

TV Sunday

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Here's a radical idea: Make wholesome programs — without stupid sex jokes — that a lotta people want to watch. Believe it or not, the networks are beginning to catch on...

GOLLY GEE! IT'S BACK TO '50s TV

THE new fall season arrived with the usual assortment of randy teens, violent dramas, and young singles on the make. But the latest trend in programming has network executives scrambling to dust off their knowledge of "Leave It To Beaver" and "Bonanza."

Yes, the wholesome family show is back.

"There's no question family shows are on the rise again," says Martha Williamson, the creator of the long-running smash "Touched By An Angel." "The bottom line is that networks will always respect success."

Sure, Fox's bleep-filled "Action" got lots of press and great reviews. But it's going to take a lot of patience to see whether it can get lots of viewers.

"There's often a big divergence between what the creative community thinks is hip and cool and what people actually want to watch," points out Tim Brooks, an executive at USA Networks and the co-author of The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows.

Network executives are slowly realizing this, along with the simple fact that they can't out-curse cable. The one thing they can do better is deliver a mass audience. And the best way to deliver a wide audience is to program widely appealing shows.

That's why every network is racing to develop family sitcoms a la "The Cosby Show" and family dramas a la "The Waltons" for later this season and fall 2000. It's no surprise they're all jumping on the latest bandwagon. But what is surprising is that they didn't see the signs earlier.

The WB is one of the most profitable networks, thanks to its laser-like focus on teens and oodles of press for sexy soaps like "Dawson's Creek" and "Felicity."

So what's the WB's No. 1 show? Squeaky clean "7th Heaven," which is about a man of the cloth and his happy brood.

CBS is back on top as the network with the most viewers and even attracted some of the precious 18-34 year old demographic to its best reviewed new show, Friday's "Now and Again."

The Eye network's No. 1 drama? The wholesome "Touched By An Angel." And its No. 1 sitcom? "Everybody Loves Raymond."

"It's not about the kids," star Ray Romano insists —



"Providence" (left), a very un-NBC type show, is the network's biggest hit in years. Right: "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" host Regis Philbin (left) says, "Families are getting together to watch television again!"



and that's true. But there are a lot less embarrassing questions for parents to answer watching "Raymond" than on your average episode of "Friends."

Speaking of "Friends," NBC is still highly profitable, but had a disastrous pilot season where it was unable to churn out enough new urban, singles-on-the-make sitcoms to replace collapsing series like "Suddenly Susan" and "Veronica's Closet."

What's the biggest hit it's launched in years? "Providence," a very un-NBC type show that caught the network by surprise when it caught fire

with viewers. The female-skewing drama comes complete with cute kids, lots of pets and Mike Farrell of "M*A*S*H" for the older folk.

ABC desperately wants to find a replacement for "Home Improvement," a show that star Tim Allen has repeatedly pointed out (without rancor) was never a favorite with network executives.

It's astonishing to think a network's No. 1 show could be made to feel unappreciated, but that's exactly how Allen felt for years.

A clearer example of television's indifference to family programming — even when it succeeds — would

be harder to find. ABC is still looking for that "Improvement"-like smash, but out of left field came another runaway hit: the ready-for-prime-time game show "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?"

Executives scratched their heads trying to figure out its popularity. Were people hungering for more game shows? Maybe, because any time a genre is not on the air it's ripe for renewal. But host Regis Philbin was probably closer to the truth when he crowed, "Families are getting together to watch television again!"

Heck, there's even PAX, an entire network devoted to family friendly program-

ming like "Chicken Soup for the Soul" and reruns of stalwarts like "Touched By An Angel" and "Diagnosis Murder."

Despite all this evidence and their need for broad-based hits, networks aren't excited about brushing up on their "golly geees." Producers complain that "soft" family shows that networks fear will be hard to promote don't always get a fair hearing.

"Everybody's always looking to push the envelope and find the next, unseen miracle," admits "Angel's" Williamson. The problem isn't just with the networks.

"Most young writers like