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Spies hijack small screen

New and returning TV dramas tap into viewers' post-9/11 jitters

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Nikita is sexy, smart and dangerous and when her eponymous show debuts Thursday night on The CW, the rogue operative will join an ever-growing number of spy types taking over the small screen.

Although the Cold War ended two decades ago, a number of significant and frightening events have taken place in the past few years to keep us interested in secret agents. The ongoing war on terrorism and the June arrest of Russian spies only add to the intrigue. Consider the fact that Americans have always been fascinated with conspiracy theories and shadowy figures just outside the law, and you have an entertainment recipe that started with "I Spy" and keeps growing.

As a result, viewers will see new shows such as "Nikita," which is based on the 1990 French film and its television spinoff from 13 years ago, and NBC's "Undercovers." "Nikita" stars Maggie Q ("Live Free or Die Hard") and "Undercovers" stars Boris Kodjoe (Showtime's "Soul Food") and follows a husband and wife duo who used to be in the CIA and choose to return for the honor and adventure. The drama, from noted TV producer J.J. Abrams, debuts Sept. 22.

Other spy-driven offerings include "Covert Affairs" on USA and "Rubicon" on AMC. "Covert Affairs" follows a newbie CIA agent (Piper Perabo) as she tries to navigate the confusing world of espionage while "Rubicon" takes us into the world of Big Brother, his henchmen and spy codes.

"Burn Notice" -- which focuses on a blacklisted spy (Jeffrey Donovan) who takes on cases to help folks in need while trying to figure out who axed him from the CIA -- will return to USA in November.

"These types of shows, its characters and plots open up endless story possibilities," says Glenn "Pete" Smith Jr., an assistant communications professor at Mississippi State University. "In a post 9/11 world, where we have found it difficult to trust anyone from a different culture or background, there is an increased interest in the culture of spies, spy networks, and those who intercept the coded messages and plans of our enemies."

That Déjà vu feeling

Secret agent heroes are not new to TV.

In 1965, two spy shows tickled our fancies -- "I Spy" and "Get Smart." Although they dealt with espionage, both did so with humor.

"Hollywood is a business of recycled properties," Smith says. "If one talented writer happens to break through the network filtering process with a really good idea, we're bound to see five or so copies of that same idea."

The biggest difference between those 1960s offerings and what came later is the tone. Tapping into the fear

and confusion that plagued the country after Sept. 11, 2001, both "Alias" and "24" debuted that year and took darker, more violent looks at the world of international crime fighting. As a result, some of those fears are still dictating what we see on TV, despite the fact that "24" and "Alias" are no more.

"Fear in general, about the economy as well as foreign enemies, is rampant," says Elayne Rapping, a pop culture professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo. "The need for security is still dominant in the American psyche."

Perhaps that mood has lightened a bit.

Of all of the spy series on TV today, "Rubicon" is the only one built on fear and paranoia. "Nikita" and "Burn Notice" focus on revenge while "Covert Affairs" and "Undercovers" take on the bad guys with an element of humor and real-people relatability. This is particularly interesting because Abrams was the brains behind "Alias," but the show couldn't be more different than "Undercovers."

"When we sat down, the first thing we talked about, obviously, was neither one of us wanted to do 'Alias' again," says Josh Reims, one of the head writers and executive producers for "Undercovers." Reims and Abrams created the show together. "Obviously, he'd already done it. And second of all, I felt it was one of the most confusing shows ever. And J.J., to his credit, would say, 'If I go too far in the mythological craziness, just stop me.' "

If the pilot is any indication, "Undercovers" looks and feels like the movie "Mr. & Mrs. Smith" with a heavy dose of "Hart to Hart" thrown in. Meanwhile, the Blooms (Kodjoe and Gugu Mbatha-Raw) chat each other up all the time -- but don't let the banter and humor fool you, Kodjoe says.

"There is a lot of action," the German-born actor says, "and the Blooms really love each other. So there's something for everyone."

Spies and diversity

The other attribute that sets this new crop of spy shows apart from their predecessors is the diversity.

Maggie Q is half-Vietnamese. The actress, who got her start kicking butt in action films in Hong Kong, says she is excited that the spy trend is heating up both the small and large screens because of the doors it's opening for women.

"You see Angelina Jolie in a movie like 'Salt,' and she's very believable," the 31-year-old Hawaii native says. "But not because she's super tough or has more muscles than the next girl. She's an incredible actress, and that toughness comes from a place that's very internal, which is the reason why she's so good at what she does."

Just as "I Spy" did with Bill Cosby, "Undercovers" follows spies who also happen to be African-American. "Covert Affairs," "Rubicon" and "Burn Notice" also have diverse casts.

"We didn't go out of our way to say we're hiring two black people to be the leads of the show," Reims says, "but we certainly did not ignore the fact that it would be great if we could do that and if we found actors who were great enough."

"We all wish it wasn't such a big deal at this point in time that there are two black characters who are the leads on a major TV show on a major network, but unfortunately that's the way it is right now."

On TV

'Nikita'

Debuts 9 p.m. Thursday, The CW

'Rubicon'

9 p.m. Sundays, AMC

'Covert Affairs'

9 p.m. Tuesdays, USA

'Undercovers'

Debuts 8 p.m. Sept. 22, NBC

'Burn Notice'

Returns 10 p.m. Nov. 11, USA

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