

## TELEVISION

## Stick with 'St. Elsewhere,' but forget about 'Gavilan'

If NBC could add another hour to its Thursday lineup of quality programming, *St. Elsewhere* would be right at home. The much-quoted description of it as "Hill Street Blues set in a hospital" is excitingly accurate — it's that good.

*St. Elsewhere* (10 p.m., WKYC-Ch. 3, WPMJ-Ch. 27, Steubenville's WTOV-Ch. 9) is so far removed from the Marcus Welby tradition of TV medical shows that comparisons are laughable. Like *Hill Street Blues*, *St. Elsewhere* creates a totally credible world and pulls the viewer into it.

**THE SHOW TAKES PLACE** at St. Eligius, a fictitious medical facility overshadowed by newer, larger Boston hospitals.

"You know what everybody calls this place?" asks one doctor. "Not Saint Eligius. Saint Elsewhere. A dumping ground — a place you wouldn't send your mother-in-law."

The staff at Saint Eligius is refreshingly human, and the quirks and qualities of some characters surface quickly

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in tonight's premiere. Dr. Ben Samuels (David Birney) is a self-styled playboy who likes to listen to Bruce Springsteen while performing routine operations — and who has gonorrhea, a disease that never claimed Welby, Casey or Kildare.

Dr. Wayne Fiscus (Howie Mandel) is an emergency room physician who relieves tension by spouting a stream of one-liners and by cruising the hospital for attractive female co-workers.

Dr. Jack Morrison (David Morse), a first-year resident, and Dr. Annie Cavanaugh (Cynthia Sikes), a senior resident, are dedicated to the point of frustration

and exhaustion; Dr. Mark Craig (William Daniels), meanwhile, is Saint Eligius' answer to *Hill Street*'s Howard Hunter — prejudiced, abrasive and highly inflammatory.

**IN THE PILOT**, highest acting honors go to Morse, Mandel, Daniels and Ed Flanders (who portrays hospital head Dr. Donald Westphall), but this is only the first step in what should be a long and exciting journey. Such talented cast members as Ed Begley Jr., Norman Lloyd and others (the *St. Elsewhere* cast list is longer than a health insurance form) will get their opportunities to shine in later episodes.

The key to enjoying *St. Elsewhere* is to recognize it as an acquired taste. The comparison to *Hill Street Blues* again is apparent, but *St. Elsewhere* decrows just as much from the field staging of Robert Altman (*M\*A\*S\*H*, *Nashville*) and the impassioned soliloquies of Paddy Chayefsky (whose 1971 *Hospital* addressed, in more farcical fashion, many of the same issues as *St. Elsewhere*).

In other words, *St. Elsewhere* is not the kind of television program that underlines every significant development and mindlessly follows the usual TV conventions. There is no "disease of the week," no consuming romantic subplot that grinds the action to a dull halt.

Instead, there is life and death, exhaustion and concern, skill and confusion, incompetency and rivalry. Like the precinct house of *Hill Street*, it's life as realistically as TV can depict it: fast, furious and fabulous.

Creator-producer-writers Joshua Brand and John Falvey, producers Mark Tinker and John Masius, executive producer Bruce Paltrow and director Thomas Carter (most of whom worked on CBS's *White Shadow*, Carter as a cast member — Hayward — who graduated to directorial duties) have done a superb job, as has the entire cast and backstage crew.

The characters come and go so quickly that it will take weeks to sort them all out, but *St. Elsewhere* deserves that type of commitment. Like *Hill*

*Street*, some of its plot threads are sewn through several episodes (tonight's terrorist victim, seen only for a moment, will figure prominently in next week's episode).

*St. Elsewhere* takes advantage of its hospital setting: Life or death situations are the norm, and life doesn't always win. By adhering to reality, *St. Elsewhere* has increased the drama.

**HILL STREET BLUES** has conditioned many viewers to accept, even embrace, this type of drama, and *St. Elsewhere* will not disappoint them. It's terrific.

*Gavilan* (9 p.m., same channels), though, is a total waste. Robert Ulrich is better than he was in ABC's *Vega\$* — but how hard is that? Tonight's plot is a poor (but beautifully photographed) hybrid of *Casablanca* and *Sea Hunt*: The hero is all wet, and doesn't get the girl.

*Gavilan* is immensely missable. *St. Elsewhere*, though, is the one commercial network series worth watching on Tuesdays. Don't miss it.