

# Dark Makeover for a 70's Cyborg



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LOS ANGELES --

The car wreck comes before the first commercial break, a sudden, violent, transformational jolt that signals — even more than the presence of a working-class, dark-haired protagonist, the bass-heavy house-thumping sound track or the rainy-night “Blade Runner” look of the show -- that this new version of “Bionic Woman”, NBC’s heavily-promoted hope for a demographic-

friendly follow-up to last year’s sci-fit hit, “Heroes” will be very different than the rose-colored, lunchbox-friendly 1970’s television series from which it takes its name, and, intentionally, very little else.

“Our impulse,” said Executive Producer and show creator David Eick, who had never seen a single episode of the original “The Bionic Woman” series before he started working on his own, “was to make the incident that leads to her bionic surgery something very terrestrial and common, the kind of thing that could happen to you or me.”

Well, up to a point anyway. Unlike the character played by Lindsay Wagner in the original series, Mr. Eick’s Jaime Sommers is not a world-class athlete or globe-trotting adventurer before undergoing the emergency surgery that replaces her right arm, eye, ear and both legs with top-secret super-strong and very expensive bionic parts. She is, instead, a 24-year-old bartender, (played by British actress Michelle Ryan) caring for a troubled younger sister, unsure of her place in the world, a set of emotional circumstances that don’t change just because she is suddenly implanted with \$50 million worth of nano-technology and, like it or not, beholden to a shadowy government agency that, having saved her life, apparently wants to make her into some kind of half-cyborg fighting machine. So, really, she’s just another single woman trying to survive in the workplace, juggling family and career.

No, seriously, that's kind of what Mr. Eick has in mind, although with plenty of really cool fights and explosions and sci-fi special-effect whiz-bangery thrown into the mix, along with big questions about the limits of science and ethics and who in society gets to decide when things have gone too far. Try putting that on a lunch box.

"I'd like people to leave room for the possibility that a show called 'Bionic Woman' is going to reach deeper than they might expect," Mr. Eick said, during an interview at a hotel just off Ventura Boulevard where he was holed up, away from the show's Los Angeles production office, writing new episodes. "We're not doing Chekhov, we know that. But I do think we're definitely pushing the theme in some really compelling and sort of meaningful directions.

"In a way, you want the title to work for you, to get people to watch the show, but at the same time you don't want it to act as the kind of thing that makes people feel like you don't deserve to go into that more serious territory. I hope people will leave room for the possibility that a show called Bionic Woman can be great."

Mr. Eick has been through this process before, re-tooling the campy 70's space opera "Battlestar Galactica," with collaborator Ron Moore, first into a 2003 mini-series and then, starting in 2004, into a dark, complex series on the Sci-Fi channel that has won critical raves,

Emmy nominations and Peabody Award in 2006.

"I would say in both the case of Battlestar and Bionic Woman there was a reason for being, independent of the title," he said. "When Ron Moore and I first started talking about Battlestar, it was in December of 2001, right on the heels of 9-11. And we saw Battlestar Galactica, at its heart, as a story about desperate people in the aftermath of a holocaust, searching for a way home. So our intention was to write a drama that reflected our times that just happened to be called Battlestar Galactica. Bionic Woman is a more sociologically contemplative idea which is, simple, "Are the rules different for women? When their desire is to be a professional success and an emotional, domestic, interpersonal success, how do we judge that differently than we might a man?"

Mr. Eick's first run at the idea did not involve re-making yet another 1970's sci-fi show. "It was about a female tycoon who, in the aftermath of an Enron-like debacle, retreats to her home and to her family where she eventually launches a crime syndicate out of her kitchen. There were all these shows with morally-ambiguous male protagonists out there like "The Sopranos" or "House" or "The Shield" and it seemed like the female heroes always were painted in primary colors. They were either a real bad-ass or they were a super mom or the doting wife. I wanted to look into gray areas.

“I was raised by a single woman, who was an entrepreneur,” said Mr. Eick, who grew up in Phoenix and whose mother owns a high-end memorabilia store in Las Vegas, “so I knew the force of a successful female business person who’s also a successful mom. And I wondered why we hadn’t seen more of that on television.”

When the original script didn’t work out, Mr. Eick started re-thinking the idea, except with a female superhero instead of a crime boss, an idea that he realized could be worked around the basic premise of “The Bionic Woman.” Because he was a former production executive, he knew the rights to the title were available. Along with writer Laeta Kaligridis, he pitched the idea last year to Katherine Pope, president of Universal Media Studios, who immediately saw the appeal.

“I’m 34. I’m a boss. I’m a wife. I’m a mom.,” Ms. Pope said in telephone interview. “I feel a lot of the burden of responsibility. Sometimes I wish I could be bionic. So to have that dramatized, to illustrate those themes – How do I embrace my strength and power and also embrace my femininity -- was something that resonated.”

From the beginning, Mr. Eick said he envisioned his “Bionic Woman” as younger and more vulnerable than the original and that she would have a worthy adversary, a woman named Sarah Corvus (played by Battlestar actress Katee Sackhoff) who had also undergone bionic implant procedures but had given into the dark side of having nearly

unlimited physical powers, a shadowy reflection of the temptations and dangers that come with Jaime Sommers new abilities.

“Sarah was a good way of showing this as a cautionary tale,” Mr. Eick said. “And if you look at the storytelling tools of the great science fictions writers, it’s all about be careful what you wish for. H.G. Wells and Ray Bradbury are always talking about that which we create eventually destroying us unless we heed the warnings. And Jaime will have to make moral choices that may or may not move her down the path towards becoming another Sarah.”

Not that the series, which films at the same Vancouver soundstages as “Battlestar Galactica” will continue to be as dark as the pilot, which itself has undergone some changes since being released on the internet earlier this year, the most notable being a Jaime’s sister is no longer deaf and, at the network’s request, has been recast, with Lucy Hale replacing Mae Whitman. In recent weeks there has also been turmoil in the writing ranks. Executive producer Glen Morgan, a veteran X Files writer, left because of unspecified creative differences, with Mr. Eick taking over the day to day responsibilities of running the show.

“I never thought this series should be as dark as Battlestar,” Mr. Eick said. “It would be impossible to maintain the heaviness of the pilot, which is about a girl getting pulverized by a Mack Truck, barely surviving and struggling to come to terms with this incredibly traumatic thing. You can’t do that story every

week. Sometimes she has to feel that this is exhilarating, sometimes it's terrifying and sometimes it's just fun."

Besides the obvious pitfalls of trying to get audiences to take a show called "Bionic Woman" seriously, Mr. Eick had to accept creative restrictions that came along with the name. Because the original series was a spin-off from the 1974 television series "The Six Million Dollar Man," which was based on a 1972 novel called "Cyborg," there was an elaborate list of what could and couldn't be used in the new show. Basically, the Jaime Sommers name and the extent of her bionic abilities are the only specifics which can be used. Mr. Eick does not have rights to any mention of "The Six Million Dollar Man" or Steve Austin. It's also why Jaime Sommers gets her bionic missions not from "Oscar Goldman" but from a character named Jonas Bledsoe (played by Miguel Ferrer).

Nor will there be any slow-motion fluttering sound effects when bionic powers are being used, the duh-duh-duh-duh noise emulated in 70's playgrounds the world over. Not that the sound won't appear elsewhere. "It shows up," Mr. Eick said, "but in a way that's not too cute, that's not making fun of it, but is just not what people are necessarily expecting."

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