

Playing hurt ; Series use the time-honored device of physical disability to energize plotlines:[North Sports Final Edition]

Allan Johnson, Tribune television reporter. **Chicago Tribune**. Chicago, Ill.: Oct 31, 2002. pg. 3

Abstract (Article Summary)

That element of surprise is especially useful in season finales and/or premieres, which is how [Robert Romano] (played by Paul McCrane), [Bud Roberts] (Patrick Labyorteaux) and [Gil Grissom] (William Petersen) experienced them. Grissom's and Roberts' injuries came into play during last season's finales, while Romano's accident occurred during "ER's" ninth season premiere in September.

Full Text (982 words)

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TELEVISION.

Viewers of NBC's long-running medical drama "ER" (9 p.m. Thursdays, WMAQ-Ch. 5) probably thought prickly Dr. Robert Romano was being dispatched from the show after witnessing his horrifying fate in last month's season premiere.

But Romano survived having his left arm sliced off by a helicopter blade while trying to load a patient for transport, making him one of three featured or leading characters on different successful series who have undergone traumatic physical change this season.

Their characters' transformations will have impacts on several levels for their respective shows, but they also contain some risks.

The characters in "ER" will be "forced to re-engage with [Romano], and suddenly every time he comes into a room or opens his mouth, it's different because of what's happened," says co- executive producer R. Scott Gemmill.

In addition to Romano, Lt. Bud Roberts of CBS' "JAG" (7 p.m. Tuesdays, WBBM-Ch. 2) had his right leg blown off while trying to save a young boy from a minefield in Afghanistan.

Less graphic, but no less jarring, is senior forensics officer Gil Grissom of CBS' "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation" (8 p.m. Thursdays, Channel 2) suffering from gradual hearing loss that he says is "genetic, progressive and impossible to predict."

What these storytelling devices do is restore a sense that the unexpected should be expected, according to [Darrell Mottley Newton](#), a cultural critic with the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

"It's no secret that American violence and television have desensitized us," he says, "to the point now where when we hear the piano music we know there's going to be something emotional; when we hear the sax we know there's going to be sex; when we hear a certain creepy music we know violence is coming. So we've come to accept that."

'Re-sensitizing'

However, [Newton](#) says, with something as sudden and drastic as Romano losing his arm in such a gory manner, it represents a "re- sensitizing" to the notion that even long-running characters aren't always safe.

"No matter how used you are to certain types of TV discourses or the same tired plotline," he says, "boom! here's something to catch you off-guard."

That element of surprise is especially useful in season finales and/or premieres, which is how Romano (played by Paul McCrane), Roberts (Patrick Labyorteaux) and Grissom (William Petersen) experienced them. Grissom's and Roberts' injuries came into play during last season's finales, while Romano's accident occurred during "ER's" ninth season premiere in September.

"Wanting to kick off the new season," Gemmill says, "we came up with something that was exciting and dramatic."

"CSI" creator and executive producer Anthony Zuiker says "it was sort of by accident" that Grissom developed a backstory that blossomed into his current situation.

An episode in the show's first season saw Grissom using sign language during a case, and the producers "sort of fell in love with the beauty" of Grissom signing.

It turns out Grissom's mother is deaf, and producers decided to make it hereditary.

The characters' circumstances were created for storytelling punch, but producers and the actors are now faced with the long-term ramifications.

"I was thrilled because a story line like that is really very fun to play," says Labyorteaux, 37. "When you deal with something like this, it's really very exciting because it's so different than what you've been doing."

A change of personality?

Before McCrane, 41, became intrigued with the story line, he had some "concerns," mainly not wanting Romano, a mean-spirited, sarcastic and dismissive character, to suddenly become sympathetic.

"JAG" executive producer Donald Bellisario says having Roberts lose a limb was more emotional because Roberts is a character that everyone likes.

"[Roberts is] the type of man who will be able to handle this," Bellisario says. "So while he's going to have some trauma and he's going to have his depressed moments, he is going to be able to handle it and handle it well."

For Roberts, the story line will be whether he can serve as a JAG lawyer with his disability (the character has been fitted with an artificial leg).

Bellisario says one JAG naval officer told him "in reality, if the guy's a lieutenant suffering that type of injury, it's automatic discharge and out. Yet, there are people who are amputees who have stayed in the military."

Future stories

For Romano, future stories will see whether he can regain full use of his reattached arm. McCrane's research indicates Romano may have performed his last surgery.

"It is a very relatively small percentage of people who undergo that kind of trauma who regain functional use of it," McCrane says. "And functional use is not necessarily even fine motor skills."

But if Grissom permanently loses his hearing, it will be the end of the character on "CSI," according to Zuiker, although he stresses it's not because the character couldn't function.

"If he was totally deaf and he can go nowhere else with his character but be signing, the franchise would be over," says Zuiker, who was born in Blue Island but moved with his family to Las Vegas when he was 6 months old.

Instead, "we're very subtly putting him in situations where his hearing is a little bit of an obstacle for him and we'll be doing it in doses. And when we say doses, we may not even deal with it for two or three episodes in a row."

The characters' fates also have to be handled delicately so as not to alienate audiences, Zuiker says.

"If you have a brain tumor and all of a sudden the next season you don't have a brain tumor, the audience feels cheated and they feel manipulated emotionally. And once you lose that audience's emotional trust, you begin to lose viewership."

[Illustration]

PHOTO; Caption: PHOTO: Lt. Bud Roberts of CBS' "JAG" had his right leg blown off while trying to save a young boy from a minefield in Afghanistan.

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Subjects:

Article types: Feature
Section: *Tempo*
ISSN/ISBN: 10856706
Text Word Count 982