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TELEVISION

Rest in peace

Six Feet Under digs into its fifth and final season

BY GARY MORRIS

Who knew a miniseries set in a funeral home and featuring one of the most dysfunctional families in TV history could be a hit? Alan Ball did, and for good reason. The gay screenwriter's sensibility was responsible for the commercial and critical success of 1999's *American Beauty*. That film was a kind of rehearsal for Ball's next major project, the HBO miniseries *Six Feet Under*. Both tell sophisticated stories of families in crisis, sexual repression, separation, loss and death—all

Brenda, a cynic whose psychiatrist parents used her in experiments; her borderline-psychotic brother, Billy; David's on-again, off-again cop boyfriend, Keith, who has anger management problems; Clare's sensitive-thug beau, Gabriel; Rico's pill-popping wife, Vanessa; and many, many others. Think *Balzac* with formaldehyde. The acting throughout is absolutely first-rate, though the women—Francis Conroy as Ruth, Lauren Ambrose as Clare and Rachel Griffiths as Brenda—may have a slight edge.

The third season, newly released on DVD, received mixed reactions from the series' fans, with even diehards worried that the delicate balance of dark comedy and just plain darkness was tipping too much toward the latter. Watching the 13 episodes bears out this judgment, though it remains a riveting experience.

Despite many of the actors receiving Emmys and other awards, the third season focuses most strongly on the character of Nate (Peter Krause). Ruth's first son is a self-absorbed, none-too-stable pretty boy who has a child and marriage with another emotional basket case, Lisa (Lili Taylor). Nate's problems—his ambivalence about Lisa, his lust for warped ex-girlfriend Brenda and those frequent chats with the dead, including his father—overwhelm some of these shows, numbing the viewer with repetitive sequences of him crying and screaming (and sometimes hitting). Nate's decline upon Lisa's disappearance (which is also dragged out) is supposed to be tragically Shakespearean, but it's ultimately just tiresome.

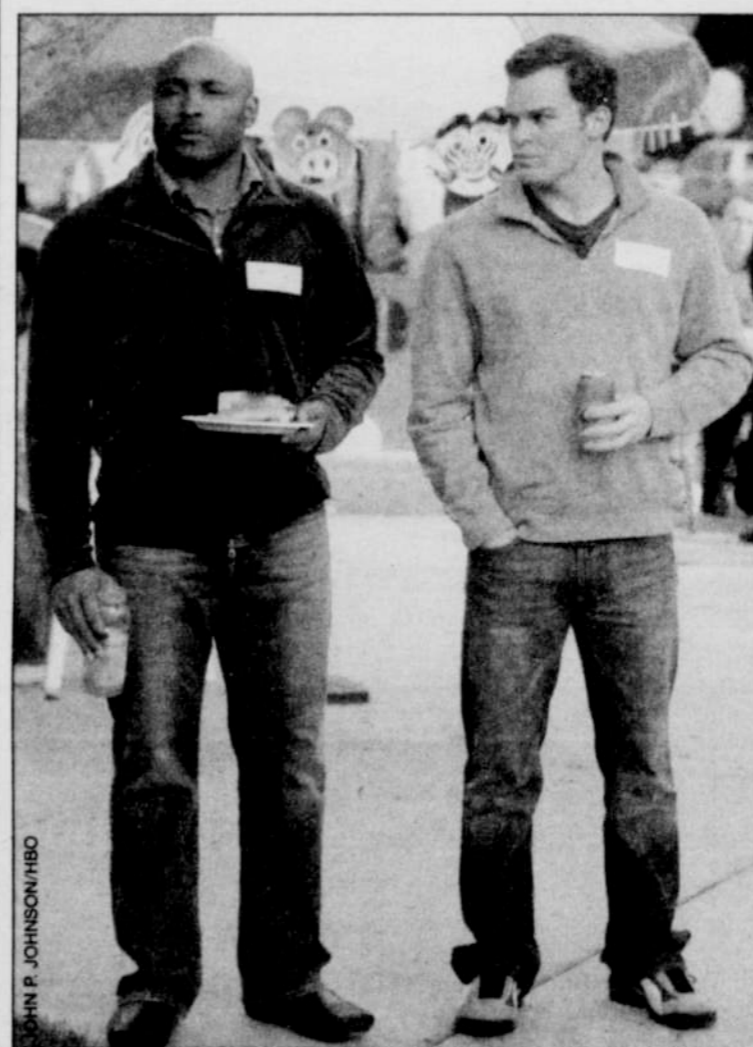
Some of the other characters and relationships prove more engaging. Keith (Mathew St. Patrick) and David (Michael C. Hall) try to adopt or hire a surrogate when they're not fighting. Keith and his virulent homophobic father dramatically duke it out, with David intervening to disastrous effect. The Fishers let a gay lighting director create a fantastic "opera funeral" for his dead lover. A queen named Father Jack denies he's gay but is busted by a video store clerk for not returning *Butt Munch II* on time. The great Patricia Clarkson returns as Ruth's drugged-out sister, and Catherine O'Hara has hilarious moments as Lisa's insanely narcissistic boss.

Keith and David play gay paintball ("I thought you were enemy ass!") and end up in a three-way with red-hot "Sarge." Best of all, perhaps, is a pretentious, domineering art teacher named Olivier who seduces Clare's sexually confused boyfriend, Russell. Olivier is a dead-on satire of know-it-all Eurotrash. He rails that his students "aren't fucking enough" and screams about the stupidity of Americans: "You are all born without a soul. I have to beat it into you!"

The DVD set (overpriced at \$100) includes five audio commentaries, an in-depth interview with Ball, the original trailer and a few other odds and ends. **JW**

The fifth and final season of *SIX FEET UNDER* premieres 9 p.m. June 6 on HBO.

GARY MORRIS is auditing classes in mortuary science to learn how to embalm Republicans who haven't died yet.



Mathew St. Patrick (left) and Michael C. Hall star in *Six Feet Under*.

wrapped up in a vivid narrative that weaves in and out of past, present and future, dreams and reality. And, like *American Beauty*, *Six Feet Under* has enough queer characters and motifs to satisfy the most militant member of GLAAD.

The series started in 2001 but was initially lost in HBO's blockbuster lineup of *Oz*, *Sex and the City* and, of course, *The Sopranos*. But by the second season, audiences and critics alike were cheering the show's high level of writing and acting and sheer imaginative force. Sometimes likened to David Lynch's depressing studies of the hell that's behind the *American Dream*, *Six Feet Under* mostly avoids Lynch's nihilism, opting instead for a distinctive blend of black comedy, operatic emotions and—no surprise considering the setting—a permeating awareness of the fragility of life and the pressing presence of death.

There are too many plot threads to describe in any detail, but the major ones center on the Fisher family. Matriarch Ruth, a widow, is a suppressed domesticated wreck, constantly whipping up tasty dishes in her kitchen while her life and family fall apart. Her uptight sons, Nate (straight) and David (gay), run the family's funeral business with help from married, also uptight, Rico. Ruth's teen-age daughter, Clare, is a confused artistic type and creep magnet.

Spinning through their orbit is a gallery of equally troubled eccentrics: Nate's girlfriend