

Love and death

By MICHAEL GILTZ

If you play a doctor on TV, people describe their symptoms to you. Play a lawyer and they want legal advice.

If you're Michael C. Hall in HBO's **"Six Feet Under"** and you play a mortician...

"It's amazing how many people either themselves work in the business or are going to school to be a funeral director or know somebody [who is], or grew up next to somebody who did it," says Hall.

He drops his voice to a whisper: "They're everywhere!"

Hall plays David Fisher, the tightly wound, gay-but-not-happy head of the family funeral home business. The acclaimed HBO series returns for a second season next Sunday with 13 new episodes, looking for even more fans after winning Golden Globes for Best Drama (and another for Best Supporting Actress, Rachel Griffiths).

Looking back, **"Six Feet Under"** should have been a disaster.

It had the impossible task of being HBO's first drama following its phenomenal breakthrough with **"The Sopranos."**

Another sign of trouble? It was created by Alan Ball, who worked on TV's **"Cybill"** but was really just Hollywood's flavor-of-the-month after winning the Oscar for **"American Beauty."** That film traded on the tired idea of the

suburbs as a hotbed of misery and complaint.

The last thing anyone expected was the subtle, confident **"Six Feet Under."** In fact, its ratings that were the equal of **"The Sopranos"** in its first season.

"We had the luxury in a way of finishing all 13 episodes of the first season before any of them aired," says Hall, 31. "So we were in a little vacuum."

"It was like we did a 13-hour movie, sort of. To see everything so well received was a really nice thing."

They're already filming the tenth episode of the second season, but the cast knows expectations are sky high now.

Hall's character, David, continues to gain confidence after coming out to his family and fellow church members. That looks like it might give him another chance to connect with his once-and-future boyfriend, Keith (the magnetic Mathew St. Patrick).

"I love David because he is such a stew of conflict and contradiction," says Hall, who has kept a home in New York since attending NYU's graduate acting program. "He is such an unlikely combination of things."

While David struggles with trying to loosen up, his brother Nate (Peter Krause) will spend the second season doing the opposite. He finally passes

the state exam and can officially take on the responsibilities of running the funeral home with David.

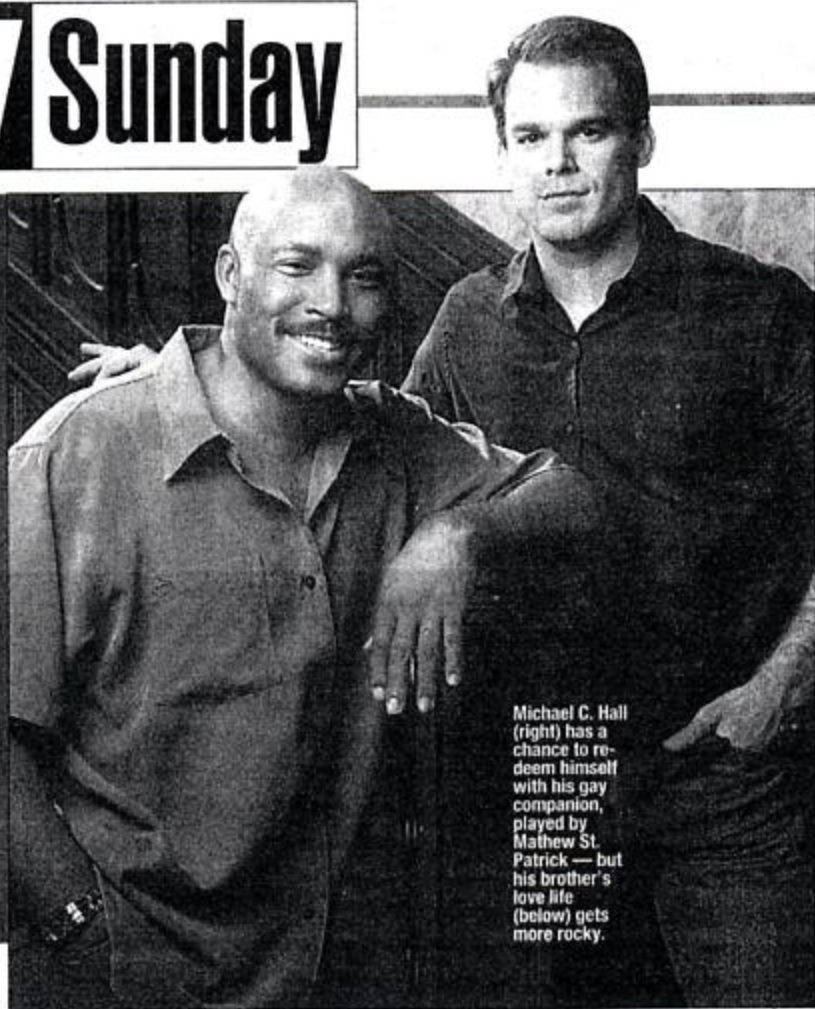
While David is cautiously trying to reconnect with Keith, Nate hits a rough patch with his girlfriend Brenda (Griffiths). She's still feeling guilty about committing her psychotic brother to a mental hospital and Nate will pay the price. Of course, Nate's life-threatening illness (revealed towards the end of last year) forces him to confront the idea of his own death even more than usual.

Best of all is the mother Ruth, played by the exceptional Frances Conroy. Ruth spent last season feeling her oats, gaining confidence as she asserted herself with her sons, got a part-time job at a flower shop and began dating.

This year, Ruth is still pretty vulnerable, thanks to a plot twist that has her joining an EST-like cult called The Plan.

"I love the way Ruth and David's stories parallel one another," says Hall. "They have a great deal of friction and maybe it's because they have so much in common."

Hall has a little in common with David, too. Low-key and unrevealing, it's hard to believe his breakthrough was as the outrageous emcee in **"Cabaret,"** a role he took over after Alan Cumming left the Broadway show a second



Michael C. Hall (right) has a chance to redeem himself with his gay companion, played by Mathew St. Patrick — but his brother's love life (below) gets more rocky.

Sordid sex, psycho brothers and more dead bodies than that crematorium in Georgia. **'Six Feet Under,'** the hippest show on TV, returns

time. Raised in North Carolina, he too had to face death at an early age, raising the sort of questions a little boy shouldn't have to ask.

"My father passed away when I was 11," Hall says, going on to name other people he's known who died. "My aunt, my grandmother, some classmates in high school, some teachers. I guess maybe I've had a little more than my share."

Would say spending time thinking about it as a young person helps inform what I do on the show."

Hall never took acting seriously until he was halfway through college. That led to NYU and a series of plays at the Public and elsewhere.

Before **"Cabaret,"** his most notorious stint came in **"Corpus Christi,"** the Terrence McNally play that created a firestorm over its depiction of Christ as gay.

Hall worked steadily. He might have drawn the occasional unemployment check, but he never had to take a second job. (A good thing since he wasn't very good at selling knives door-to-door, the job he had while still a student.)

"I might have brought somebody room service on **'All My Children,'**" he says, but in general all of his work was in the theater.

Though doors are now open to him, don't look for Hall in the movies anytime



soon. He's engaged to be married and used his first hiatus from **"Six Feet Under"** simply to relax.

He needed the rest. "After the season finale [last year], when David has his epiphany at church and comes out to his mother and everything," Hall recalls, "this older guy walked by me at the gym and without introducing himself or anything said, 'I'm glad you're finally starting to behave yourself.'"

"Stuff like that is kind of creepy and funny at the same time."