



Robson Arms: The Complete First Season

Cast: Gabrielle Miller, Mark McKinney, Megan Follows, John Cassini (CTV, 2005)
 UK release date: 15 May 2007

by **Shaun Houston**

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Traffic in products of pop culture between the US and Canada is almost entirely directed by the wealthier and more populous southerly neighbor. A glance at the latest top 10 television shows in Canada reveals only the NHL playoffs as a departure from what Americans are also watching in large numbers. And where the movie box office is concerned, Canada and the US are mostly treated as a single market.

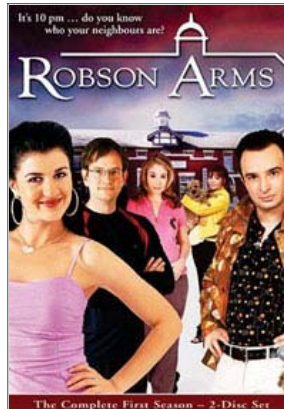
Music is, perhaps, the one area where Canadian pop culture has a discernible cross-border cachet as art that is clearly marked "made in Canada". However, in today's media landscape, television and film producers have more options than ever when seeking ways into new audiences. The DVD release of the CTV half-hour dramedy *Robson Arms* is one sign of the changing times. Just a few years ago, it would have been close to impossible to see this series outside of Canada at all. Today it is being made available to US viewers right on the heels of its second season up North. Anyone whose tastes run towards half-hour programming that runs against the sitcom grain will find much to appreciate in *Robson Arms*, despite, or maybe even because of, the series' rough edges.

Robson Arms' narratives revolve around a collection of characters who live in an aging apartment building, the "Robson Arms", located in Vancouver BC's otherwise fashionable West End. Among the residents are: a single parent, Megan Follows' (*Anne of Green Gables*) Janice Keneally, an extended family, "the Tans", two May to December couples, Carlisle (William B. Davis, *The X-Files*) and Elaine (Margot Kidder) Wainwright and Stanley Wasserman (Kevin McNulty) and Geoff McAlister (David Richmond-Peck), and a pair of young drug dealers, Hal Garcia (Zak Santiago) and Nick Papathanasiou (Fred Ewanuick). Each episode of *Robson Arms* begins with quick looks at a different residents, and often their apartments, before finally landing on one character. That character becomes the focus of that episode.

Because some characters are more interconnected with the lives of the other residents than others, the number of supporting actors each episode varies. Hal and Nick, along with building super Yuri Kukoc (John Cassini), are on the highly interconnected end of the spectrum, while Janice and sort of beau Tom Goldblum (Mark McKinney, *Kids in the Hall*, *Studio 60*) make less frequent appearances. Haig Sutherland's cyber-geeky Fred Fochs is arguably the most disconnected from his neighbors. Other characters generally fall in between these extremes, but the Tan family runs a convenience store attached to the apartment building and that necessarily puts them at the intersection of the other residents' lives.

The first two episodes of the series, "Dancing the Horizontal Mambo" and "The Tell-Tale Latex", are, as clearly indicated by the titles, focused on sex, and initially it is easy to conclude that the show is intended as some kind of sex farce. However, the third episode, "The Eyes of Grandma Tan", takes an abrupt turn towards an entirely different subject: aging and health. This is a theme also taken up in "A Certain Vintage" as Stanley and Geoff deal with the ironies of a younger partner having to face a serious illness. Episodes such as these serve to reframe the openers, drawing out the more complex emotional substance underlying the jokey scenarios involving Janice and Tom and newlyweds Bobbi (Gabrielle Miller) and Bobby (Tobias Mehler) Briggs.

Fans of the late, lamented *Arrested Development* may find themselves particularly taken with *Robson Arms*. While the Canadian series is not, strictly speaking, a "family" comedy, the residents do form a dysfunctional family of sorts. As on *Arrested Development*, the characters in the



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apartment building are all struggling with questions of identity and belonging and the challenges of being closely bound to others not of your own choosing (and sometimes even with those that you have chosen).

The theme of "arrested development" also clearly runs through *Robson Arms* as each of the characters we meet exhibits one or another kind of social incapacity; some care about this more than others, and some are more self-conscious of it than others, but all have difficulties dealing with relationships, and most are in relationships and other situations of their own making that work to inhibit their development as social beings, even with those closest to them. With its third-person narration and focus on the sordid secrets and desires of the Bluths, *Arrested Development* amped-up the inherently voyeuristic nature of family drama and comedy. *Robson Arms* achieves a similar effect by containing its action almost entirely within the walls of the apartment building and through its recurring "peeps" into what different characters are doing at different times, even when those characters may have little or nothing to do with the main story in an episode.

What sets *Robson Arms* apart from *Arrested Development* is that all of its characters are ultimately treated as redeemable. They may not always be likable or noble or "worthy" of redemption, but they are all recognizably human. This is best exemplified by Alisen Downs' improbably named Sault Ste. Marie, a transplant from Toronto who moved to Vancouver after losing her job doing PR for a government minister. Sault is highly self-possessed and abrasive. She is also lonely and all too self-conscious of her social faults. Compounding her defensiveness and anti-social tendencies is her alopecia, a condition played not for laughs, and not as a singular explanation for her character, but as one piece of who she is. These qualities do not make *Robson Arms* better than *Arrested Development* and its cast of well-realized, albeit hyper-self-absorbed and superficial, characters, but it does make for a different kind of show. *Arrested Development* has the sharper edge, but *Robson Arms* manages to pull off sentiment almost as well as it does snark.

A more generally novel aspect to *Robson Arms*, at least for viewers outside of Canada, is its Vancouver setting. To be sure, there is no shortage of images of greater Vancouver in American-produced film and television, but rarely does the city get to self represent. In *Robson Arms* this begins with the title, which appears over a time-lapsed long shot of the city's gleaming, steel-and-glass core, backed by mountains, and taken from across Coal Harbor. From there, each episode cuts to a montage of people and activities along the water, usually in Stanley Park, and then to West End streetscapes, and finally to the Robson Arms itself, where "The Troubadors", Tom Saunders and Jason Dedrick, play narrative-appropriate songs as the audience is eased back into the life of the building. The city is also signified by the show's unassumingly multicultural ensemble of actors and characters, and by the ambivalent relationship that some of the building's residents have with the city.

British Columbia is to Canada what California is to the US, and Vancouver is BC's LA equivalent. Gabrielle Miller's Prairie-born Bobbi is drawn to the city for its opportunities, but resents the smug self-satisfaction of its people. Like many self-styled "cosmopolitan" places, Vancouver can seem parochial to outsiders, and *Robson Arms* gives a look into that perception through Bobbi, and to a lesser extent, Bobby. Meanwhile, Torontonian Sault has a litany of complaints and adjustment issues to contend with. She chafes at the city's mores and regulations regarding smoking. She resents being cajoled into saying "venti" at the coffee shop (that Stanley provides a reasonable defense of this norm is a nice touch in the writing of the show), and she makes a serious social error when unable to respond appropriately to Geoff going "all Vancouver on me", which is to say all touchy feely.

Sault could just as easily be a New Yorker feeling unmoored amongst Angelinos, but hearing these characterizations of "East" and "West" in a Canadian context gives them a new and different significance. Just for starters, unlike the American cities, after all, Toronto and Vancouver aren't actually divided by the full breadth of the continent. *Robson Arms* wears its Canadian-ness well, neither overtly excluding nor explicitly spelling out its in-jokes to "outsiders".

The show's most notable weakness is an unevenness in the appeal and quality of episodes. In part this is a function of the series' structure. In focusing on one character per episode, there will, by necessity, be installments that are more or less appealing to different viewers. By itself this can be excused as a necessary consequence of the creators' willingness to experiment with format. However, as is often the case with made in Canada for Canada film and television, the acting on the show ranges from stagey and stilted to pitch perfect and professional. Certain episodes founder on the limitations of the featured actors. The variation in the acting is at least partly a function of budgetary constraints, constraints that are also reflected in the show's production values. The look and feel of *Robson Arms* is a far cry from the obviously shot on video look of '80s sitcoms, but it also falls short of the cinematic quality found in its US-counterparts like *Weeds* and *My Name is Earl* or the aforementioned *Arrested Development*.

Adventures in Hollyhood: Premiere Episode	Painkiller Jane: First Episode
America at a Crossroads	The Riches
Brando	Shear Genius: First Episode
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Drive	The Sopranos: Season Six: First Three
Friday Night Lights: First Season Finale	Thank God You're Here
The Gilmore Girls: Series Finale	The Amazing Race: All-Stars: 11th Season Finale
Human Giant	This American Life
Notes from the Underbelly: First Two	The Trials of Darryl Hunt
	The Tudors
	The Unit: Paradise Lost (Season Two Finale)
	The Unit: In Loco Parentis (Season Two Episode 20)

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At the same time, and to be fair, the low rent appearance of the sets is somewhat appropriate given the implied shabbiness of the Arms.

The 13 episodes of season one are divided across two discs in the DVD set. Disc two also contains the following extras: two conversations with co-creator Gary Harvey, one on the opening sequence and one on the show's "tone, look, and sound", two commentary tracks on the season finale, one from director James Dunnison and one from co-creators Gary Harvey and Susin Nielsen, a season one trailer, and a season two preview. The conversations with Harvey are interesting for the insight they give into the show's intent and structure, while the commentaries are notable for their differing perspectives on the episode. Dunnison is more concerned with the finale itself, whereas Harvey and Nielsen have more to say about the entire arc of the season. It's a well put together DVD set, and one likely to whet your appetite for season two.

Robson Arms - Troubadours

RATING:  7

EXTRAS:  7

— 24 May 2007

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