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Northern Exposure

U.S. Dramey

Northern Exposure, perhaps the best example to date of a crossbred television "dramey," began inauspiciously as a CBS replacement series in the summer of 1990 and quickly garnered critical acclaim as well as an audience sufficient to warrant its return for a short stint the following year. Its popularity grew, and for its first complete season, 1991-92, *Exposure* received ratings in the top twenty, the Emmy for Best Television Drama, and an unusual, two-year commitment from the network. During its fourth full year, 1994-95, the show's future appeared questionable. The mid-season departure of one of its key players, Rob Morrow, and a move from its established, Monday night time slot to Wednesday, contributed to a decline in ratings and reputation. The program was canceled by the network at the end of the season.

Set in the fictional hamlet of Cicely, Alaska, this unique, contemporary, hour-long series was created by Joshua Brand and John Falsey, whose earlier brainchild, *St. Elsewhere*, had also become a surprise hit. Location shooting in and around the towns of Roslyn and Redmond, Washington offered scenic panoramas invoking cultural images of unspoiled American frontier. Into this haven comes the proverbial "fish out of water," Joel Fleischman (Morrow), compelled to serve as town doctor in order to repay the state of Alaska for his medical school tuition. His initial disdain for Cicely's outwardly unsophisticated inhabitants is exceeded only by his desire to return to his beloved Big Apple where his ambition, cosmopolitan tastes, and Jewishness might have free reign.

The frontier theme is extended and personified in many of the town's multi-cultural, multi-generational denizens. Former astronaut and wealthy entrepreneur Maurice Minnifield (Barry Corbin) is forever devising ways to exploit Cicely's natural wonders. No-nonsense septuagenarian Ruth-Anne Miller (Peg Phillips) operates Cicely's General Store, where Native American Ed Chigliak (Darren E. Burrows) helps out while aspiring to be a filmmaker and, eventually, a shaman. Broadway star John Cullum plays French-Canadian immigrant Holling Vincoeur, who owns and manages Cicely's watering hole,



Northern Exposure

CAST

<i>Dr. Joel Fleischman</i>	Rob Morrow
<i>Maggie O'Connell</i>	Janine Turner
<i>Maurice Minnifield</i>	Barry Corbin
<i>Chris Stevens</i>	John Corbett
<i>Ed Chigliak</i>	Darren E. Burrows
<i>Holling Vincoeur</i>	John Cullum
<i>Shelly Tambo</i>	Cynthia Geary
<i>Marilyn Whirlwind</i>	Elaine Miles
<i>Ruth-Anne Miller</i>	Peg Phillips
<i>Rick Pederson (1990-1991)</i>	Grant Goodeve
<i>Adam (1991-1995)</i>	Adam Arkin
<i>Dave the Cook (1991-1995)</i>	William J. White
<i>Leonard Quinhagak (1992-1993)</i>	Graham Greene
<i>Bernard Stevens (1991-1995)</i>	Richard Cummings, Jr.
<i>Mike Monroe (1992-1993)</i>	Anthony Edwards
<i>Walt Kupfer (1993-1995)</i>	Moultrie Patten
<i>Eugene (1994-1995)</i>	Earl Quewezance
<i>Hayden Keyes (1994-1995)</i>	James L. Dunn
<i>Dr. Phillip Capra (1994-1995)</i>	Paul Provenza

The Brick. He is assisted by girlfriend-turned-wife Shelly Tambo (Cynthia Geary), an ex-beauty queen some forty years his junior. Joel's receptionist, Marilyn Whirlwind (Elaine Miles), orients her "boss," a man of science, to her Native American customs and spirituality while keeping him in line with the slightest grimace or glare. Chris Stevens (John Corbett), ex-con and deejay for Cicely's KBHR "Kaybear" radio, peppers the narrative with eclectic musical selections, self-taught philosophy, and Greek chorus-like commentary. Finally, Maggie O'Connell (Janine Turner), a local bush pilot and Joel's landlady, engages him in a tangled romance reminiscent of 1930s and 1940s screwball comedy. When Joel exited the scene during the 1994-95 season, Dr. Phillip Capra (Paul Provenza) and his journalist-spouse Michelle (Teri Polo) were introduced.

It is around intermittent characters that some of *Exposure's* most ground-breaking episodes and themes have emerged. Chris's African-American half-brother Bernard (Richard Cummings, Jr.) and Marilyn's healer cousin Leonard Quinhagak, played by noted film actor Graham Greene (*Dances With Wolves*), deepen and enhance the show's representation of multi-culture. Gender and sexuality are explored through Ron (Doug Ballard) and Erick (Don R. McManus), proprietors of the local inn, whose gay wedding was a prime-time first. Ron and Erick's arrival also helped to provide a larger context within which to recollect the town's founding by a lesbian couple, Roslyn and Cicely, later featured in a flashback episode. Eccentric bush couple Adam (Adam Arkin) and Eve (Valerie Mahaffey) allude to the ongoing battle of the sexes rendered center stage by Joel and Maggie and, with their exaggerated, back-to-nature facade and conspicuously consumptive habits, poke lighthearted fun at *Exposure's* "yuppie" audience.

The "fish out of water" narrative exemplified by Joel's gradual softening toward Cicely, Cicelians, and small-town life is replicated again and again in episodes about visitors who give of themselves in some fashion while becoming enriched by their interactions with worldly wise, innately intelligent, and accepting locals. Humanity's place within the larger natural environment is another significant thematic thread running through the program's extended text. Behavior and temperament are often seen to be influenced by phenomena such as seasonal winds, Northern Lights, midnight sun, and ice breaking in springtime. The lesson is clear: nature tames human beings--not the other way around.

A "cult" favorite, *Northern Exposure* has inspired several fan clubs as well as its own internet newsgroups and other cyberspace bulletin boards--forums for spirited discussion by an international following. Although its network run was short-lived, it has extended its audience in syndication and has clearly made its mark with

Michelle Schowdoski Capra (1994-1995)..... Teri Polo

PRODUCERS Joshua Brand, John Falsey, Charles Rosin, Robert T. Skodis

PROGRAMMING HISTORY 88 Episodes

CBS

July 1990-August 1990	Thursday 10:00-11:00
April 1991-December 1994	Monday 10:00-11:00
January 1995-March 1995	Wednesday 10:00-11:00
July 1995	Wednesday 9:00-10:00

FURTHER READING

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innovative storytelling and character-driven themes crystallizing new and ongoing debates about cultural values weighing heavily on a viewing public facing the uncertainty of a new millennium.

-Christine Scodari

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See also [Dramedy](#)