

The New York Times

DVD

One Couch Potato, Gently Roasted



Don McKellar, left, and Callum Keith Rennie in the Canadian television series "Twitch City."

THROUGH the '80s and '90s, sitcoms grew ever more referential, thanks to the self-conscious likes of Garry Shandling and Jerry Seinfeld. But to the few who saw it, "Twitch City," a short-lived Canadian series that revolved around its main character's crippling attachment to his television, stood out as a bold and perversely literal form of meta-TV.

Produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and created by Don McKellar, a Renaissance man of the Toronto indie film scene who won a Tony last year as a writer of the hit Broadway musical "The Drowsy Chaperone," the comedy ran for a mere 13 episodes over two seasons in 1998 and 2000. But it attained cult status at home and abroad and is the rare television show that also holds up as a work of media scholarship. (It was shown here on Bravo in 2000 and is being released in a two-disc DVD set Feb. 20.)

Its protagonist, a socially challenged shut-in named Curtis (played by Mr. McKellar), spends almost all his time glued to the television, often to a "Jerry Springer"-like confessional circus called "The Rex Reilly Show." To watch "Twitch City," in other words, is often to watch someone watch TV. The screen serves as a de facto mirror — a nifty trick for a show about the vortex-

like pull and mind-altering possibilities of television.

On the DVD commentary Mr. McKellar calls "Twitch City" an "anti-sitcom." Many of the plot convolutions are indeed satiric variations on the roommate shenanigans that have long been a sitcom staple. (Joyce DeWitt of "Three's Company" pops up in a knowing cameo.)

The first episode sets up a classic personality clash between the slovenly Curtis and his fastidious, short-fused roommate Nathan (Daniel MacIvor), who lives by the color-coded "job wheel" he has taped to the kitchen wall. After accidentally killing a homeless man with a bag of cat food — long story — Nathan winds up in jail, paving the way for a revolving door of eccentric subletters (a cat-hating Wiccan, a pair of possibly gay neo-Nazis). Nathan's girlfriend, Hope (Molly Parker, who went on to "Deadwood"), moves into the hall closet and, against all odds, falls for Curtis.

Offering an absurdist slow burn in place of punch lines and belly laughs, "Twitch City" is an incisive study of slackerdom, a state of mind and way of life that the show portrays with neither condescension nor sentimentality. In Curtis, Mr. McKellar created a sitcom protagonist even more complex and unlikely than the Larry Da-

vid of "Curb Your Enthusiasm." Committed to an existence of bohemian languor, he's also a cutthroat entrepreneur hellbent on renting out every last square foot of his apartment. He may be truly agoraphobic — he doesn't venture outside until the sixth episode — but his couchbound apathy masks a ruthless manipulative streak, as when he cons a Meals on Wheels volunteer into delivering his lunches.

"Twitch City" is an artifact of the pre-TiVo age — Curtis shoves a tape into his VHS recorder whenever he's summoned away from the TV — but its sly, sophisticated take on media saturation hasn't dated a bit. Curtis may be a TV addict (as the hilarious detox episode confirms), but he has turned his addiction into an empowering form of social rebellion.

Curtis is neither a mindless viewer nor a stereotypical pop-culture savant. His obsession is somehow deeper and purer: he watches TV silently, without ironic comment, "to learn from it and not laugh at it," he says. As a case study Curtis supports the contention of his fellow Canadian Marshall McLuhan that the effects of television are more relevant than the content. In "Twitch City" the medium truly is the message.

DENNIS LIM

The New York Times

February 11, 2007

issue