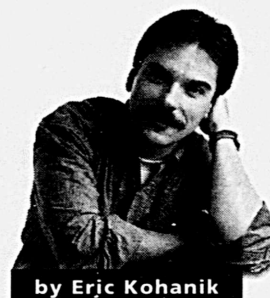


The Watcher

Guilt-free stories are a refreshing part of life on 'The Rez'



by Erjc Kohanik

A show that is as irreverent, good-natured and comically offbeat as *The Rez* deserves to be recognized for its accomplishments from week to week. But *The Rez* is a vastly underappreciated series that has, quite frankly, endured more than its share of challenges.

The Rez grew out of a 1994 Canadian theatrical movie called *Dance Me Outside*, which was itself an adaptation of author W.P. Kinsella's collection of short stories about life on an Indian reserve in Ontario. The film made its TV debut in February 1996 and was promptly spun off into a series by CBC.

At the core of *The Rez* is Silas Crow (played by Ryan Black), an introspective young man who relates assorted stories about his life and the various individuals inhabiting the confines of the Kidabanesee Reserve, affectionately known as the Rez. Those characters include Silas' girlfriend, a determined, sensible and strong-willed young woman name Sadie Maracle (Jennifer Podemski). At the other end of the spectrum is Silas' best pal, a goofy schemer named Frank Fencepost (Darrell Dennis) who usually spends most of his waking hours trying to get lucky, in one way or another.

The rest of the colorful ensemble cast is populated by a host of absorbing performers, including Tamara Podemski (Jennifer's real-life sister), who plays Frank's semi-girlfriend, Lucy, a confused young woman who has always been torn between her loyalty to the Rez and her desire to escape and chase her dreams of becoming a Broadway star.

Some interesting newcomers have been added to the mix this season. Among the more notable are *Northern Exposure* graduate Elaine Miles as Etta, a wise and wacky eccentric who is the local community's spiritual guide and conscience, and Kari Matchett as Tanya, the long-lost daughter of earthy, shopworn bar/marina owner Eleanor Nanibush (Patricia Collins).

The Rez has tackled serious subjects -



'Rez' castmates (clockwise from top left) Tamara Podemski, Dennis Matchett, Jennifer Podemski, Black: irreverent humor

racism, violence, self-esteem - with thought-provoking care. But the strength of this show lies in what producer Brian Dennis once described to me as "guilt-free stories" - tales of native life that are playful rather than sombre, tales that go beyond glue-sniffing and suicides.

The show tears down many of the ridiculous racial stereotypes which other film and TV productions have fostered. In the process, it has allowed a deliciously refreshing sense of humor to rise to the fore.

The effort has paid off to a certain extent. However, even though *The Rez* has developed a reliable core audience -

ratings for the beginning of November credited the show with an average of about 400,000 viewers (not bad, by Canadian standards) - the series has undoubtedly escaped the attention of much of this country's TV audience. But then, viewers can be forgiven if they've never even laid eyes on the show.

For one thing, *The Rez* hasn't been given a fair shake by CBC this season. It has been tucked away in relative obscurity on Wednesday nights, doomed as a follow-up to the network's weekly cultural snorefest, *Adrienne Clarkson Presents*.

To make matters worse, *The Rez* hasn't enjoyed anything close to the type of promotional push which CBC has lavished on such other returning shows as that big-ticket Sunday night attraction, the colorfully fluffy *Wind At My Back*.

And, of course, there is the on-again, off-again broadcast history of *The Rez* itself, which hasn't helped.

CBC brushed the series away like yesterday's dandruff after *The Rez* completed its initial six-episode run in 1996. Chalked up as just another casualty of budget cuts at the taxpayer's network, *The Rez* languished in limbo for a year until new TV-production funding from the federal government allowed producers to resurrect the series with 13 new episodes this season.

The last two of those new episodes will hit the air this week - burned off as a back-to-back presentation on Wednesday night. Boosted by a guest appearance by director David Cronenberg, it's a terrific double-whammy - one in which Silas travels to Toronto to find Sadie involved with another guy. Meanwhile, Frank discovers Lucy plying her trade, as a hooker.

At press time, CBC representatives were unsure what fate would await *The Rez* after this week. Whether it survives remains to be seen. But at least the series will finish its season with a bang.

And its cast members can take some measure of pride in the knowledge of work that has been extremely, and consistently, well done.

THE REZ

Wednesdays, CBC. Website:
www.therez.com