

This week's
must-see
DVDs: P.108

TV Sunday

Talk to us online at:
tvplus@nypost.com

Damon Wayans' kids were uneasy about seeing their lives as comedy material on TV. Now they say...

By MICHAEL GILTZ

SOME hit shows — like "Friends," for instance — anchor a night.

Some — like ABC's "My Wife and Kids" — have been asked to anchor an entire network.

In the last four weeks — and especially during the Olympics — ABC has aired "My Wife and Kids" a whopping 11 times.

That kind of durability is a testament to the network's highest rated sitcom — it scored well almost anywhere it aired. But it's also a big fat headache.

"I worry about the value of the show and over-saturation," says the show's star and co-creator, Damon Wayans. "People sit back and go, 'Well, if it's on every night, I'll catch it tomorrow.'"

"You don't really build a fan base. It's a concern."

Still, it's a compliment," says Wayans, who is working on the last four episodes of the season. Given the heavy load "My Wife and Kids" has had to shoulder, it's no surprise Wayans is filming 28 shows this year — four more than most sitcoms.

"My Wife and Kids" is, by far, the actor's most personal and successful project to date — it's based on Wayans' marriage to his ex-wife and draws on family stories for inspiration.

And he is serious about making sure it is not run into the ground because the network has a short-term need to fill timeslot holes.

That's exactly what Fox did with "In Living Color" — the sketch comedy show that introduced the talented Wayans dynasty to the world — and it's also been a major problem for ABC stalwarts like "Who Wants To Be a Millionaire" and "Home Improvement."

"Very soon it's going to be resolved," says Wayans. "It's going to be resolved or we'll be talking again. We're in the middle of it right now."

A genial sitcom about the owner of a private trucking company and his wife and three kids, Wayans' show marks a return to ABC's past — classic family-oriented sitcoms like "Roseanne" and "Home Improvement" — and, the network hopes, its future. ABC can't afford to squander that rarest of TV commodities: a breakout hit. It has had so few in recent years.

Co-starring Tisha Campbell of "Martin," the show seems deceptively easy-going, building on storylines like a daughter who wants to date or an entire episode built around the family driving somewhere.

It works because 41-year-old Wayans finally listened to his siblings and built a show around events closest to his heart.

"I was hesitant to do it," he

says. "But the family was telling me that this is what people want."

"Actually, it's really easy. It's too easy to actually do it because you're just taking true stories and playing them out."

When he pitched the series, Wayans was still married. He and his wife separated soon after the show got going, turning the show into what he jokingly calls therapy.

His kids, who were initially uneasy about seeing their lives as raw material for TV comedy, have come around, he insists.

Besides, Wayans only gave them two options: get their own sitcom and talk about him.

And the other?

"Be a better kid," Wayans says.

"Now, all my kids work on the show in some capacity, except my youngest. She's in school, but she's here today."

"They understand it more."

They feel like they're a part of the process, so they're less skittish about using some of their stories. They actually pitch stories.

Would they get into trouble on purpose — just to help Wayans get good ideas for the show?

"No, 'cause the TV dad is different from real-life dad," he says. "Real-life dad busts their ass."

Wayans' own dad was much tougher.

Damon was born in Harlem one of 10 kids, where money was always tight and jokes were always loose. His father was a Jehovah's Witness who did not spare the rod for any reason.

Since then, the Wayanses have become an acting dynasty akin to the Barrymores, with Damon breaking out on "Saturday Night Live" and Keenen Ivory Wayans developing shows like "In Living Color" and smash films like "Scary Movie."

Half the fun of watching an episode of "My Wife and Kids" is seeing how many Wayans you can spot in the credits.

And he's not stopping there.

Wayans has already sold ABC on another sitcom called "Weekend Dad" about a divorced father — also clearly modeled on his personal experiences.

He sarcastically calls it "My Ex-Wife and Kids" and says he really wants to cast David Alan Grier and his sister.

To Fox, he's sold a pilot about a black Archie Bunker that has Wayans reading a lot of black playwrights to find the right

Way to go Dad



voice for his star character.

The mogul-in-the-making promises to use his shows and to bring along a lot of people, even if their last name isn't Wayans.

"I really want to turn this into a camp," says Wayans, who jokes he is spoiled by having his kids and other relatives around him all the time.

"I want to have acting classes and have a writer's workshop and really create talent. That's definitely what I'm going to do next season."

Wayans is worried his hit sitcom "My Wife and Kids" (inset) will be over-exposed.

