

TV Sunday

TV's best cop show may still be beautiful. But it ain't getting any younger.

By MICHAEL GILTZ

BILL CLARK — the retired New York detective whose job it is to supply the "NYPD Blue" writers with new plots — admits that seven years into the series' run, it becomes harder and harder to keep the plot lines fresh.

"When I bring detectives in to hear their stories," says Clark, one of the show's executive producer, "more and more I think to myself, 'I've done that.'"

"It does get difficult because there are only so many [types of] homicides," he says.

"NYPD Blue" faces the usual dilemmas of a show its age — working in new characters, maintaining quality control on its scripts and trying to find new ways of telling the same stories without repeating itself or becoming far-fetched.

TV years are like dog years; they take their toll very quickly.

Last week, the question of how to deal with "NYPD Blue's" mid-life crisis became more than academic when ABC informed the show's creators — Steven Bochco and David Milch — that they are thinking about moving it to a new night.

TV networks, as a rule, don't like to fiddle with shows that ain't broke. And "NYPD Blue" — along with "ER" — remains the most successful drama of the '90s.

But the hoopla and hand-wringing over the fate of the cop show — indeed the fact that the network raised the possibility at all — begs the natural question: Is "NYPD Blue" showing down?

The challenge to stay fresh is more difficult than ever. Thanks to chat rooms, fan web sites, and the media's insatiable desire for new stories, TV shows are now hooked up to a permanent EKG machine.

The trend began with "Seinfeld." Before, shows were judged from season to season, with perhaps a

NYPD Blue's midlife crisis arrives early

brief checkup halfway through the year. But "Seinfeld's" success and its hyper-fanatical fans changed that.

Episode to episode, the show's fortunes were tracked. If the third show of a season wasn't deemed up to snuff, warning bells began to ring, columns were written and chat rooms were jammed with complaints.

"NYPD Blue" — like "X-Files" and "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and any other show good enough to have a following that cares — is monitored just as carefully.

Jimmy Smits' farewell? Ratings and reviews were healthier than ever.

Rick Schroeder's arrival? Still A-OK.

Slight drop in Nielsen ratings at the end of last season? Just the normal signs of a show six years into its run.

Every cloud is supposed to have a silver lining. Perhaps the show's recent travails will give it the adrenaline rush it needs.

No longer an aging grand dame collecting accolades and high ratings



The stars of "Blue" — Andrea Thompson (l), Kim Delaney (c) and Dennis Franz — reflect on whether the show's current troubles mean that its best days are past. ABC

thanks to past glory, it's suddenly been cornered by market forces and network scheduling. "NYPD Blue" has to fight or flee — and fighting may be the best thing that could happen to it.

The last time the show faced a comparable crisis, it had a happy ending: David Caruso — the heart and soul of the show at its inception — left in the second season. A potenti-

ally fatal blow, Caruso's departure was a blessing in disguise. It opened the door for Jimmy Smits.

Smits brought sexiness and star power; he was less of a white knight and more of an Average Joe (albeit a very good-looking, very sincere one). Unexpectedly, he also gave Dennis Franz the chance to take center stage as Det. Andy Sipowicz.

Perhaps studio execu-

tives or even Bochco might have had second thoughts about building another show around Franz. He floundered in the misbegotten "Beverly Hills Buntz," a spinoff from "Hill Street Blues." But that's exactly what they've done with "NYPD Blue."

His endless travails — alcoholism, struggles with his ignorant prejudice, estrangement from his first wife and son, the death of his son and now his best friend — have made Sipowicz a very modern twist on Job. Instead of a god man suffering unnecessarily, he's a flawed man who may have deserved a little commiseration, but surely not all this.

The Emmy Awards may be dull retreats of previous winners. (Even Franz seemed embarrassed this year about winning yet again.) But unlike other awards — see Helen Hunt for "Mad About You" — no one questioned whether Franz was worthy.

Others may have rooted for sentimental favorite Jimmy Smits or the terrific James Gandolfini, but pound-for-pound Franz is

TV Sunday



The network gave "NYPD Blue" the bum's rush when it announced that it was thinking about the moving the show to a new night. Ouch! After everything that's gone wrong for Sipowicz (l), during the last six years — how much more do they think can we take?

NY Post: Larry Schwartz

'TV years are like dog years; they take their toll very quickly . . . NYPD Blue has to fight or flee — and fighting may be the best thing that could happen to it.'

the best actor on television.

Which made Smits' departure last season less dangerous than it seemed. It's Franz's show now, and Rick Schroeder has moved in smoothly.

Schroeder's character is more volatile than Smits', more prone to Runyon-esque street slang and mixing it up with the criminals, more reserved about

his private life. (Why exactly won't he speak to his aunt and uncle?)

But because he's a foil for Franz and not the star, Schroeder's compelling presence is a bonus — not a necessity.

As for the women, only Kim Delaney's Diane Russell has been a fully developed character in recent years. (Though Lola Glau-dini's meltdown last sea-

son as the heroin-addicted Dolores was a rare chance for another female to shine.)

"NYPD Blue" has a strong female following, thanks to Smits and now Schroeder, but it's a man's show onscreen. None of its female characters have ever been nominated for Best Actress and Delaney won only once (in '97) for Best Supporting Actress.

This season brings another few characters, including African American detective Baldwin Jones, an imposing 6-foot-four slab of a man who will win over Sipowicz (however grudgingly) with his focus on the job.

It also brings an opener that tackles police brutality, in response to the Diallo shooting, the Louima trial and other real-world developments.

But unlike other shows, the job at hand has never been the strong point of "NYPD Blue." Compare it to "Law & Order."

That series keeps an almost-religious focus on the crime at hand, a strategy that makes its revolving-door cast a non-issue

and ripped-from-the-headline stories its bread and butter. (They must have a sign posted for the writers that says, "It's the case, stupid!") "ER," on the other hand, delves into the private lives of its cast members, but gets most of its energy from the workplace — the rush of dealing with new emergencies and new co-workers in a life-or-death situation.

Last season was by general consensus "ER's" first weak year — and much of it devolved around soap opera antics like Noah Wyle's dalliance with Kellie Martin and Anthony Edwards being stalked by Mare Winningham. They've righted themselves quickly this season by getting the focus back on the staff at work and on the patients who come through the door.

Still, fans of "ER" don't know what injuries might come through the door.

"NYPD Blue" leans even more on the private struggles of its cast — and its fans worry most about them.

Will Sipowicz wallow in despair or take some comfort in being a single dad? Will Sipowicz and Russell become closer? (How many other widowed alcoholic cops can there be in their precinct?) Will Danny Sorenson (Schroeder) reveal more of his troubled family background?

The cases are really an excuse to see how they've grown.

Fans may be leery of watching Sipowicz sink into gloom yet again. But overall, "NYPD Blue" is in fine form. Unlike the self-regenerating "Law & Order," however, it is showing its age.

Knowing when to end a series is the one judgment call that almost every show has blown. (Perhaps only "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" exited gracefully in peak form both commercially and critically. Every other classic, from "I Love Lucy" to "M*A*S*H" to "Hill Street Blues" pushed its luck further than it should have.)

If "NYPD Blue" had called it a day after Smits' heart-rending exit, the show would have gone out on top as one of television's most acclaimed dramas.

Now it faces the challenge of declining gracefully, trying to maintain integrity and remain vital without dimming the memory of what it's already accomplished.

AHC isn't making that any easier, but maybe it has unintentionally done the show a favor.