

watch!

LOVE BITES

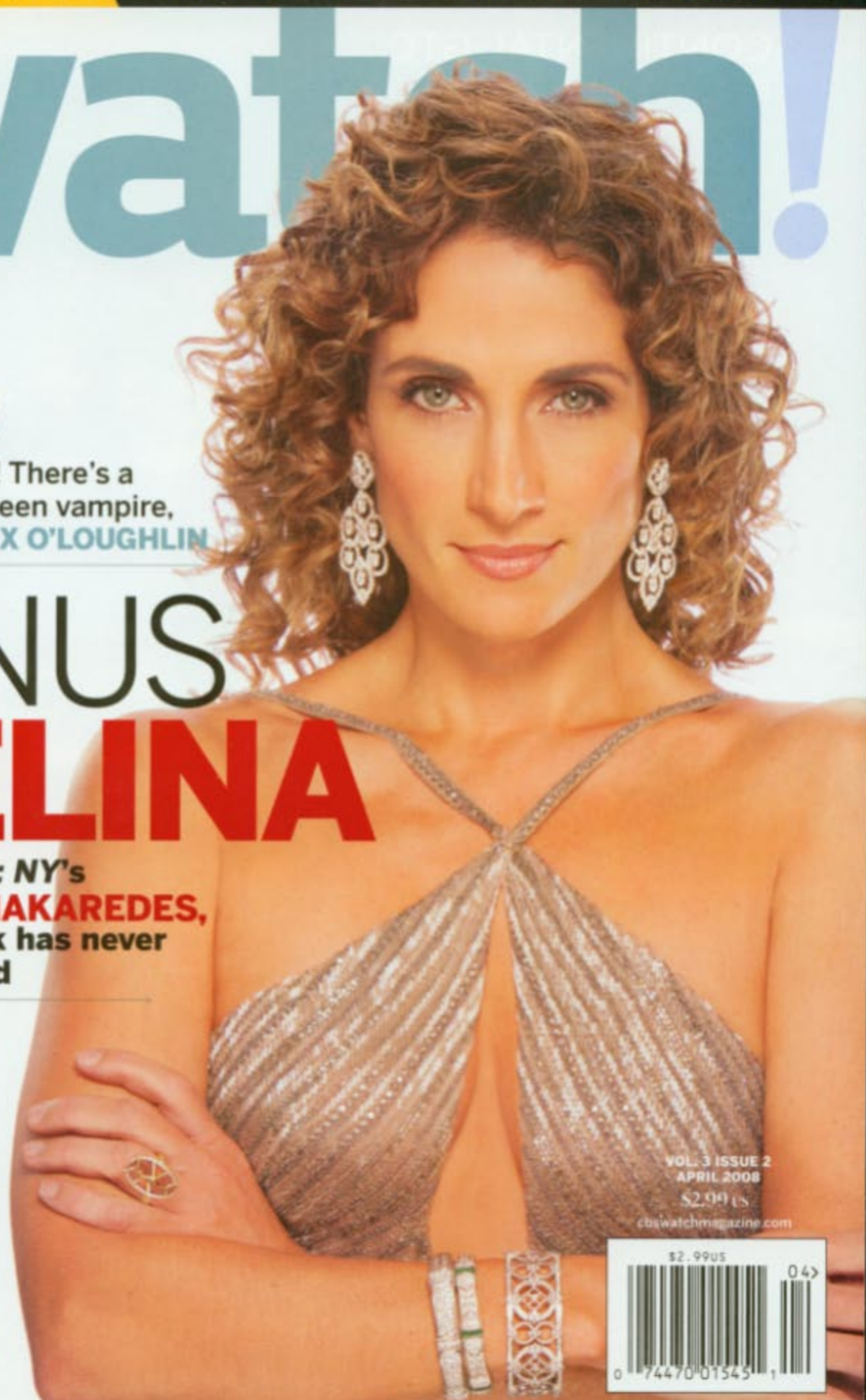
Look out, ladies! There's a HOT, new on-screen vampire, *Moonlight's* **ALEX O'LOUGHLIN**

VENUS MELINA

Thanks to *CSI: NY's* **MELINA KANAKAREDES**, detective work has never looked so good

Star Style!

From LASHES to LIPSTICK, makeup pros share their secrets



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TELEVISION'S
BEHIND-
THE-SCENES
NOTEBOOK

QUICK TAKES



Swept Away

TV lovers relish the fact that networks are no longer relegating their best programming to just Sweeps weeks

By Jim Colucci

In May 2005, *CSI*'s Nick Stokes was buried alive. In May 2007, his co-worker Sara Sidle was kidnapped by the Miniature Killer. Historically, at least in the lives of TV characters, T. S. Eliot was wrong about April being the cruelest month; that has always been a designation better suited for May—or February,

or November. That's because those particular calendar pages have always denoted TV's traditionally all-important "Sweeps" periods, wherein the Nielsen Company compiles ratings for programs airing in the nation's 211 local television markets.

A generation ago, Johnny Carson delivered bit jokes about networks and their attempts to capture our attention during the all-important Sweeps months. Suddenly, big movie stars would show up on the tube, extended-length episodes would be suspiciously touted as "very

special," characters would impulsively wed or give birth to their long-gestating babies, and even the teasers for upcoming stories on your local 11 o'clock newscast would become all that much more urgent. But now, thanks largely to advances in ratings technology, these Sweeps stunts may soon become a thing of the past.

And Now, a Word from Our Sponsors

Nielsen actually tracks your favorite shows—not just during these four months (including July)—but year-round. Yet the number of viewers in the company's sample isn't big enough in any one market to give a full picture of who's watching what—and that's crucial information for local commercial salesmen wooing advertisers in, say, Albuquerque. And so the company conceived of the Sweeps period: During those four months (chosen to



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IN THE STARS



represent the four seasons), the company seeks out additional volunteers in the country's smallest towns and cities to fill out more-detailed paper diaries recalling their viewing. The resulting ratings are then used in the intervening months to set commercial rates for local stations—the more people watching, the more stations can charge for commercial time.

The problem was, advertisers hated Sweeps. "It was not the ideal system," says CBS research guru David Poltrack, "because advertisers advertise 52 weeks a year—not just in November, February and May."

The Local People Meter Changes Everything

Nielsen began to pilot new, more automated ways of gauging ratings, culminating in 2003 with an electronic system called the Local People Meter, which connects to the TV set and offers an instant picture of not just how many people are watching but also the full demographic picture of the audience. The new system has begun to change the relevance of the Sweeps, one city at a time. With better measurement every day of the year, "we'll know what we're getting and we're getting what we're paying for," says Richard Cotter, a senior local broadcast executive at media buying firm MindShare. "People would tend to fill out their paper diaries at the end of the week, and who knows how accurate their

recall was at that point." Cotter predicts that the new technology will eliminate not only the suspicious swings in ratings of the "antiquated" diary-only measurement but also the temptation for local stations to resort to wackiness. "Once we have daily numbers, there'll be no reason for stunts," he says.

In fact, according to CBS' head of current programming, David Brownfield, viewers are already seeing fewer over-the-top exploits today than in the past. For example, the network has shied away from Sweeps-month stunt-casting, he says, "because we've found that if we were to bring Tom Hanks in to do *CSI* one week, it might bring in a few more eyeballs," but it's more effective, and more satisfying for viewers, just to provide "important moments, with major story developments that affect the context of the whole season." Without the pressure of Sweeps at their backs, a show's writers can now structure their season to better string out those climactic moments—even if some of them land in March rather than February. And although seemingly stunt-like episodes still pop up in November, Brownfield counters that now they actually tend to be much more organic.

Sweeping Changes Ahead

So far, Nielsen has reserved rolling out the expensive Local People Meters to only the country's biggest markets; by 2011, the company has pledged to spread the

technology to cover over 70 percent of U.S. households, and to eliminate paper diaries altogether.

But even today, viewers may already be noticing some changes, says Mediaweek's Marc Berman—or make that not noticing. "I don't think people even knew that this past November was a Sweeps period," Berman says. "Not that long ago, you could be in Day 27 of the Sweeps and a network would change the schedule for that night because it was neck-and-neck with a rival and wanted to win the month. Then, after the Sweeps, each network would have a conference call with the press. It's a telltale sign that they don't bother to do that anymore. They don't make a big deal about Sweeps, even if they happen to come out No. 1."

Spreading the Wealth

Because ratings technology will undoubtedly continue to improve, Poltrack foresees an ultimately Sweeps-free future. Yet, to viewers, the change may not end up being noticeable. November will always be an important, pre-Christmas month to advertisers; February, with its typically bad weather, tends to find many of us cuddled in front of the set, watching big events like the Super Bowl; and May is the gateway to summer spending. And so, even without Sweeps, all three months will naturally continue to attract fun, fresh programming.

And conversely, the lack of Sweeps may just make the other eight months of the year that much more entertaining as well. It's already happening; rather than hoard its big-event miniseries for a Sweeps month, CBS aired *Comanche Moon* in January. And so, Poltrack predicts, the downplaying of Sweeps will be beneficial for networks and audience alike. Networks won't have to battle each other as they cram all their best stuff into the same 16 weeks per year.

And already, Brownfield adds, CBS' philosophy about Sweeps has definitely changed. "We want to provide audiences with something special to watch not just in February, May and November, but throughout the entire year." ■

Sweeps Season's Most Over-the-Top Moments



MOST WATCHED:
J.R. Ewing
(Larry Hagman)
is shot on *Dallas*.



MOST CONTROVERSIAL:
Bobby Ewing (Patrick
Duffy) returns to *Dallas*.



MOST FARCICAL:
An asteroid nearly
wipes out earth on
Touched by an Angel.



MOST SPOOFED:
Nancy Reagan
lectures *Diff'rent Strokes*
on drug use.



MOST INTENSE:
Nick is
buried alive
on *CSI*.