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Clever, cadaverous 'Dead' shines/ Teen goes from dim to grim

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Ah, the melodrama of adolescence: incapacitated by pre-noon sun, pressured to clean your room, tormented by pesky siblings, terrified of menial part-time jobs, plagued by mind-numbing ennui.

Oh, the humanity!

Georgia "George" Lass (Ellen Muth) is a typically self-involved slacker 18-year-old. It's only after a freak accident involving debris from the Mir space station - OK fine, she's killed by a toilet seat - that she realizes, hey, wait, life didn't actually suck so much after all. Mom and Sis weren't really that bad. And at least I never had to do my own laundry.

Too late now.

Showtime's latest original series, "Dead Like Me," is a "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" meets "Ghost" dark comedy about the spoiled teen's adjustment to her posthumous career as a grim reaper. It's like a "My So-Called After Life," if you will (Scott Winant of "My So-Called Life" and "West Wing" fame is onboard as a director and consulting producer).

Mandy Patinkin stars as Rube, the pseudo-paternal leader of a reaper posse that also includes stoical Roxy (Jasmine Guy), bewitching Betty (Rebecca Gayheart), and roguish Mason (Callum Blue).

Each reaper provides George with crash-course lessons to cope with life after her own death and her new role assisting the deaths of others. "It's like a destiny thing," Betty chirps, "Enjoy it."

Enjoy killing people? Well, she's not that kind of grim reaper. She doesn't actually do any killing; that's left to "gravelings" - quick, creepy, gremlin-like creatures whose snickers and scuttling are beyond perception.

No, her mission is to free souls from their mortal shells in order to spare them the pain of their deaths. George, like the rest of her new crew, is assigned to the particularly gruesome "External Influence" division, which helps people who die via murder, suicide, accidents and the like.

Provided by Rube with only a name, E.T.D. (estimated time of death) and address, she sits in on an afternoon "appointment" with Mason. "It's like Clue," she observes. Pondering the details of somebody's impending doom, she predicts, "Graveling in the lobby with the banana peel."

But it takes the premiere episode a while to get to this kind of good stuff. A third of the show is wasted on backstory, pre-dead George. The reason for the lengthy set-up was, most likely, to make the audience sympathetic toward the main character. But with all her snotty looks, snide wit and angsty attitude, by the time the crapper hits her, we're well past wishing something or someone would put the whiny brat out of her misery.

There's really nothing in that 25 minutes that couldn't have been broken up into flashbacks. Then again, maybe it's better to just get it over with. Once the character profile is out of the way, the show delves into George's new life - not only a life after death, but a life on her own.

Reapers don't collect salaries, mind you, and because they have physical presence, walk among the living and eat the same key lime pie, George ends up doing everything her mom was nagging her to do the very day she died: finding a place to live, finding a job and finding herself.

All in all, "Dead Like Me," like its channel-mate "Queer As Folk," isn't quite good enough to give HBO's programming a serious run for its money, but it at least proves that Showtime has what it takes to enter the race.

TO VIEW

"Dead Like Me" airs at 8 p.m. today on Showtime East (Adelphia channel 221) 11 p.m. on Showtime West (Adelphia channel 226).