

Sunday TV

Craig T. Nelson is now starring in his second hit show. Still, hardly anyone knows who he is — or what the T. stands for.

The quiet man

Craig T. Nelson never thought anyone watched "Coach." He wondered who was home on Saturday night to see his new series, "The District."

By MICHAEL GILTZ

When CBS told Craig T. Nelson they were putting his new drama "The District" on at 10 p.m. in the Dead Zone (also known as Saturday night), he wasn't sure what to make of it.

"I'd been out of it so long," admits the 55-year-old actor, "I didn't know what was a good time slot or what wasn't. I thought, 'Good Lord, Are people home? What's going on?'"

He needn't have worried. In a season filled with success stories, perhaps the quietest one has been "The District," an earnest drama about Chief Jack Mannion, a sharp dresser and no-nonsense man of action who takes charge of the struggling Washington D.C. police force.

Based on Jack Maple, the bowler-wearing former New York deputy police commissioner, Mannion fights crime using tactics made famous in New York City.

Not only does it beat everything else on at that hour, "The District" is often the highest rated show of the night.

The media and even CBS may not have paid much attention to it, but as with Nelson's last hit, the viewers are. This isn't the first time Nelson's been underestimated.

Born in Spokane, Wash., to a jazz drummer father, Nelson avoided the family business ("It was my dad's fervent wish that I play the clarinet," he admits) and formed a

stand-up comedy act with director Barry Levinson, who went up to do "Diner" and "Wag the Dog."

"We had three sets of 40 minutes each," he says proudly. "We would do a lot of improv to see where it went and then sit down and write it. Barry was a really good writer. And so. He was really good at structure. And I was good at the timing part of it. It was just a great time."

"And it was also a time when you couldn't make any money at it. You did it for the love because comedy was not paying well. The only place you could really do comedy at the time — if you weren't Nichols & May — was Vegas."

They wrote for Tim Conway's CBS variety show and TV specials starring Alan King, but Nelson was worn down by the grind. He left town, moved his family out into the wilderness and spent a few years building a log cabin.

"When welfare checks became a part of his life, he decided things weren't quite working out and took another stab at the business."

"My real intention was to produce documentaries and spend my life in that world — almost like a Ken Burns," says Nelson. "I didn't have any real aspirations for acting. I spent so much of my early years in comedy and had been disheartened. I just didn't feel I had it. If it hadn't been for Barry Levinson and Valerie Curtin writing 'And Justice for All'."

Nelson stumbled into a role on that film and has never stopped working since. Most of the movies were dramas, including the smash hit "Poltergeist" — a film that unexpectedly got him back onto television.

"My first series, 'Chicago Story,' was a result of 'Poltergeist,'" says Nelson. "It was a deal that was made between Mr. Begelman [meaning the legendary sharky studio boss David Begelman] — who was then at MGM — and NBC. It was in the fine print of my contract and I didn't even know that! I was committed to it."

The show didn't last and Nelson did so many roles in serious dramas — "The Killing Fields," "Silkwood" with Meryl Streep and "All the Right Moves" with Tom Cruise — that when he decided to audition for "Coach," no one thought he could do comedy. It didn't help that his reading before ABC executives was a disaster.

"I went in to audition for it and got turned down," says this man who'd made his mark in stand-up. "ABC didn't think I was funny. Boy, was I embarrassed. I just did it the way I thought it should be and they didn't think that was very good." Nelson laughs. "Maybe they were right."

Ultimately, he'd win an Emmy for Best Actor in a Comedy, but it wasn't easy. "The show was moved 17 times in 9 years," he says. "I think that gives you an idea of the network's faith in it."

First "Coach" did poorly in a spring try-

out. Then, when the fall schedule was announced it didn't even make the list of possible replacement series. But a slot behind "Roseanne" opened up when comic Jackie Mason's highly-rated "Chicken Soup" took a nose-dive. "Coach" stepped in and never looked back, spending a number of seasons in the Top 20 and ranking as high as No. 6.

Now he's doing it again, playing Chief Mannion in a show that so far hasn't received much attention from the press but — buzz or no buzz — pulls in viewers.

Mannion is a bit of a dandy, sporting great clothes, great shoes and the occasional flashy scarf. He also is prone to frequenting karaoke bars. (Nelson has been especially proud of his take on a George Jones country classic. "I also had a good thing going with 'New York, New York,' but they cut a lot of that out.") But most of all he fights crime using the latest hi-tech gadgets and old-fashioned common sense.

Mannion doesn't care much about city politics or courting fame and probably Nelson doesn't either.

He's found satisfaction in seriously devoting himself to car racing (an expensive habit he backed away from after several years). He never realized he had fans in the "real world" beyond the industry ("I didn't think anyone liked 'Coach,'" he says) until getting out on race tracks and marveling at the response he'd get.

Then there is his dream project.

Called "The Trilogy," the story is autobiographical but fictional, using Nelson's own life as a springboard for exploring what he's learned about the industry and life in the last 30 years. He's been working on the script for years, with help from friends like Herb Gardner, the playwright who wrote "Tom No. Rappaport."

"The Trilogy" is black comedy and dramatic and a lot of it is pure silliness," Nelson says.

The plan is to turn it into a six hour miniseries.

"It's six hours that I overwrote. As Herb says, 'Is it long? It looks long!' I said, 'Yeah, it's a little long, Herb!'"

"He said, 'Cut the wisdom!'"