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Television & Radio | TELEVISION REVIEW

Feast for the eyes, famine for the ears

TNT's 'Into the West' is lovely to behold, and it captures the Old West, but there's a cacophony of corn and cliches.

June 10, 2005 | Robert Lloyd | Times Staff Writer

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The first and possibly most important thing to say about "Into the West," the Steven Spielberg-produced six-part dramatic Critique of Manifest Destiny (beginning tonight on TNT) is that it is extraordinarily beautiful to behold.

Expanses of unspoiled scenery -- Canada, mostly, standing in for what we are pleased to call "America" -- of grassy plains and snowy mountains and green woods and wide rivers, all under a multicolored performing sky, have been filmed in a way that lets the viewer apprehend something of their real proportions and grandeur. (With television so full of indifferent video images -- wide-angled, over-bright and full of information but lacking art -- this is no small gift.)

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Even indoors, the impression is always of natural light and authentic space. As shot by William Wages and Alan Caso, it's a show that makes owning one of them there big-screen televisions seem like a right fine idea.

On the other hand, nothing else in the production is as good as it looks. (At least not in the three episodes available for review.) Watch with the sound down and you'll miss nothing of substance -- and you'll avoid the score, which is a field of old Hollywood corn of the sort the executive producer famously finds tasty. This is due in part to its visual sophistication but also to scripts that stick fairly close to the surface: Forced to illustrate history, the characters are converted to cliches. (William Mastrosimone wrote the

story, and three of the six screenplays.) It's a sort of checklist drama -- everything that could possibly happen on a wagon train, for example (accident fording a river, child killed by rampaging bison, cholera, storm, Indian attack, leg crushed by runaway wagon), will happen, one incident following almost comically close upon another. The whole series has that feel: Some well-written, well-played scenes come by now and again -- a prairie proposal, a disastrous parlay between Indians and cavalry over an escaped cow -- but they come on all of a sudden, do their quick business and just as suddenly depart.

Wearing its obviously thorough research on its buckskin sleeve -- this is a show, one might say, ripped from the pages of history -- and as scrupulous as it can be within its small-screen means, the series is a victim of its own ambitions. In rushing around to cover the many bases of life on the frontier, over a period of 65 years -- we are continually being kicked two years, six years into the future, by narration or title card -- neither the characters nor the pieces of history they represent are deeply explored. Earnest without being terribly enlightening, full of action but dramatically inert, it's like a very long, expensive, semi-star-studded educational film.

The story divides its attention between the Wheelers (formerly) of Virginia, specifically the conveniently peripatetic Jacob (Matthew Settle to begin with, John Terry later), who goes wherever the writers need him to, and the Lakota tribe who will become his in-laws. (The Lakota fare better, dramatically if not historically, as they get to pretty much stay in the same place.) It's "How the West Was Won, or Lost, Depending on Your Point of View." We meet mountain men and trappers, abolitionists, prospectors, runaway slaves and free men of color, Pony Express riders, preachers, soldiers and impresarios.

For their part, the Indians demonstrate their bison-based lifestyle, their oneness with nature, their medicine wheel and vision quest and sun dance, and also their interest in obtaining rifles and whiskey. Unpreviewed episodes will involve the building of the railroads, the rise of the merchant class, the discovery of gold in the Black Hills -- the milieu of "Deadwood" -- the meeting of Crazy Horse and Custer at Little Bighorn and the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee that effectively ended the Indian Wars. To cover all this territory requires a degree of narrative coincidence that would make Dickens blush.

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Another problem is that while the film aims to communicate historical truths, to tell what's usually not told, to straighten the record, it's also a Western, which is to say, it's invested in the myths the movies have helped make. This, in part, is what makes it so easy to read. Indeed, the history of film is bound up with the West, from "The Great Train Robbery" to "Stagecoach" to "The Wild Bunch" to "Unforgiven" and "Dead Man." (So is the history of television, for that matter, though in recent years TNT has been more or less the sole keeper of the flame -- until "Deadwood.") Indeed, you can divine the story of any generation in the westerns it makes, in the degree to which it celebrates or punctures the myths of the frontier.

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