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A Gay Fantasia on National Themes

Part I: **MILLENNIUM APPROACHES**

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New HBO series 'to die for'

By Frazier Moore
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — You've gotta hand it to death. Here's a sure thing shrouded by mystery. An everyday affair yet a once-in-a-lifetime bombshell. It's an elephant in your living room — too big to ignore but too scary to acknowledge.

Woody Allen spoke for many when he famously said, "I'm not afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens."

But now it's happening on "Six Feet Under," a fancifully discomfiting look at life and death from the perspective of a family that runs a funeral home.

Premiering on HBO this Sunday at 10 p.m. EDT, the 13-week series bears the stamp of creator Alan Ball, whose existential whim fueled his Oscar-winning screenplay for "American Beauty."

"Six Feet Under" is better, with both the odd and the distasteful far more nuanced than in Ball's 1999 film. Awkward bumps and swerves sometimes break the narrative flow (in Episode 3, the lost foot story line is pretty lame). But "Six Feet Under" is a deeply felt, slyly funny exploration that blazes new territory for TV.

What territory? "To me, it's not a show about death," said Ball in a recent interview. "It's a show about life, in the presence of death — which is life. But we don't tend to think of death that way."

A bit convoluted, but Ball makes a good point. Among any

but the ghoulish, death is branded a conversation killer.

By contrast, "Six Feet Under" truly lives with death.

As do the Fishers. They live over the mortuary they have owned and operated for decades in a now-faded section of Los Angeles.

The matriarch is Ruth (Frances Conroy), a wan, eccentric noodle who, through the years, seems to have had much of the life drained out of her.

David (Michael C. Hall) is the dutiful but tightly wound son who manages the business, even though he'd rather be doing almost anything else. Adding to his sense of isolation is his homosexuality, which he keeps a secret.

His teen-age sister, Claire (Lauren Ambrose), is a sharp-tongued rebel who drives a retired hearse to school.

Older brother Nate (played by Peter Krause of ABC's "Sports Night") long ago escaped to Seattle and an aimless life managing an organic-foods co-op — or so he thought.

On the premiere (written, as are two future episodes, by Ball), Nate is returning for the family's obligatory Christmas get-together. Then Dad, en route to fetch him at the airport, collides with a city bus.

At home, Ruth gets the news. After pitching a fit in the kitchen where she casts the family's dinner to the floor, she numbly reports to David, "There's been an

accident. The new hearse is totaled. Your father is dead. Your father is dead and my pot roast is ruined."

And Nate, the prodigal son, is back in the fold. Like it or not.

Other series regulars are Freddy Rodriguez as Frederico, the eager young "restorative artist" at Fisher & Sons; Michael St. Patrick as David's gay-cop lover; and Rachel Griffiths as Brenda, the brilliant slut-goddess Nate hooks up with on the plane.

And what of Nate's dad? Played by Richard Jenkins, he practices selective intervention with the living (yes, like the mom on NBC's "Providence"), usually while enjoying a cigarette and a beer.

At Dad's funeral, Nate strikes a blow against his mortuary's mission when he explodes, "I refuse to sanitize this anymore! What is this hermetically sealed box, this phony AstroTurf around the grave? It's like surgery: clean, antiseptic!"

David's bitter comeback: "You want to get your hands dirty? Talk to me when you've had to stuff formaldehyde-soaked cotton up your father ... so he doesn't leak."

Ritual or cover-up? Observation or avoidance? "Six Feet Under" takes no sides on death's thorny issues. Instead, it marshals humor, tragedy and mischief as an irresistible reminder: You never know, until you know. And then it's too late.

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