

■ TV review

New Comedy Central sketch show premieres with a 'hollow' beginning

"The Hollow Men," the work of four British comedians, feels uninspired but shows some promise

BY RYAN NYBURG
PULSE EDITOR

Sketch comedy is a precarious art form. Like poetry, it's very easy to do badly. The right combination of creative talents can lead to excellent humor, but anything less than that is usually dull, worthless and painfully mediocre. Comedy Central's new original sketch comedy show, "The Hollow Men," shows that it has the seeds of a good sketch comedy program, but is still lacking the sort of willingly absurd attitude it takes to push a project like this forward.

The show, which premieres March 10, is the work of four British comedians attempting to re-create the best of "Monty Python's Flying Circus," but who unfortunately lack the pure force of personality needed to make some of the sketches come off. The group's name, taken from a T.S. Eliot poem, becomes oddly appropriate through the first two episodes. The actors have no distinguishable personality, nothing that separates them from one another. In turn, their characters also become bland and interchangeable.

The show's writing is not especially low par, but it rarely passes above the level of the average Saturday Night Live sketch. The more absurd sketches, such as one in which someone sells an old couple at an antique show, often feel forced rather than natural. It's surrealism that is always looking over its shoulder to see if anyone is watching.

The more standard sketches follow a simple setup/punchline format that just feels tired and rarely ever works. The look of the show is also unappealing, coming off like "Kids in the Hall" without the sense of technique. The camera acts as if it doesn't know where it wants to be, zooming in at bad times and changing angles at a distracting pace.

Part of the problem stems from the fact that the performers seem used to a stage setup rather than a television format. Many of the sketches feel written for stage as well, with the performers looking out at an audience that often isn't there.

But there is some hope for the show. When the sketches work, they

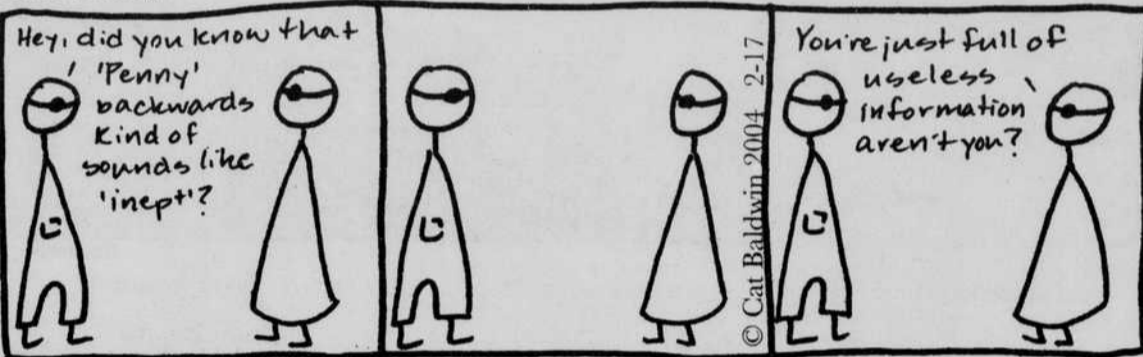
work well. One sketch in the first episode involving a police interrogation shows the group in perfect stride, hitting every note all the way to the follow through.

But despite some excellent moments, the creators of "The Hollow Men" don't seem sure of what they are trying to accomplish. Lacking any kind of political or artistic consciousness, the show is simply covering well-marked territory, treading water until it can come up with something original. Comedy Central has put forth some excellent programming in the past few years (as well as its share of flops), with the twisted absurdity of "Trigger Happy TV" or the brilliant satire of "The Daily Show." Among all of this, "The Hollow Men" seems like little more than a space filler.

It is important to remember, though, that even the best sketch comedy shows, such as "Monty Python" and "Kids in the Hall," usually get off to a rocky start. But most of them usually show why they are worth the trouble in the first place. It just seems difficult to see where "The Hollow Men" is headed.

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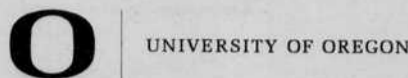
Heads up Penny



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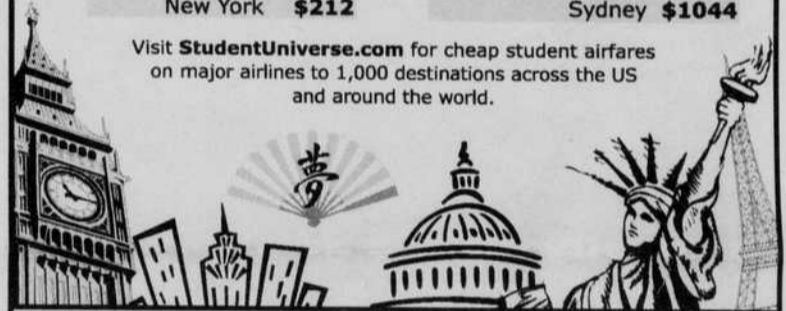
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