

# Move right in! Robson Arms quirky, brilliant

## *New CTV series is no fixer-upper*

**Y**OU wouldn't want to live there, but it sure is a cool place to visit.

In fact, Robson Arms — the down-and-dirty low-rise rental property that is the setting for the new CTV series of the same name — is such an intriguing, confounding, amusing and emotionally charged environment that the betting here is that viewers will want to drop in every week to find out what the heck is going to happen next.

*Robson Arms*, which premieres Friday at 9 p.m. on CTV, is a wildly inventive new half-hour comedy/drama that follows the goings-on in a once grand but now rather

threadbare apartment complex in Vancouver's extra-weird West End.

The series boasts probably the largest and most impressive cast of Canadian talent ever assembled for a homegrown TV series.

It's led by Hollywood veteran Margot Kidder, Canadian acting legend Shirley Douglas, Canuck-TV icon Megan Follows, *X-Files* scene-stealer William B. Davis, *Kids in the Hall* alumnus Mark McKinney, *Corner Gas* co-stars Gabrielle Miller and Fred Ewanuick, *MadTV*'s Will Sasso and the always-imposing Gabrielle Rose (*Milgaard*, *The Sweet Hereafter*).

Structurally, *Robson Arms* has a lot in common with ABC's rookie hit *Lost*, in that it examines the common experiences of a bunch of stranded souls, but uses each episode to veer off into a deeper exploration of one or two of the characters' storylines.

(You might think there's no parallel to be drawn between life on a deserted island and life in an apartment block, but after watching a few episodes of *Arms*, you'll surely agree that these victimized Vancouverites are just as lost and trapped as those plane-crash survivors.)

But in terms of its content and attitude, *Robson Arms* is completely and quite defiantly Canadian — it embraces mature themes, topics and language that could never be addressed on American network television, and its decidedly inner-city sensibility has an identity and cultural diversity that could only have been envisioned by producers on this side of the border.

In the premiere (the first of two episodes tomorrow; after that, they'll be seen on a once-per-week basis), newly separated single mom Janice Keneally (Follows) arrives at the block with her precocious 10-year-old son Henry (Perry Finnbogason) in tow. As she surveys her new digs, she makes a series of observational comments that probably reflect the feelings of every one of the building's tenants when they first move in:

"It's... nice."

"It's... charming."

"It's a fixer-upper."

"It's a sh-hole."

After hearing an off-colour comment from the building's creepy super, Yuri (John Cassini, the only player to appear in every episode), about what his mother needs to improve her mood, enterprising Henry takes it upon himself to match Janice up with their upstairs neighbour, lawyer/widower Tom Goldblum (McKinney).

The youngster's plan, which includes (but is not limited to) stalking Goldblum, sneaking into his apartment, snooping through his personal belongings and telling just enough great big fibs to force a dinner-table meeting of the two lovelorn adults, doesn't go particularly well. But things have a way of taking the strangest turns inside Robson Arms, so it'd be premature to write off their romantic prospects completely.

This first episode does a great job of setting the stage for the shows that follow. It's sharply written, smoothly acted and filled with the sorts of big dramatic aspirations and tiny, perfect little human moments that make for the best of scripted entertainment.

Friday's second episode focuses on Bobbi and Bobby (Miller and Tobias Mehler), a pair of lightheaded newlyweds from Saskatchewan who are trying to build their own special lovenest at the Arms — until the sudden discovery by Bobbi of a disturbing wrapper in their bedroom leads to suspicions, veiled accusations and a bit of ill-considered retaliatory behaviour.

It, too, is a brilliantly executed half-hour of television.

In short, there isn't a whole lot not to like about *Robson Arms*. Even the minor details — like the show's ever-changing theme song, performed by in-residence troubadours Tom Saunders and Jason Dedrick, and the complex's cheeky courtyard statue, which offers an oddly appropriate "streaming" commentary on events inside the building — are done just right.

In addition to the large and stellar cast, *Robson Arms* also boasts a revolving-door roster of big-name cameos, including *Corner Gas*'s Brent Butt and Nancy Robertson and *Will & Grace*'s Eric McCormack, whose fleeting-glimpse presence adds to the show's quirky charm without ever stealing the spotlight from its stars.

On top of everything else, the show also has a pretty neat website ([www.robsonarms.com](http://www.robsonarms.com)) that is filled with lots of extra information. It's running a contest offering viewers a chance to win free rent/mortgage for a year.

There was a completely justified big fuss and bother at CTV — and, actually, right through the Canadian TV biz — when *Corner Gas* arrived two winters ago and redefined TV comedy in this country.

*Robson Arms* deserves at least that kind of fanfare, and maybe even a little bit more.



**Watching TV**

Brad Oswald