

CHANNEL ISLAND | SCOTT COLLINS

ABC likes its chances in 'Murder Club'

The network thinks the series based on James Patterson's books could be television's next 'CSI.'

By SCOTT COLLINS
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THOSE plucky detectives on ABC's "Women's Murder Club" sure do use some innovative crime-solving techniques.

Lifting a sheet in the autopsy room, medical examiner Claire Washburn (Paula Newsome) directs her gaze to a certain part of the female corpse's anatomy. "That's not your mama's bikini wax," she says.

From this observation, the heroines deduce that the victim was keeping up appearances for the special man in her life. Might he have killed her?

Cue the threatening music.

It doesn't matter whether such a scene seems plausible or even whether it's meant to be taken seriously. The real significance of the bikini-wax clue is that it sums up the presumed appeal of the entire show. In the no-sure-thing world of television drama, "WMC" follows what looks like a perfect formula. Premise: A quartet of attractive career women bypass the pillars of their male-oriented profession and solve grisly slayings on their own.

Here's the math: Women, who make up the majority of the networks' prime-time audience, can identify with all the female bonding over things like bikini waxes and jerk boyfriends. And guys who watch will get to wallow in plenty of "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation"-style forensics, while savoring the not inconsiderable charms of Angie Harmon, who plays eminently likable workaholic Det. Lindsay Boxer ("great at her job but bad at her life," according to the PR copy), and her costars.

Who wants to bet against that?

Not ABC, which liked the "WMC" concept so much it made a preemptive bid, ensuring that no other network would even get a whack at the pitch.

"Everyone has the hope it will be the next 'CSI,'" ABC Executive Vice President Jeff Bader said last week, clearly swinging for the fences.

Executive producer Sarah Fain, who formerly worked on FX's gritty cop drama "The Shield," said, "We call the show a 'characteral' -- not strictly a procedural, not strictly a character show." (Characteral?)

The female detectives on "WMC" are trying to have it all -- career and a personal life too. But will modern

audiences find their balancing act a touching reflection of career women's plight today? Or will a group of crime-solvers who fret over guy troubles at the scene of a horrific murder just seem like pop culture's latest setback for feminism?

"WMC" is set to land Friday, in the midst of a fall season that has so far failed to bowl over many viewers. The one breakthrough is "Private Practice," a spinoff of the popular soap "Grey's Anatomy." Most other new shows seem to be earning shrugs or thumbs-downs from the audience. In its second week, NBC's "Bionic Woman" -- another attempt to dramatize today's post-feminism themes -- lost nearly one-third of its young-adult audience compared with the premiere.

"The networks are paying a lot of money toward launching and advertising these big-ticket" shows, said Dana Walden, chairman of 20th Century Fox Television, which produces "Women's Murder Club" as well as NBC's "Journeyman," a struggling new drama. "It's frustrating the audience is not responding in as excited a way as we'd hoped."

The "WMC" producers are counting on a built-in audience because the show is based on a series of bestselling books by James Patterson. And even viewers who never visit a bookstore, the thinking goes, will be captivated by the notion of a crime procedural with female leads.

The idea isn't exactly new, of course. Yes, there was Aaron Spelling's "Charlie's Angels," nominally a crime show but really a breezy excuse to have Farrah Fawcett and Jaclyn Smith dash around in swimsuits and other skimpy attire. A better example is "Cagney & Lacey," which 25 years ago advanced the notion that a pair of smart, career-minded female detectives could run circles around a geezer like Barnaby Jones.

"Cagney" was provocative enough to launch a debate about gender roles and femininity. After some viewers objected to what they saw as the show's lesbian undercurrents, CBS ordered the producers to ditch costar Meg Foster, who'd been criticized as too "masculine." (She was replaced by Sharon Gless.) When CBS later canceled the program due to low ratings, the National Organization of Women was among the groups that demanded its return.

It's hard to imagine "WMC" igniting similar controversies, partly because it seems designed more as calculatedly high-concept fare than as groundbreaking drama. "Cagney" explored tough topics like alcoholism and marital woes. At "WMC," the women are single and committed to topics such as the appropriate amount of time to wait before calling a guy back. It's a lot closer to "Sex and the City" than "The Naked City."

The project's genesis deserves a special prize for bringing together a motley crew of boldface names. Brett Ratner, the garrulous director best known for the "Rush Hour" action films, developed the series alongside (sound the gong, please) Joe Simpson, the onetime Baptist minister turned manager to his pop-singing daughters, Jessica and Ashlee.

This unlikely assemblage of testosterone -- Ratner, Simpson, Patterson -- then went out to pitch their show about how a plucky group of women does an end run around the old boys' club.

How much involvement each of the old boys will have in "WMC" going forward is still unclear. Ratner pulled out of directing the pilot, reportedly due to his commitments on "Rush Hour 3." Patterson -- who according to his Wikipedia biography has written or co-authored more than 50 books -- was immersed in developing the series initially. But he's lately pulled back to serve mainly as a sounding board for the writing staff, the producers say.

Meanwhile, Patterson seems to have found a TV producing partner he likes. "We are continuing to work with Joe and have another series idea which we will take out sometime in the next few months," the author wrote in an e-mail.

20th Century Fox brought in Fain and longtime writing partner Liz Craft, as well as executive producer R. Scott Gemmill, late of "ER."

The journey since then has not been without bumps. The producers extensively retooled the pilot over the summer, after it was determined that not enough time was spent developing the lead characters.

"Once we saw the pilot . . . we said, OK, we need to make sure we have the time to let these characters bust out," Craft said.

"WMC's" 9 p.m. Friday time slot is not considered the sexiest of prime-time berths. But that could work to the show's advantage.

There's not much competition. Rivals include NBC's widely praised but little-watched "Friday Night Lights."

"The smartest thing they did was put it on Friday nights," John Rash, senior vice president at ad firm Campbell Mithun, said of "WMC." "It's the land of low TV expectations."

And that's precisely what ABC is praying for, of course: That the show will defy those low expectations and emerge as a surprise hit. Bader said that if the show proves successful, the network has every intention of moving it to a more heavily trafficked spot.

One possibility: 10 p.m. Thursdays, where "Big Shots," the soap about rich guys behaving badly, is fizzling after "Grey's Anatomy."

You can bet your next bikini wax, in fact, that if "WMC" has any model in its bid for prime-time hitdom, it's that other crime show that started on Fridays seven years ago this month.

That show, of course, was "CSI."

The Channel Island column runs every Monday in Calendar. Contact Scott Collins at scott.collins@latimes.com.

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