

There's a metaphor here worth thinking about, people

JOHN DOYLE
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It's "a critical week in Ottawa with Afghan debate, budget." So I was informed yesterday while reading an online news service. Sure thing. **The federal budget** (coverage all over the place today, starting at 4 p.m.) is unveiled. The debate on the future of the Afghan mission: The gist is, "Whither Canada?" Will there be an election? That's what makes it a big week in this country, I guess.

Meanwhile, people get on with life. Go to work. Pay the mortgage or pay the rent. Worry about the kids. Worry about the boss being hostile and irrational. Think about watching **American Idol** (Fox, CTV, 8 p.m.) for a little relaxation and wonder again about the U.S. being such a strange, success-obsessed country of strivers.

Robson Arms (CTV, 9:30 pm.) slips back onto the TV schedule tonight, getting a "sneak preview" spot after *Idol* for tonight and tomorrow. If you stick around to watch it, and you should, you'll see life as it's lived here, all brittle comedy and small drama, and radiant with possibilities.

Things have changed at Robson Arms, the run-down apartment building in Vancouver where the series is set. The place has a new owner, an American named Chuck (Dave Foley) and his wife, Trixie (Allison Hossack from *Falcon Beach*). As things begin, Chuck has placed one of those weird welcome signs that Americans seem to adore on the building. Yuri (John Cassini), the apartment super, is looking at it when the eternally cranky and skeptical Sault Ste. Marie (Alisen Down) walks by. She launches into a predictable diatribe about "the continued Wal-Mart-ization of our true north strong and free."

Along come the new owners. "My name's Chuck and this here is Trixie. We're the new owners," Chuck says with admirable American bluntness. He says "Howdy" a lot and makes a speech about how the United States and Canada have been buddies, "from the beaches of Normandy all the way up to the poppy fields of Afghanistan ..." This fails to endear him to the tenants of Robson Arms.

There follows a charming, subtle bit of comedy and drama as Yuri discovers that his first task under the new owners is to evict Bobbi (Gabrielle Miller, who plays Lacey on *Corner Gas*) from the building. See, in previous episodes of *Robson Arms*, Bobbi had problems with hubby Bobby and had a fling with Yuri. Now, Bobbi is a single mom struggling to pay the rent. It's a tad awkward.

It gets even more awkward as Yuri is obliged to take care of Bobbi's bambino while she's on a job interview, and it dawns on him that he might be the father of the boy. What ensues is a deft bit of drama and subtle comedy as Yuri's ornery but inherently decent sensibility clashes with those of the new owners.

It's a delight to see the residents of Robson Arms again. The series is a smartly made social comedy, aimed at grownups and the better for it. What's really interesting about tonight's new episode is the presentation of the new American owners. They're kooky, and at first you think all that "howdy" stuff means that the show is being a tad heavy on the cutes. But you soon get the idea that there's something vaguely menacing about all that forced geniality. These are selfish, self-absorbed people.

How Yuri reacts is telling. A pragmatist and essentially lazy, he is willing to go along until his conscience is pricked. Then, he draws the line, like a good Canadian.

This is an interesting week to have Yuri and the Robson Arms residents return. Oh sure, it's a critical week in Ottawa, with all those major issues on the table. But, at the core, the whole debate is about what it means to be a good Canadian.

It's possible to read *Robson Arms* as an extended metaphor. It's an anthology drama about the many and motley residents of an apartment building in Vancouver. That's Canada, in a nutshell. Now, it has American owners. How will everyone react and behave? That's the question. The show is about how life is lived, away from Ottawa.

Check local listings.

Also airing tonight

Quarterlife (NBC, E! channel, 10 p.m.) is, apparently, the first show to jump from the Internet to prime-time network TV. Created by Marshall Herskovitz and Edward Zwick (*My So-Called Life*), *quarterlife* has been on the Net since late last year and has offered a total of 30 eight-minute episodes. It's all about twentysomethings and their messy lives. It's as angsty as all get out and fascinating in its brooding on contemporary mores. A lot of the focus is on Dylan (Bitsie Tulloch), a young woman whose video blog chronicles the ups and downs of her close personal friends. One critic described *quarterlife* as being about "coming of age in the 21st century." I don't think so. It is more truthful to think of it as the two fiftysomething creators of the show imagining what it's like to be twentysomething these days.

J.D.

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