

In the beginning, there was a soap

To attract viewers back to Friday nights, NBC makes a bold move and serves up a soap opera about a reverend.



Kevin McDonough

But this isn't about a Roman Catholic priest. In fact, 'The Book of Daniel' (9 p.m., NBC, TV-14) is a lot more 'O.C.' than 'R.C.'

Aidan Quinn stars in the title role as Daniel Webster. Yes, he's descended from that Daniel Webster, and his family has been in the Episcopal clergy business for some time.

Don't go looking for a new '7th Heaven' here. Everybody on this show has sex. OK, Daniel's daughter Grace (Alison Pill) doesn't seem to have sex in the first three episodes, but she is arrested for dealing drugs before the opening credits roll.

There's the straight sex, gay sex, and pre-, extra- and just plain marital sex going on almost all of the time. And in a plot twist too complicated to explain, Daniel's gay son (Christian Campbell) has straight sex because he's too embarrassed not to.

Between trysts, there is time for other scandals. Daniel's brother-in-law embezzles funds from the church's building fund.

Daniel's gorgeous wife, Judith (Susanna Thompson), is seen with a martini pitcher permanently attached to her hand.

And later we learn that Daniel's smug older brother, Worth (D.W. Moffett), still holds a torch for her.

For all of the hanky-panky, 'Daniel' does manage to pack in some pathos, too. Daniel attends to a woman's deathbed. Daniel's mother suffers from Alzheimer's disease.

And if this isn't exciting enough, Daniel talks to Jesus. And Jesus (Garret Dillahunt) talks back.

With so much going on, these conversations take 'Daniel' to another weird dimension. Jesus is depicted as an all-forgiving dude, straight out of 'Godspell.'

He seems to show up whenever Daniel reaches for his bottle of painkillers, which he does with great frequency. And if these chats with Jesus aren't enough to offend some viewers, 'The Book of Daniel' treats the Catholic Church as a conduit to the Mafia.

Excesses aside, 'Daniel' is a real hoot and twice as addictive as Daniel's pills. The always-capable Dylan Baker plays a snobby fundraiser, snitch and all-around drip with real gusto.

'Book of Daniel' is the right pew for you.

Tonight's other highlights

Tom Bergeron hosts 'Dancing with the Stars' (8 p.m., ABC, TV-PG).

A race to find an antidote on the season premiere of 'Stargate SG-1' (8 p.m., Sci Fi).

Pet psychologist Cesar Millan talks sense to dogs and their owners on the second-season premiere of 'Dog Whisperer' (8 p.m., National Geographic).

The boys trek to Tinsel Town in the movie-length adaptation of the 'teen series 'Drake & Josh Go to Hollywood' (8 p.m., Nickelodeon).

Scheduled on '20/20' (10 p.m., ABC): Star Jones; the proliferation of 'e-waste': old computers, monitors, mobile phones, batteries and chargers and other potentially toxic garbage.

Political quibbles imperil an attack on a Cylon ship on the season premiere of 'Battlestar Galactica' (10 p.m., Sci Fi).

The clinic reopens a 13-year-old case on 'In Justice' (9 p.m., ABC, TV-14).

Cult choice

A worried wife (Hope Davis) tracks down her wandering husband (Stanley Tucci) in the 1996 drama/comedy 'The Daytrippers' (6:30 p.m., IFC).

Series notes

A mystery windfall on 'Malcolm in the Middle' (8:30 p.m., Fox, TV-PG) ... A legal technicality on 'Close to Home' (9 p.m., CBS, TV-14, V) ... Love's labors lost on 'Hope & Faith' (8:30 p.m., ABC, TV-PG, L) ... Parenting styles clash on 'Trading Spouses' (9 p.m., Fox, TV-PG, L).

Late night

Amy Sedaris, the Temptations and Dennis Regan appear on 'Late Show With David Letterman' (11:35 p.m., CBS) ... Jay Leno hosts Matt Dillon, ANT and Lil' Wayne on 'The Tonight Show' (11:35 p.m., NBC) ... Cheryl Hines and David Banner appear on 'Jimmy Kimmel Live' (12:05 a.m., ABC) ... Nathan Lane and Sarah Chalke chat on 'Late Night With Conan O'Brien' (12:35 a.m., NBC) ... Craig Ferguson hosts Daryl Hannah, Tom Lennon and Iron and Wine and Callexico on 'The Late, Late Show' (12:37 a.m., CBS).

Kevin McDonough is a TV columnist for United Features Syndicate.

ACCENT ON PEOPLE

The Associated Press

Heiress sued by former girlfriend of ex-fiance

Paris Hilton is accused of spewing lies about an altercation with a romantic rival at a London nightclub and harassing a business promoter in two lawsuits set for court this month.

The first suit pits the hotel heiress-actress against diamond heiress-actress Zeta Graff, who is seeking at least \$10 million in damages for Hilton's comments in a July New York Post story.

The paper reported that Graff — who once dated Hilton's then-fiancee, Greek shipping heir Paris Latsis — went 'berserk' at the nightclub, tried to strangle Hilton and attempted to steal her diamond necklace.

Graff denies the report and claims Hilton said 'I'm going to destroy you' after trying to oust her from the club, according to the suit. Former Hilton publicist Rob Shuter said in a deposition that Hilton asked him to help plant the story.

A Hilton spokesman declined to comment on the case.

Singer buys house owned by Johnny Cash

Barry Gibb of the Bee Gees has purchased the home where Johnny Cash and his wife, June Carter Cash, lived for 35 years.

Gibb and his wife, Linda, bought the rustic retreat on Old Hickory Lake for an undisclosed amount, a lawyer for the Cash family said Wednesday.

Hendersonville is 13 miles northeast of downtown Nashville.

The 13,880-square-foot home and 4.6-acre property was purchased by Balinda LLC, a Florida company owned by Gibb and his wife, according to Nashville lawyer Robert L. Sullivan, who administers the Cash estate for the family.

The house went on the market in June with an asking price of \$2.9 million. The price was lowered this fall to \$2.5 million.

Cash died in 2003, soon after the death of June Carter Cash.

LOS ANGELES

Acting couple following through with divorce

Charlie Sheen and Denise Richards, who seemed to have reconciled, have filed legal papers asking a private arbitrator to handle their divorce.

Lawyers for the couple filed the papers Wednesday in Los Angeles, said Sheen's publicist, Stan Rosenfield.

'They asked the court to go to a private arbitrator. They want to keep it private,' he said.

Rosenfield wouldn't comment further. Richards' publicist, Cheryl Maisel, also confirmed the filing but refused to elaborate.

The papers, filed in Los Angeles Superior Court, request that the case be taken out of court and assigned to retired commissioner Jill S. Robbins.

Richards filed for divorce in March after three years of marriage. The relationship appeared to dissolve just months before the 34-year-old actress gave birth to the couple's second child, Lola.



SHEEN



RICHARDS

FRIDAY EVENING

Table listing TV programs for Friday, January 6, 2006, including channels, show titles, and times.

More light, more dark for 'The L Word' CALENDAR

By LYNN ELBER

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LOS ANGELES

The lesbians of 'The L Word' could serve as role models for their straight counterparts on 'Desperate Housewives': They've put a sophomore slump behind them to return more heartfelt and more playful.

Starting its third season Sunday (10 p.m.), Showtime's drama about a circle of gay friends and lovers who move in the trendiest of L.A. circles has upped the emotional ante while restoring the light touch that graced the first season.

'The L Word' can't match ABC's series in ratings, still strong despite critics' reservations about year two. But the action on 'The L Word,' including a wrenching journey for tennis pro Dana and — wait for it — Alice's fling with a vampire, makes Wisteria Lane look sleepy.

That doesn't even address the fact that the ladies of 'The L Word,' with couture duds to die for, are the better-dressed. And, courtesy of premium cable, they also have extensive opportunities to strut their stuff naked.

The ensemble cast includes Jennifer Beals, Pam Grier, Erin Daniels, Laurel Holloman and Katherine Moennig, with Alan Cumming, Dana Delany and Rosanna Arquette among the guest stars in the dozen new episodes.

'We were in our adolescence in the second season,' said Daniels, whose character, Dana, faces breast cancer this year. 'In the third season, we've grown up and really figured out what works.'

'I made a conscious decision to go back to what we did in the first season, which I think worked better,' said series creator and executive producer Ilene Chaiken. 'We went for more naturalistic drama, and we went for the humor which we missed the second year.'

One example: Alice's (Leisha Hailey) obsession with her ex, Dana, reaches comic proportions, including a spooky shrine. Then comes a rebound romance with Uta the vampire, whom Alice



AP PHOTO

Erin Daniels stars as Dana on Showtime's 'The L Word.'

meets through a bisexual speed-dating service.

'It's not completely absurd,' Chaiken said. 'When I brought up that story (to the series' writers), I said, 'Lesbians and vampires: there's something there. How shall we do it?''

But the show's emotional pulse beats most strongly this season with Dana (Daniels) as she confronts her mortality.

'Ilene and I talked about that a lot, about how it's so important because it's not just lesbians, it's

women. And this is something most women fear,' said Daniels.

'Dana has always wanted to be more loved than she was and more accepted than she was. Finally, she gets to a point where she's comfortable and she's slapped in the face with another harsh reality ... In Dana's case it brings out an angry side, 'Why me?''

Even before the new season has started, the rumor mill (aka the Internet) has been churning with speculation about the popular character's fate. The actress is mum on the subject.

But she's happy to talk about what the series and its social impact mean to her.

'I would say the show is responsible for making it more OK for lesbians to be seen publicly and to be out there. That kind of opportunity for an actor doesn't come around very often,' Daniels said.

'I get, 'Thank you so much for giving me somebody to identify with,' or 'Giving me the courage to come out to my parents,' or 'Giving my sister an example so that she can sit me down in front of the television and say see that ... I'm a lesbian.'

'That's awesome,' Daniels said.

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