

Los Angeles Times

HOWARD ROSENBERG

Television's Criminal Tendencies

It's appalling.

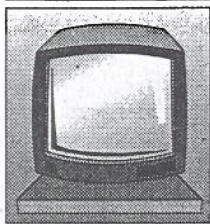
Innocent people are being victimized. They're constantly being kidnaped, threatened, extorted, swindled, mugged, robbed, savagely beaten, raped, sexually abused, maimed, knifed, shot and randomly murdered. There's no longer any doubt about our greatest problem.

Crime on the streets? No.

Crime on television.

Three crime-related series premiering tonight—NBC's "Reasonable Doubts" and ABC's "Pros & Cons" and "FBI: The Untold Stories"—symbolize a condition.

TV's reliance on action and conflict leads it down the criminal path. Although



THE
NEW
SEASON

■ One in a series

comedies get the most publicity because of a decline in the one-hour drama, series with crime themes consume about 20% of the new prime-time schedules on ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox.

Moreover, that total excludes such series as CBS' late-night "Crime Time" strip and "60 Minutes," ABC's "20/20" and NBC's "Expose" that regularly feature crime stories. And it also ignores seven network movie blocs that gorge on both real and fictional sensational crime in an attempt to titillate or capture the attention of viewers. This week alone, for

Please see PREMIERES, F7

Continued from F1

example, we've seen Dolly Parton as the victimized wife of a violent husband who gets bumped off by his father and a movie about a real-life high-school teacher convicted of getting her student lover to murder her husband.

Add to this the crime emphasis of predatory newscasts, tabloid programs and talk shows—"Donahue" and "The Maury Povich Show" ran opposite each other in Los Angeles Tuesday with segments concerning the Texas mother convicted of trying to advance her teen daughter's cheerleading career through murder—and the picture becomes clear.

If the extent of crime itself is not sufficient to terrorize and shove America into an abyss of paranoia and panic, then TV's own often-exploitative crime blitz will surely finish off the job.

Not that any of tonight's premieres is by itself terrifying.

Opening at 8 p.m. on Channels 3, 7 and 10, "Pros & Cons" is, as advertised, a lighter-hearted successor to last season's creatively loftier, at times superb "Gabriel's Fire."

The new show finds James Earl Jones now much cheerier as Chicago private investigator Gabriel Bird, even though jobless after losing his attorney employer to a judgeship. But not for long, for tonight he's sent to Los Angeles to snoop on a man whose wife suspects him of having an affair. This gives Bird a chance to meet Mitch O'Hannon (Richard Crenna), the happy-go-lucky private eye who will become his partner there. As for the cutesy title, both characters are ex-cons and professionals. And, as it turns out, also great joshers.

Even giddier than the new Gabriel, the Mercedes-driving O'Hannon has some occasional nice moments with his soon-to-be-associate, including a sequence in which they amuse themselves by playing TV cop trivia. Based on the premiere, however, this is destined to be one of those "character-driven" buddy exercises where plots are eclipsed by protagonists.

Yet, you'd think that a series having the luster of three superior actors and Emmy winners—Jones, Crenna and Midge Sinclair (returning as Bird's girlfriend, Josephine)—would do better for them initially than tonight's thin and facile story that finds Bird and

O'Hannon collaborating on solving an unmysterious mystery concerning a hit man.

Although the script's attempts at comedy mostly fail, Jones and Crenna do give class to this new wise-cracking, crime-fighting relationship, so perhaps there's hope, even though there's no longer any fire.

The evening's other new drama premiere, at 10 on Channels 4, 36 and 39, is "Reasonable Doubts," which returns Friday in its regular 10 p.m. time period.

Hearing-impaired assistant district attorney Tess Kaufman (Marlee Matlin) and maverick police detective Dicky Cobb (Mark Harmon)—whose honesty makes him a turncoat in the eyes of some of his colleagues—would be a less obvious pairing in real life even than Bird and O'Hannon. But this is TV, where odd couples proliferate like rabbits.

Tonight, Kaufman and Cobb clash on strategy over a mentally disturbed suspect in an assault case. And, although they definitely don't get along, felony division chief Arthur Gold (William Converse-Roberts) makes them a team.

This trite premise gives seed to an intriguing relationship, though, for Cobb's knowledge of sign language enables him to communicate with and interpret for Kaufman, even though she does read lips and is able to speak the traditional way somewhat. And still more subversive, the two seem headed—for the moment at least—toward a platonic union. It seems that Kaufman has a philandering estranged husband (Tim Grimm) who wants to reunite, and Cobb's romantic interest is a barmaid. Both of those relationships are interestingly explored in the future.

Although the opening story plays out somewhat illogically and clumsily—and having the hearing-impaired Matlin (an Oscar winner for "Children of a Lesser God") orally communicate mostly

through Harmon tends to elevate him over her—"Reasonable Doubts" has the essential elements of an appealing crime-based character study. And although NBC has not been exploitative about it, Matlin's prosecutor joins Corky, the character with Down's syndrome in ABC's "Life Goes On," in the forefront of an encouraging revolution—actors with disabilities starring in series as persons in mainstream society.

In any language, this is a series worth monitoring.

Truer to the standard crime genre, meanwhile, is that new ABC "reality" series "FBI: The Untold Stories." It arrives at 9, airing back-to-back with another "reality" series, "American Detectives," turning this hour into cops galore.

On the screen are "actual events taken from FBI files, interviews and public records." These are depicted through a dangerous fusing of news footage, recollections from actual agents and re-creations that, while labeled, may still be confused with reality. At some points, moreover, voice-overs from

actual agents are allowed to briefly run with re-creations, adding to the potential confusion.

The opening episode, about an epic bomb used in an attempt to extort \$3 million from a Lake Tahoe casino owner, is astonishingly flat, distinguished only by actual footage of the bomb blowing a hole in the gambling establishment. Next week's Episode 2 about the kidnaping and slaying of a 7-year-old girl is much more compelling, becoming a psychological study of a murderer and of a parent's anguish.

Nonetheless, the segment points out apparent holes in the investigation, only to dismiss them almost cavalierly, while sometimes also giving conflicting information. At one point, in a re-creation, for example, an agent is just aghast that the main suspect passes a polygraph examination. At another point, an actual FBI man says agents "weren't totally surprised" that the suspect passed.

So much for the files in this case.

Excluded from ABC's dramatized FBI files is the agency's oft-criticized investigation into the

1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas. You do hear about it, though, in "The Men Who Killed Kennedy," a five-part documentary from Britain that premieres at 9 p.m. Friday on cable's Arts & Entertainment Network.

Kicking off A&E's new "Investigative Reports" series, it advertises "startling new evidence" that the Warren Commission, FBI and others covered up an alleged conspiracy behind the death of Kennedy. Thus, it attempts to knock down J. Edgar Hoover's stated belief that Lee Harvey Oswald was a "lone nut assassin."

With Bill Kurtis supplanting the original British narrator, and creepy music heightening the suspense, all of this makes for irresistible viewing. Its truth is another matter.

The conspiracy theory is uncloseted and dusted off every so often. However, the information on this topic is so voluminous that others will have to decide whether these producers are indeed presenting new evidence or extending TV's tradition of glossily repackaging old material.