices are frequently moronic (Lucy tries to get her boyfriend to say he loves her; Eric is horrified when Annie says she tried pot — in college!), but the central character of Eric Camden is carefully drawn to avoid the thing people dislike most about preachers, which is preaching. Bad things go on all around the Camdens, and the kids are subjected to the problems facing any kid today (dating the wrong, violence-prone guy; crossing the wrong, heat-packing school bully). But a lot of the problems don't get resolved by the end of the hour. Barry Watson, 25, who plays the Camdens' eldest son, Matt, shares a running fantasy with Collins of a spinoff show they call *Bucky and the*



Rev, about a minister who solves every problem he faces, generally by blowing up the offending person with dynamite. "We can do it with \$36,000 an episode," enthuses Watson. So far, Spelling hasn't bitten, but he is on board for Hampton's next project, a pilot for a series to be called *Safe Harbor*, which will have the same upright values as *7th Heaven*'s, except the father figure is a sheriff. You can imagine the pitch: *7th Heaven* with car chases.

Like all Spelling productions, *7th Heaven* is a masterpiece of casting. Tossing originality to the wind, Mitchell describes life on the set as "like a big, happy family." (Well, someone had to say it.) The vixenish Mitchell plans to study acting and business at college next year. She's a year older than Jessica Biel, who plays the earnest, clever big sister, Mary, and describes herself as "more of a retard" than her character. Both actresses have a long list of credits — Mitchell with guest roles on *Melrose Place* and *Baywatch*, Biel with films like 1997's *Ulee's Gold* and last year's *I'll Be Home for Christmas*.

But it's burgeoning heartthrob Watson who has the most extracurricular activity going on, with a lead role in the upcoming black comedy *Killing Mrs. Tingle*, co-starring Katie Holmes. All three actors are, of course, Spelling babes, although the camera, roaming the halls and bedrooms of the Camdens' improbably luxurious domain, never seems to catch them with their shirt off.

So if it's not sex that sells the show, what is it? Maybe it's not all that complicated. Maybe *7th Heaven* succeeds just by giving the people what they want — heartwarming little stories about a family as serenely cohesive as Switzerland, so intensely nuclear that even the college-age son finds it impossible to escape his parents' gravitational field. "There's a hunger in young people to be able to see parents in action," says Ron Taffel, a therapist and the author of *Nurturing Good Children*

Now. "And this show begins to deal with questions from parents who have an active role and who try to grapple with these issues. So far there haven't been many opportunities in which parents have been placed in that position on a TV show." Collins feels the

layers run even deeper. "When the show started, I remember thinking, this won't really appeal to anyone who doesn't come from a really solid family," he says. "And it does appeal to those people, but it also appeals to people from broken homes. I think it's wish fulfillment." So compelling is this vision that it can make 14-year-old David Gallagher, who plays the cherubic Simon, say with a straight face, "I am actually very honored to be on a show that teaches morals."

Just the other week, in fact, Simon was smuggling coffee up to his room so he could stay awake and study — behavior that, he was horrified to learn, can be the first step to drug addiction, imprisonment and an early death.

But you can bet he learned his lesson. ■

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