



Six of 'Blake's 7' (the computer is missing). The British sci-fi show ends its first season Saturday.

## Britannia Rules the Airwaves

**M**Y FAVORITE NEW British sci-fi show, "Blake's 7," comes to the end of its marvelous first season with episode No. 13 Saturday night at 6 on WLIW/21.

It's titled "Orac." Orac is one of the band of rebels, criminals and machines who make up the "Blake's 7" team. Orac is a computer that raises its eyebrows. Only the British could add sarcasm to a machine's capabilities. He has contempt for orders, having more important things to do than use his vast intelligence to predict the future. The cliffhanger episode is out of this world.

There are three more seasons to come from the BBC — 52 episodes in all. They will start running when "Blake's 7" moves to Sunday, Ch. 21's new sci-fi night, on Dec. 14.

Imagine:

- At 7, "Dr. Who" (and they're playing the 90-minute, feature-length Doctors).

- At 8:30, "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy," Douglas Adam's winner, back from

Oblivion or Schenectady. In several months, "Hitchhiker" will be replaced by the Australian import "The Tripods."

- At 9, "Blake's 7." The Mad Intergalactic Programmer at Ch. 21, Jack Gibson, is starting on Dec. 14 with two episodes back to back: "Shadow," in which Blake tries to tangle with Terra Nostra, the interplanetary crime syndicate; and "Weapon," in which the Freedom Fighters try to get the deadly secret weapon IMIPAC.

Blakies, like George Wells of Hauppauge — who first told me about "Blake's 7" in 1981, when it was only a bad copy videotape from London — are dancing in the fourth dimension.

"Blake's 7" is a classy series of half-hours, which originally ran in Britain from 1978 to

1981. It was created by Terry Nation, who created the Dalleks on "Dr. Who." He wrote the entire first season.

The series takes place in the "Third Century of the Second Calendar," which is not my period of public TV history. (I'm an Edwardian.) It's the post-war period, i.e., after the intergalactic wars, when a dictatorship has subjugated the populated world. Liberty has become a crime punishable by death. The majority of the people are in a drug-induced state of docility. Society is structured in a track system, from the elite Alpha grade to the menial Deltas. The government, known as The Federation, gives its biggest rewards to the totally obedient.

"Blake's 7" has a lot of action as it tells the story of a resistance group battling for survival. The seven characters are convicts, freethinkers, thieves, eccentrics and machines, who hijack a space ship headed for a penal colony (the Georgia or Australia of space).

The original team of troublemakers is led by Roj Blake (played by Gareth Thomas), an opportunistic, altruistic champion of freedom. The opposition leader is Kerr Avon (played by Paul Darrow), a cold computer expert, an opportunistic pragmatist.

The crew is not as likable, or as close a family unit, as the crew in "Star Trek." And the special effects are on the shoddy side. But the plots, characters and dialogue make it an exceptional series.

"One of the reasons I like it is that it gives the women on the show interesting roles to play," explained Kate Gallagher of Massapequa. "Jenna is a former smuggler, and Cally is an alien who is telepathic. They are allowed to do more on the show than simply be attacked by alien or evil people."

I like the thought-provoking stories. The theme is mind control. What happened in the Feder-

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Executive Producer

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ation is a metaphor for TV, and what it has done to warp people's minds.

It does seem funny how the only way they can discuss mind control on TV is through science fiction. One of the reasons "Star Trek" was so important was that it was perceived by liberals as a vehicle for speaking out against McCarthyism and the Vietnam War. It was considered a triumph when an anti-war sentiment was slipped into a script. And the story of the Reagan years — how we were able to go through six years of his presidency and not see anything wrong (until last week) — will make a wonderful science-fiction story, too.

"Blake's 7," this fascinating story about rebellion, is building a following on Ch. 21. Slowly. It takes time. Repetition did wonders for "Dr. Who." We now have a generation of viewers on Long Island who believe in flying police call booths and who count Tsardis instead of sheep to fall asleep at night.

The more I take pleasure in the success of shows like "Dr. Who" on stations like Ch. 21 and Ch. 31, the more I wonder: Why is it that public TV, with its massive spending of public and corporate funds for the last 20 years, still hasn't made one science fiction series?

It's clear that the commercial networks are not going to do it. After a generation of dragging their heels, they're finally making a TV sequel to "Star Trek." And you just know that: 1) It's not going to be any good, and 2) They'll cancel it — fast. Not enough sci-fi fans.

Sci-fi is not for the average viewer, but for the above-average viewer. It's minority programing

in the same way there isn't enough of an audience for a "Brain" series on commercial TV.

I remember thinking during the last run of "The Tripods": Why can't a producing public TV station like KCET in L.A., with access to the best writers and actors out there in Hollywood, make a cheap sci-fi show, like this or "Blake's 7"?

"The TV Laboratory" at Ch. 13 was on the right road with "Lathe of Heaven," a TV movie in the early 1980s. But they veered off. Why shouldn't public TV be doing a sci-fi series, instead of artsy-craftsy video experiments?

Why are the folks in public TV afraid of doing anything with a continuing story? Narrative is an important form of communication. Whether it be in great books, or science fiction, story is what the people love most.

It's almost as if public TV has an anti-people fixation. They run away from all the popular art forms, like game shows. Why can't there be quiz shows for intellectuals on public TV, like "Mastermind" in Britain, or continuing dramas (soaps) based on great literature (Dreiser, instead of Sheldon)? What an indictment of public TV it is that every one of the shows on Ch. 21's great Sci-Fi Sunday Night is British or Australian.

I realize the underwriters will be a little shy about science fiction at first. Get some corporation with a stake in outer space; whoever made the Challenger, for example, will need some good brownie points with the opinion-makers the next few years.

Why not do an Isaac Asimov Story Hour — 68 episodes — as a starter? /■