

Online TV is a format just waiting to click

June 27 2011, By Robert Lloyd

Kiefer Sutherland, the star of "24," and John Hurt, the eminent British thespian, recently joined forces, playing opposite each other in "The Confession," a sort of short feature about a hit man and a priest. I say "sort of" because "The Confession" was created specifically to go online, in installments - there are 10 of them, averaging about seven minutes each; they ran from the end of March to the beginning of May on the video-streaming website Hulu. So it is a sort of television series as well, though one whose entire season lasts in the aggregate not much more than an hour.

"The [Confession](#)" is certainly one of the better and more ambitious dramas to have launched on the Internet, but that is, as of yet, an especially relative judgment. Written and directed by Brad Mirman, who penned the Sutherland-directed "Truth or Consequences, N.M." and the much-hooted-at Madonna film "Body of Evidence," it is talky in a theatrical mode - "That collar gives you power," hit man tells priest. "Without it you're just another man without a voice, a lonely man who thinks that breath mints and cologne will mask the scent of cheap Scotch and cigarettes" - and finishes with the sort of shock twist that writers were advised to employ back when popular magazines still ran short fiction. But neither star needs the work, and their willingness to get involved in the project is the most significant thing about it.

Whether the Internet is the future of television or not, it looks like the future, the place the future wants to be. As the spoiler that steals eyes from established media and mediums, it announces itself again and again as the game that must be played. Big-time [entertainment companies](#) want

a piece of it, hoping to dominate an emerging market that none of them really understands - they do not even understand whether it is in fact an [emerging market](#) - even as outsider artist-citizens see it as a way to breach the thick walls of show business in the not entirely paradoxical hope of being themselves admitted to the establishment.

Comedy has done well on the Web, as anyone with an email or Facebook account must know. Humor is bite-sized - "Take my wife, please" - and doesn't need much context. It takes only a second for a man to slip on a banana peel, but if you want to know how the banana peel got there and where the man was going and what was distracting him from the danger dead ahead, that will take time. (And time is money.)

Comedians like to say that comedy is harder to play than drama, but good drama is harder to pull off online. Perhaps the small-packet, stop-and-go rhythms militate against it. There is no dramatic equivalent to such viral sensations as Funny or Die's "When Harry Met Sally 2" trailer, with Billy Crystal and Helen Mirren, or the Will Ferrell video featuring a toddler as his alcoholic, foul-mouthed landlord.

Nielsen research indicates a dip in TV ownership, in part because the younger set gets all the television it needs off computers. But even as these lines are breaking down, they reinforce the old model: If online comedy cuts loose in unexpected ways, most Web dramas still aspire to look like conventional movies or TV series, and most, being inferior to television, reaffirm the old medium's difference and dominance.

Nevertheless, as improving varieties of streaming media become an increasingly popular way to watch what once could be seen only on an actual television set or in a theater, distribution points such as Hulu have begun to act as networks or studios. ([Hulu](#), which has put itself up for sale, is actually owned in common by several of them.) Sony Pictures' Crackle has some of the Web's flashier offerings, including "The Bannen

Way," with its wiseguy con-man hero, stylish split screens and hot-girl assassins; "Angel of Death," penned by comic-book writer Ed Brubaker, with Zoe Bell ("Tarantino's #1 stunt woman") as a hired killer who acquires the compulsion to kill her old masters; and the sci-fi "Trenches," picked up from Disney's now-defunct Stage 9 Digital, which sports impressive "Battlestar Galactica" special effects. All have completed their single seasons but remain available for download in the timelessness of the Web.

Of all the emerging neo-networks - also including My Damn Channel (home to the immigration comedy "Gigi: Almost American," starring Josh Gad, Tony-nominated for "The Book of Mormon"), and Babelgum, which hosts the clever sci-fi sitcom "Date a Human" - perhaps the most compelling is Koldcast, which bills itself as "The Other TV" for the sheer volume and breadth of its offerings. Most of what I've seen there is fairly accomplished, which is to say that much of it is not derivative or artistically immature. (Many of these shows have their own websites or YouTube channels as well.)

Among the interesting scenery there is "Ruby Skye P.I.," a Canadian tween mystery; "Verse," a mystery story that features cameos from several estimable poets and the New York underground legend Taylor Mead; and the popular "Anyone But Me," co-created by "thirtysomething" vet Susan Miller, a teen lesbian dramedy that makes up in sweetness and likeness to life what it sometimes lacks in polish.

The best of the straight-ahead dramas that I've seen in my trawling through cyberspace - still largely a journey of random discovery, short on comprehensive guides - is "Downsized," now in its "second season," a serio-comic collection of scenes in which seven New Yorkers deal with love in a time of economic recession, written by and costarring Daryn Strauss, whose character begins the series being fired by a sock puppet. Though there is a kind of through-line, the show, which is not especially

plot-driven, plays more as variations on a theme, giving each episode a sturdy structural integrity even as they lock into the larger whole.

Still, for the moment, comedy continues to rule, in longer as well as shorter form. When it comes to storytelling, there is no Web drama I've seen as good as "The Guild," a full-service sitcom about a group of online role-playing gamers thrust into real-world social relationships. Created by and starring nerd-heroine Felicia Day (of "Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog") and originally made on donations from fans and later with support from Microsoft, "The Guild" has four seasons under its belt and a fifth to come. Smartly written with a superb central performance, it's accessible beyond the niche-iness of its subject matter. Also marvelous is "Easy to Assemble," Ileana Douglas' Ikea-sponsored series about recovering actors working at ... Ikea. With a third season starting this year, it features an especially brilliant turn by Justine Bateman as Douglas' manipulative frenemy: "You and I were friends for weeks," she says, "before I realized you weren't Allison Janney."

After several false dawns, we are still at the beginning. Only a fraction of the people who spend time online will have watched any Web series at all, and only a fraction of those will have watched with any dedication. A successful series might have an audience in the (millions, but this is not yet a venue in which fortunes will be made.

And that's a good thing, because if the Web is going to find its own voice to shake off its status as the third-best place for a filmmaker to work, it won't be because of the industrial thinking that in 2007 created the Michael Eisner-backed teen thriller "Prom Queen" and "Quarterlife," from Marshall Herskovitz and Ed Zwick ("thirtysomething"), which streamed over MySpace and its own dedicated social networking platform and seemed to pander to a generation even as it got them wrong; when NBC reran "Quarterlife" on "actual" television, it was canceled (and moved to Bravo) after a single episode.

If there is for the moment more craft than art on display in Web drama, craft is nothing to sneeze at. To watch the Web is to be reminded how many talented actors, cinematographers and designers (and so on) there are in the world - more than there are jobs to fit them.

The point about the Internet isn't simply to replace one delivery system with another but to extend the palate and the possibilities. When the art arrives, it will be something we couldn't have imagined ourselves, made by people less concerned with making a fortune than that thing that doesn't exist yet, that they just have to see.

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