

Is there hope for *Six Feet Under*?

AS THE CULT CLASSIC RETURNS FOR ITS FIFTH AND FINAL SEASON, FANS ARE WONDERING WHETHER KEEPING THE SERIES ALIVE WAS THE RIGHT MOVE. TELEVISION HISTORIAN ED ROBERTSON PREDICTS THE AWARD-WINNING DRAMA WILL RISE AGAIN



SIX FEET UNDER HAD A DIFFICULT YEAR IN 2004, LOSING devoted viewers and causing some to question the wisdom of bringing back the series and allowing it a final encore. But the decision is the right one. Although *Six Feet Under* has never had as wide a following as *The Sopranos* or *Sex and the City*, the series remains one of HBO's most celebrated franchises, having won seven Emmys, three Golden Globes and a host of other awards. As such it has earned the right to bow out on its own terms. Besides, history reminds us that many television shows have endured creative off-years, only to come back even stronger the following season. It's a matter of pinpointing the trouble areas and making the right adjustments. In the case of *Six Feet Under*, series creator and executive producer Alan Ball already started addressing the problems by way of last fall's season finale. That bodes well for viewers this summer, and of course for HBO and Showcase, which airs the series in Canada.

Given its weighty subject matter, *Six Feet Under* has always been something of an acquired taste. Death and existential angst are not subjects that easily translate into gripping episodic television. To keep viewers coming back, it is especially critical that a show like *Six Feet Under* stick to the basics. That means creating characters that audiences care about – such as the brothers Nate (Peter Krause) and David Fisher (Michael C. Hall) – and building the show around them.

Meandering storylines took the focus away from the Fisher brothers and into the realm of soap last season. This was a big mistake, because while *Six Feet Under* is indeed about death, it's also a show about family – specifically, Nate and David's efforts to run the family-owned funeral parlour following the sudden death of their father, Nathaniel. They're the characters who really drive the show.

To resuscitate the series and finish strong, here's what creator Alan Ball needs to do:

1 GET NATE OUT OF HIS FUNK Devastated by the death of his wife Lisa, Nate grew so deeply depressed that at one point he quit the funeral business.



Granted, when you deal with death as often as Nate and the rest of the Fishers do, brooding is hardly unusual. But enough already. Nate, after all, is the linchpin of *Six Feet Under*, and as he goes, so goes the show. Ball needs to snap Nate out of his depression and, to his credit, he seems to have used last year's season finale to put the show back on course.

Nate finally exorcised the ghost of his wife, while David confronted the sadist who had terrorized him. By the end of the episode, both brothers were back where they belong: at the helm of the family business.

2 DROP GEORGE SIBLEY Nothing against James Cromwell, but the character he plays is perhaps the biggest drip on television since Darrin Stephens on *Bewitched*.

Ball seems to realize this. The last four episodes of last season had George unraveling to the point where Ruth (Frances Conroy) seriously questioned his stability, not to mention the future of their marriage.

While Cromwell is slated to come back this season, the implication is that George's days on the series (or, at the very least, his minutes of screen time) might well be numbered. If so, good for Ball.

3 BRING BACK KATHY BATES AS OFTEN AS POSSIBLE

Bates had a wonderful story arc as Bettina, the free spirit who helped Ruth snap out of her doldrums in Season Three. The screen crackles with energy when Bates and Conroy are together, as was the case late last season, when Bates reprised Bettina.

Fortunately, Bates will be back again this summer, along with Joanna Cassidy (always a delight as Brenda's domineering mom), and Emmy winner Patricia Clarkson as Ruth's estranged sister Sarah.



4 GET BACK TO THE BASICS (NO MORE SOAP PLOTS) The histrionics last season hurt the credibility of the show and must be avoided this year, as Ball appears to realize.

Claire (Lauren Ambrose) vacillated over a lesbian relationship with Edie (Mena Suvari) that proved more tedious than titillating.

5 TRIM THE CAST On a related note, Ball also needs to prune the show's various characters, whose wandering story arcs took attention away from the Fishers. Ball made inroads on this in the season finale. Claire was last seen in a lip-lock with Billy Chenoweth (Jeremy Sisto), a strong indication that Edie is out of the picture. And now that the marriage of Federico (Freddy Rodriguez) is over, he, too, can resume his responsibilities at Fisher & Diaz without distraction.



6 MORE NATHANIEL *Six Feet Under* also suffered without the ghost of Nathaniel Fisher (Richard Jenkins), who appears to his sons, Nate and David, in their moments of need. The relationship between Nathaniel and his sons is central to the show, yet Nathaniel was absent for much of last season until he finally returned to visit David in the finale. When he did, it was yet another indication that all the core elements are in place heading into the final season.



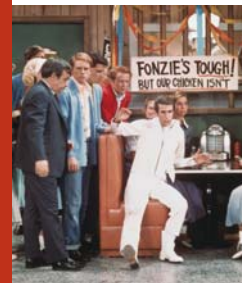
Concluding a television series always poses a challenge. Producers must find a logical way to tie up loose ends while remaining true to the show and its audience. That's why *Sex and the City* ended with Carrie and Big finally together after all those years.

Last season, Nate finally proposed to Brenda (Rachel Griffiths). If *Six Feet Under*'s history is any indication, we can count on the series ending with Brenda and Nate together, whether they decide to marry or not. Some couples are simply meant to be, and viewers wouldn't have it any other way.

BellTV *SIX FEET UNDER*, final season, starting June 6 [TMN/Movie Central] 9 p.m. ET/MT

Other TV Deaths

All good things – including popular TV shows – must come to an end. But what kind of end should it be? Here are some of the more common scenarios:



PAINFUL DEATHBED EXPERIENCES

Happy Days: Everyone knows when it jumped the shark and was mortally wounded. [Crossroads TV] weeknights 8:30 p.m. ET

Dallas: Suffered badly after most of the original cast departed.

Ally McBeal: Doomed by the arrest of Robert Downey Jr. [ARTV] Saturday 5 p.m. ET

DIED TOO YOUNG

Freaks and Geeks: An acclaimed look at high school life that barely lasted one season.

Square Pegs: It gave us Sarah Jessica Parker.

Buffalo Bill: The original *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

DEATH BECAME THEM



The Mary Tyler Moore Show: That tearful huddle is one of TV's truly great moments.

Seinfeld: Like a good comic, Jerry knew when to leave us laughing. [TBS] Sundays 8 – 11 p.m. ET (six-episode marathon)

NYPD Blue: One of television's most celebrated police dramas. [Bravo!] Wednesday 12 a.m. ET

MIRACULOUS RECOVERIES

Touched By An Angel: Nearly axed in 1994, it was a huge hit in the late '90s. [Vision TV] weeknights 7 p.m. ET

Friends: It seemed to be seriously ailing, but received an unexpected boost after 9/11.

Sex and the City: Perhaps more of a minor recovery, but nevertheless the show finished Big last year after an anemic penultimate season. [City] Tuesday 7 p.m. ET □