

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

SURE, the sitcoms "Friends," "Frasier" and "Seinfeld" were big hits and made all its actors rich.

But if those actors wanted actual careers — meaty parts in movies and other TV shows — if they wanted to become stars instead of being forever linked to one role — the show they should have been on was "Saved by the Bell."

That NBC sitcom from the early '90s about gorgeous but goofy high-school students was ignored by critics. But Hollywood was clearly paying attention. It turned around NBC's ratings on Saturday morning, helped spawn a new wave of TV shows starring young people (hello "Beverly Hills, 90210," hello the entire lineup on The WB) and launched more successful careers than almost any other TV show in recent memory.

Elizabeth Berkley is the biggest success story so far, thanks to achieving most actor's dream: a featured role in the new Woody Allen movie "The Curse of the Jade Scorpion." (Berkley plays a sweet secretary, right down to her penny loafers.)

"I'm a part of film history forever," agrees Berkley, when asked about what it means to be in one of Allen's films. She is forever grateful to getting an early break on "Saved by the Bell" and happily talks about her time on the show.

But Berkley, who also starred in "Showgirls," is just the tip of the iceberg. Mark-Paul Gosselaar takes over the lead in "NYPD Blue" this fall. (Coincidentally, Berkley had a recurring role on "Blue" last season created for her by David Milch.)

Mario Lopez is one of the regulars on the new NBC talk show "The Other Half" (a male spin on "The View") after making points for his dramatic role in "The Greg Louganis Story."

Holland Taylor (who played the dean in "Saved by the Bell: The College Years") won an Emmy for "The Practice" and deserves another for her funny turn in the AMC sitcom "The Lot."

Tiffani-Amber Thiessen, of course, scored big on "90210." (When she got her break on "SBTB," Tiffani had only competed in beauty contests. Series creator Peter Engel believed in her so much, he cast her anyway and kept Thiessen "protected" for the first season while she

One kids' show turned out stars like Volkswagens

These faces should RING A BELL



Like some freakish incubator, "Saved by the Bell" probably produced more stars than any other TV show. Among its graduates are (clockwise from above) Elizabeth Berkley, Mario Lopez, Tiffani-Amber Thiessen, Mark-Paul Gosselaar and Lark Voorhies.



developed her acting chops.)

Lark Voorhies appeared on "The Bold and the Beautiful," "Days of Our Lives" and for three years

about six episodes, stars in "The King of Queens."

"We also had the Bond girl Denise Richards. Tori Spelling did a number of episodes," he says. In fact,

People magazine when he first did "Party of Five." For a moment, I couldn't remember him," laughs Engel.

As a spotter of talent, Engel is practically batting a thousand, so it's little surprise he's started a management company.

(The lone exception to this breakout rule might be Dustin Diamond, who is known by fans now and forever as "Screech." Engel himself called the actor Screech for a moment before correcting himself — no big surprise since Diamond played the role on various "SBTB" spinoffs for 11 years and was clearly robbed of his dream role:

'People don't realize what happened with guest stars: We had Bond girl Denise Richards, Tori Spelling...'

on the LL Cool J sitcom "In the House."

Clearly, Engel has some kind of Midas touch. "It wasn't just the original stars," Engel says. "A lot of people don't realize what's happened with a lot of those guest stars." He ticks off even more names: Leah Remini, who appeared on

Engel can't even keep track of all the kids he's given their first big break in show business.

"Scott Wolf! He was on a whole year; every show," he says. "He was one of the kids in the glee club; he was one of the waiters. He was a lot of things. In fact, he thanked me in

Shaggy in the upcoming live action movie, "Scooby Doo.")

"We're so excited for Mark-Paul getting on 'NYPD Blue,'" says Engel about the latest success of one of his kids.

"He had to be able to smile at you and lie right to your face, and you had to love him. That was something most of the kids couldn't do."

Other parts found the perfect actor once Engel began using his imagination. The character Lisa Turtle — originally a clas-

sic Jewish princess — was uncast until Engel saw Lark Voorhies and knew she was the one, even if she was black. The role of Slater was going to be filled by a white actor until Engel was unhappy with their choices and started looking at black and Latino kids and stumbled on Lopez.

Engel insists he's done it again with his new teen sitcom, "All About Us," which debuts on NBC's Saturday-morning teen block on Aug. 4. It stars singer Alecia Elliott as a Southern gal who moves to Chicago.

"Our new show coming on next week has four girls and some of them are better than any we've ever had," Engel says. "And that's saying a lot."