

TV Sunday

Every TV season brings returning stars in new roles (Gregory Harrison, Tyne Daly) and movie actors looking for a dependable day job (Rob Lowe, Gina Gershon). But the most fun for writer MICHAEL GLITZ is discovering the new faces of fall. Here are the ones to watch, five terrific actors in their best shot yet at stardom.

TV'S FIVE



Eric Close

Age: 32
Hometown: Staten Island, N.Y.
Role: Michael Wiseman on "Now & Again" (CBS; Fridays at 9 p.m.)

Winning trait: winsome smile and a "gee whiz" delight in his superpowers

Best previous role: the Steve McQueen character in "The Magnificent Seven"

Eric Close has charm to spare as a middle-aged businessman whose brain is transplanted into a new, younger body endowed with amazing abilities.

Close himself has been transplanted from L.A. (where he loves surfing and rock climbing) to the East Coast for this New York-set show.

Maybe this time the operation will be successful. He's already been plunked into roles on the "X-Files" wannabe "Dark Skies," the Western "Magnificent Seven," "Sisters," "McKenna," and even the soap "Santa Barbara."

In every case, either he or the show didn't last. (Close is probably especially glad that was the case for his role in the TV movie "Hercules and the Lost Kingdom.")

But "Now & Again" looks like the perfect fit. The show bounces from heavy drama to action to romantic comedy with head-snapping speed, and Close stays nimbly on top of every twist.

Producer Glenn Gordon Caron cast him, and Caron knows a thing or two about talent that's been discovered (Cybill's Sherie Rene Scott looked like a star).

Linda Cardellini

Age: 24
Hometown: Redwood City, Calif.
Role: Lindsay Weir on "Freaks and Geeks" (NBC; Saturdays at 8 p.m.)

Winning trait: a top-notch "mathlete," but acting (oh, so vulnerably) to be one of the guys

Best previous role: a starlet on AMC's "The Lot"

The strongest element of NBC's cross between "My So-Called Life" and "The Wonder Years" is the casting.

In "Freaks and Geeks" — which has already improved creatively on its pilot — freshmen boys look like boys. Even the cool, good-looking kids look like the normal, good-looking kids you might find in any high school, instead of like impossibly pretty models.

At the head of the class is Cardellini, an attractive actress who manages to dress down enough to make her character, Lindsay, a believable misfit — too smart for the freaks and too cool for the geeks.

Whether throwing a kisser while her parents are out of town or lusting after the bad boy of the school, Cardellini handles the simple but overwhelming struggles she faces without lapsing into self-absorbed whining.

Like Claire Danes, Cardellini exudes a natural honesty. Since "The Lot" already showcased her glamorous side, she's clearly set to graduate to the movies whether "Freaks and Geeks" passes or fails.



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FRESHEST FACES



Jason Behr

Age: 25
Hometown: Minneapolis, Minn.
Role: Max Evans on "Roswell" (WB, Wednesdays at 9 p.m.)
Winning trait: soulful alienation
Best previous role: good-time Christian Chris Wolfe on "Dawson's Creek"
 Teens usually think their parents are from another planet. But on "Roswell," it's the teens who are aliens.
 Jason Behr has been here before — he had a role in the TV movie "Alien Nation: Millennium."

But that's not surprising; he's played almost everything before, thanks to an impressive number of guest roles, including "JAG," "Profiler," "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," "Cracker," "7th Heaven" and even — surely a career low point — a Christmas episode of "Step by Step."

His magnetic appeal always shined through — especially on a six-episode arc of "Dawson's Creek" where Behr charmed the pants off Michelle Williams.

Well, he almost charmed the pants off her until his double life as a jazz-loving, hard-drinking goody-two-shoes threw her for a loop. Now Behr charms his new girlfriend on "Roswell" with magical healing powers (he saves her life in the first episode) and the sad eyes of an orphan (he hasn't just lost his parents; he's lost his entire world).

Behr manages the near-impossible trick of making wholesome goodness just as appealing as a walk on the wild side.



Allison Janney

Age: 37
Hometown: Dayton, Ohio
Role: C.J. Gregg on "The West Wing" (NBC, Wednesdays at 9 p.m.)
Winning trait: smart as a whip... and just as stinging
Best previous role: take your pick; she's always good.
 From the imperious Kate of "The Taming of the Shrew" (performed for Shakespeare in the Park) to the near-cenotaphic mom in the acclaimed film "American Beauty," there's seemingly nothing Janney can't do.

She's triumphed on stage in revivals of "Present Laughter" and "A View from the Bridge" (garnering a Tony nomination). She's scored in movies with her hilarious, frenetic turn in "The Object of My Affection" and her touching romance with Stanley Tucci in "Big Night."

She's even received the ultimate acting benediction: a role in a Woody Allen film ("Celebrity").

Now Janney's got the juiciest female role on "The West Wing," a drama teeming with terrific actors. She plays C.J., the press secretary for the president who must daily placate a hungry mob of reporters and a frenzied staff without betraying the trust of either.

Here's the plan: "West Wing" turns into a hit, Janney gets more name recognition and maybe an Emmy nod, and — finally — the leading parts in movies that her talent and charisma demand.



Scott Bairstow

Age: 29
Hometown: Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
Role: Lt. Thomas Hobbes on "Harsh Realm" (Fox, Fridays at 9 p.m.)
Winning trait: moody intensity

Best previous role: a faith healer on "The X-Files" in '93 (hey, Chris Carter remembered him)

Reportedly expelled from high school, Scott Bairstow is also comfortable talking about his Christian faith and a desire to do TV shows like the "Lonesome Dove" series (in which Bairstow played the Rick Schroeder character) because they're more wholesome than the movies.

That was before he played an Internet porn writer on Fox's "Significant Others" (the failed drama from the creators of "Party of Five") and slapped Nave Campbell around as an abusive boyfriend on "POD." It was also long before Bairstow tackled "Harsh Realm," a

series tagged as the most violent of the new season (in counting pro wrestling, of course).

But don't think of Bairstow as hypocritical. Think him as contradictory: strong and decent but ready to fight back if you push him too far.

That innate core of strength should prove crucial "Realm," a complicated sci-fi spin on virtual reality. I plot in so goofily complicated that it needs someone in Bairstow to take it seriously so you can't... Even if Chris Carter's second attempt at a hit with "The X-Files" should end up... will be back to play again.