

'Casablanca' . . .

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Recreating the chemistry among the actors in the original movie even once would be difficult; to recreate that chemistry every week is absolutely impossible. Even the success of the original was a colossal accident — a series of setbacks that somehow resulted in ultimate success.

That said, the trick is to try to judge "Casablanca" against its competitors on television, rather than against the film. Matched against this admittedly weak competition, "Casablanca" fares well, at least in the early episodes.

In Humphrey Bogart's portrayal, Rick Blaine, the owner of Rick's Cafe Americaine and the man with his proverbial finger on the pulse of Casablanca, became the guy that two generations of moviegoers tried to become in their spare time. David Soul, who is in the enviable position of being paid to act like Rick Blaine, does not give the character the understated feeling of control evident in the film, but he also had better not do so if this series is ever to succeed in the long run. Indeed, the worst moments in the early episodes have been those in which Soul too-closely duplicates Bogart's mannerisms or speech patterns. Left to his own devices, Soul gives us a more nervously energetic version of Blaine that is well-suited to the necessities of the 60-minute action-adventure formula script, which places a premium on evolution of the story at the expense of evolution of the characters.

If David Soul's version of Rick Blaine resembles any one character from television, it might be Col. Robert

Hogan of the old "Hogan's Heroes" comedy series. The whole Casablanca series, in fact, might best be judged as a dramatic version of "Hogan's Heroes." The regulars at Rick's, including police chief Renault and faithful pianist Sam, resemble the gang at Stalag 13 in that they walk the tightrope of acting just suspicious enough not to be trusted and just innocent enough not to get caught. Maj. Stroesser, the Nazi top banana whose autocratic rule is so constantly and effectively subverted by Rick and his cohorts, has been written in the series as the absolute Jesus of Sleaze, a ruthless, godless and ultimately friendless guy who even the most cursory viewer can learn to hate in seconds.

They are broad, brush-stroked characters operating within a formula story, but it is a formula that has always worked in television. The reason it won't work this time, at least with the viewing public, is that this is the one instance in a million in which the television audience expects something more for their time than a formula story and broadly-drawn characters.

Even if "Casablanca" only stays on the air the obligatory 13 weeks and then dissolves, producer David Wolper deserves some credit for, if nothing else, having the cheek to try something as ambitious as "Casablanca" in the notoriously safe world of prime-time programming. With a track record that includes the likes of "Roots" and "The Thorn Birds," however, Wolper can probably afford this kind of gamble, whereas it might be suicidal for a lesser-known producer. While "Casablanca" is not up to his aforementioned previous efforts, it is still at least as interesting as most of what prime time has to offer.

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