

● REALLY BIG SHOW

'The O.C.'

Crime and kids in Southern Cal



Benjamin McKenzie (far left), Mischa Barton and Peter Gallagher star in a new primetime soap with a teen-angst spin.

By MICHAEL GILTZ

PETER Gallagher has had a much better career than you realize — but not nearly as good as he deserves.

He starred in the American theatrical debut of Tom Stoppard's *"The Real Thing"* and got a Tony nomination for the last great revival of *"Long Day's Journey into Night."* (He lost to *"Frasier's"* John Mahoney.) And of course he was Sky Masterson in the legendary Broadway revival of *"Guys and Dolls"* with Nathan Lane.

In film, the actor played prominent roles in Steven Soderbergh's breakthrough *"sex, lies and videotape,"* Robert Altman's comeback *"The Player"* and the Oscar winner *"American Beauty."*

So why don't the parts keep flowing to the guy who grew up in upstate Armonk?

"I think I realized early on — at least in my case — that it was a complete fallacy to think if you do something well, it will lead to something else," says the soon-to-be 48-year-old Gallagher.

In the new Fox drama *"The O.C.,"* he plays a public defender living in the lap of luxury in Orange County who brings home a troubled — but, of course, drop-dead gorgeous — teenager who just needs a place to stay for the weekend, or maybe five seasons if the ratings are good.

"I wasn't really looking to find a good series," claims the married father of two, whose most recent movies have included the Mandy Moore teen flick *"How to Deal"* and Adam Sandler's *"Mr. Deeds."*

"But I got a new manager and I haven't had a manager for a while. She asked me, 'When's the last time you had meetings?' I said, 'About 20 years ago.'"

Actually his most recent TV stint was in the flop ABC sitcom *"The Secret Lives of Men"* that lasted six weeks in 1998. But Gallagher can be forgiven for trying to forget about that.

"I thought it was going to be a lot of fun. And it wasn't. From my point of view, I never really had anything to do," says Gallagher, who is developing a one-man show for theater.

The talented Gallagher is also pretty meticulous with his research. And as a result, can now pinpoint a public defender in five minutes.

"There are three types: The guys right out of fancy law schools who want to get court experience fast and stay for two or three years and then split and go to a private firm. Then there are the civil-service types who stay there forever and do as little as possible. And then there are those who are committed to the whole idea of not trusting the government or the police, which is so crucial for this whole process to work," the actor explains.

Naturally, the character he plays is the latter. At one point, when his wife is distraught over Gallagher playing nursemaid to some hoodlum they don't even know, she says, "When did you get so self-righteous?"

"I've always been self-righteous," replies Gallagher as Sandy. "You used to find it appealing."

So expect lots of good-looking teens behaving badly, while rich but troubled parents have their own problems to deal with (like the government investigation narrowing in on their next door neighbor). But don't expect high ratings: when the show returns in the fall, it plays opposite *"CSI"* and *"Will & Grace."*

"So many good shows had less than spectacular beginnings. In fact, so many people have less than spectacular beginnings," laughs Gallagher, who expects the network to have patience and reasonable expectations.

"It's nice Fox is on top right now and we can benefit from their success and confidence. I feel much more at peace doing a TV show like this now, having had a kind of rich life in theater and films and television. Besides, finding a new musical is like finding a unicorn."

THE O.C.
Tuesday, 9 p.m., Fox