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TV Followups
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Buck Rogers

For its second year of existence, NBC-TV's "Buck Rogers In The 25th Century" has come under the aegis of John Mantley, the exec producer of "Gunsmoke" and "How The West Was Won," among others. Mantley has indicated that the focus of the series will be changed to rely more on "people stories" — and its two-hour season debut Thursday (15) suggested that he may succeed in enlarging the audience acceptance factor of the science-fiction skein by his efforts.

With Gil Gerard, Erin Gray and Felix Silla returning from last year's cast and the addition of Jay Garner, Wilfrid Hyde-White and Thom Christopher as new regulars, the format has been changed to have them based on a starship which is looking for the Lost Tribes of Earth — presumed to be somewhere out in the universe. After a rather conventional beginning, the opener proceeded to rather cannily introduce Christopher as its new regular — as Hawk, a man-bird who had vowed vengeance on humans for their destruction of his race (whose ancestors had once lived on Easter Island in the Pacific).

Christopher, by episode's end, had managed to establish the Hawk character as a viable addition to the series — as a not-quite-human character that immediately brought to mind the quality that Leonard Nimoy's Spock brought to "Star Trek." The actor achieved this despite a makeup of feathers for hair and other visible oddities — making the character compelling rather than ludicrous and hokey, no mean trick.

There were other out-of-this-world character contributions from Barbara Luna (as Hawk's mate), David Opatoshu and Lavelle Roby, along with familiar work from Gerard and Gray. Hyde-White's role of eccentric scientist was played curiously out of synch with the rest of the cast, the veteran British actor seemingly ad libbing his dialogue (and overdoing it) to the detriment of the scenes he was in (obviously a correctible distraction). What was apparent after the two-hour episode had run its course was that Mantley's approach could attract adult viewers to "Rogers" along with the kids who presumably made up its audience last year — if the writing and attention to motivational details exhibited in the debut show are adhered to all season. —Bok

