Getting 'Lost'

Show pursues TV's most elusive genre -- mythology. Or maybe that's not it all.

By Matthew Gilbert, Globe Staff  |  October 27, 2004

On "Lost," 46 plane-crash survivors are stuck on a remote Pacific island. Or at least they might be survivors; they might also be souls in purgatory, hovering between heaven and hell, defending their lives on the sands of judgment. Or at least they might be on a sandy island; they might also be inside a "Truman Show" --like zoo, or on a planet where polar bears thrive in tropical climates. If indeed those beasts in the "Lost" forest are bears, and not emissaries of God, or grotesque alien creatures, or Mulder, Scully, and the Log Lady on a journey to the Hellmouth.

Feeling out to sea?

Then you're right where "Lost" creator J.J. Abrams wants you to be. You can't assume anything when it comes to his compelling new show, except that it's a big hit for ABC and that right now you're reading an article about it. It is a classic example of TV's most challenging and elusive serial format, the mythology show, a genre whose number includes "Twin Peaks," "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," "Smallville," "Roswell," "Carnivale," Abrams's "Alias," and, of course, "The X-Files." "Lost" airs tonight at 8 on Ch. 5.

On a mythology show, everything you know is suspect -- a cigarette, as "The X-Files" made all too plain during its 1993-2002 run, is never just a cigarette. Mythology TV writers aren't in the business of selling certainty. They're all about pulling viewers into the guesswork and paranoia of a giant mystery, leading them on with a trail of cryptic clues. Abrams may have titled his series after the castaways, but he wants viewers to feel a little lost, too.

Mythology shows tend to attract lively, game audiences. Nighttime soaps such as "The O.C." and "Everwood" require a similar commitment to ongoing plots, but they don't ask viewers to do a lot of work along the way. They explain themselves. A mythology show, however, makes its viewers into cosmic Sherlocks who must keep finding the hidden truths in an only partially recognizable universe. Mythology writers expect rigorous, un-couch-potato-like viewing -- and they get it, sometimes in spades. There are countless websites devoted to the likes of "The X-Files," "Lost," "Millennium," and "Dark Angel," where avid fans turn their theories into communal-shrine art. Many of these sites also publish "fanfic" -- fan fiction -- that finds members spinning their own tales about a show's characters. Unlike most TV viewers, mythology devotees are not passive listeners to the stories the box is telling them.

And with such dedication to labyrinthine puzzles, mythology fans deserve a payoff. It behooves TV mythology creators and writers eventually to unite years of disparate plot tips and evasive disclosures. They don't need to force events to a hokey resolution, but they do need to reward viewers with a glimpse of the big picture.

In this way, "The X-Files" is the embodiment of a failed mythology show. Ambitiously, across a decade, creator Chris Carter threw thousands of provocative morsels at viewers hungry to understand his unique mind trip. But ultimately, he failed to assemble the pieces into a satisfying, sensible whole. He squandered his audience's good faith. It was as though he'd extended the mythology beyond any possibility of cohesion in order to keep making money on it. Every sweeps period, it seemed, and with the theatrical release of the movie, "X-Files" ads were promising resolutions that never came. The series mythology began to feel relentlessly circular, like hearing a long game of "Dungeons & Dragons" on a tape loop.

That Abrams is now behind two mythology series -- "Alias," along with "Lost," which he co-created with Damon Lindelof -- proves he's a bold fellow indeed. They're hard products to conceive well, and they're hard sells with audiences, as recent mythology flops such as "Tarzan" and "Wolf Lake" have proven.
"Alias," which returns in January, has shown great creative energy during its three-year run; but its core mystery is approaching "X-Files" overripeness. If he wants us to have faith in his vision for "Lost," Abrams needs to show us he still has control of his vision of "Alias" and its knotty Rambaldi business.

And, the best mythology shows are truly about unique vision. Usually tinged with the supernatural, if not out-and-out science fiction, they are to the medium what "Star Wars" is to the movies, or what Ursula K. LeGuin novels are to literature, or what comic books are to the magazine rack. They look altogether different from the rest of television, with highly stylized set designs that suggest distant, even surreal territories. "Carnivale" is a visual masterpiece that takes you far away in time and place as it showcases the catastrophic tension between the preacher and the outlaw. It's set in an evocative, alien location -- a world invented by show creator Daniel Knauf, who had far less fortune with "Wolf Lake."

While an original series such as "Desperate Housewives" charms, its world looks and behaves like a version of our own. Mythology TV worlds are more organic products of the imaginations -- and some would say the collective unconsciousness -- of its creators. They're pure figments of human fantasy, nightmare, wish, fear, rapture, grief.

Remarkably, many of TV's mythology shows are contemporary iterations and revisions of the sort of archetypes Joseph Campbell once mapped out. Most of them are built on Campbell's Hero journey -- the Hero's initial refusal of the call, for example, which last week found Jack (Matthew Fox) on "Lost" vehemently -- but temporarily -- rejecting his role as leader of the survivors. Abrams has given us the archetypal animal in the enchanted woods, if, of course, that presence is indeed an animal. And he has given us John Locke (named after the "tabula rasa" philosopher and played with keen ambiguity by mythology icon Terry O'Quinn, whose TV credits include "Harsh Realm," "Millennium," "The X-Files," and "Alias"), who could be Jack's Mentor, and who could also be the Shapeshifter of the piece. After all, Locke did rise from his wheelchair after the plane crash.

It would be quite an exaggeration to suggest that mythology shows, which include "Angel" and "Farscape," are as enduring as the myths we've inherited from the ancients. In thousands of years, Sydney on "Alias" will be electronic dust, while the goddess Diana may still be alive in our cultural memory -- the name of a moon shuttle company, perhaps. Television is a medium of transience -- less so, as it stretches its shelf life on cable, DVD, and Internet fan sites, but still fleeting. And while myths are told and retold and kept alive by interpreters, TV's mythology shows are told only once. Attempts to duplicate them and expound upon them can lead to copyright problems. Even fanfic is discouraged by studios; disclaimers must appear on stories, and no profits may be collected for them. But still these shows have ancient archetypes at their root, as they update and perpetuate them.

Like their heroes and heroines, mythology shows are the antithesis of prime time TV's big monsters, Scylla (crime dramas) and Charybdis (reality shows). Unlike the "CSI" and "Law & Order" series, they don't solve a murder and then provide viewers with a tidy denouement. And unlike "Survivor" and "The Apprentice," they evade direct statement and self-analysis. They deliver their realities in the peripheries of the storytelling, in the hints that are dropped ever so carefully over time.

That's why the instant success of "Lost" is as surprising as it is deserved. As each episode explores its characters' backstories, and adds to a dramatic tapestry that will include events both off and on the island, it doesn't grant the instant gratification of most shows. It invites us to imagine possibilities, welcoming our crazy theories about Purgatory and alien abduction and government conspiracy. For an hour a week, it encourages us to get lost in a few uncommon daydreams.

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