

Hollywood's Fertile Imagination

Baby-Making Goes Prime Time

Viewers watching the opening credits of the new NBC series *Inconceivable*, which takes place in a fertility clinic, are given an early warning that the show does not treat its subject with subtlety: large sperm swim languorously around the names of the lead cast members, followed by images of pipettes piercing human eggs during in vitro fertilization procedures. The show's first scene focuses on an anxious white couple eagerly awaiting the birth of their child, who has been carried by a white surrogate. When the baby emerges, however, it is clearly biracial, and the parents, aghast, storm out of the hospital without a baby and threatening a lawsuit.

The series is a slick production with a suitably prime-time-ready cast of characters. There is the dashing doctor, played by Jonathan Cake, whose British-inflected voice and God complex are used to great effect both in the clinic, when he's reassuring patients of the richness of their uterine linings, and outside of it, when he's compulsively bedding women then dumping them. ("Everything has an expiration date," he explains suavely, as he shows a pretty nurse with whom he's been dallying the door.) Then there is the earnest clinic co-founder, played by former *ER* regular Ming-Na, who dashes around the office trying to do

the right thing but can't figure out how to explain to her own son why he'll never meet his father (she used donor sperm to conceive him) and why his friends call him "Frankie," for "Frankenbaby." Guest star Alfre Woodard, the clinic's psychological adviser, is the straight-talking anchor of this somewhat listing ship.

The clinic's female patients are nearly all tough-minded and knowledgeable older women, asking questions about cycles and injections and percentages and risks. The men are another story—either obsessive, in the case of a gay couple having a child by surrogate, or just plain uncomfortable. One man natters away to strangers in the hospital, trying to explain his and his wife's elaborate fertility odyssey; another, a minister in full vestments, is snappish and pessimistic when his hopeful wife questions the doctor about her odds for a fifth round of IVF. (The doctor reassures her by pointing out a cabinet full of expensive bottles of champagne, given to him by satisfied patients, some of whom, he says, went through far more than five rounds of IVF.)

It is perhaps no surprise that the overall effect is less *Brave New World* than *Melrose Place*, and the closest the show comes to feeling sinister is when one of the doctor's spurned lovers slips

into the clinic's sperm storage facility and replaces a patient's sperm with a sample she "collected" from the doctor—setting up a potential plot twist for a future episode. The in-house embryologist is the nearest thing to a clinic conscience, noting casually in the staff kitchen that perhaps some people just shouldn't have children. "Just because we *can* do it doesn't mean we *should*," he says matter-of-factly. This water-cooler observation is as close the show gets to tackling the many tough ethical issues raised by assisted reproduction technology.

As a result, some critics have remarked on the glibness with which the show treats difficult questions. As *New York Times* television critic Virginia Heffernan sternly noted, "Around the delicate creation of human life, however, it's worth saying: more reverence is in order." Still, asking our prime-time television dramas to

offer sophisticated bioethical narratives seems slightly preposterous. As Alexandra Jacobs noted in the *New York Observer*, "This ain't *Nova*." Viewers looking for more challenging treatments of bioethical issues can still turn to the excellent movie *Gattaca* or, better yet, the contemporary fiction of writers such as Margaret Atwood, whose book *Oryx and Crake* has much to say about our genetic future, or to Kazuo Ishiguro's haunting new novel about clones, *Never Let Me Go*. For now, at least, NBC seems intent on portraying the fertility industry not as a mysterious and fraught world where men and women make decisions about manipulating life at its earliest stages, but as something far more enticing to the average television viewer—a soap opera. The only difference is that in this soap opera, the unlikely stars never say a word. They can't. They are just embryos.