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Cabby Verite: Philadelphia is the sullen and at times sparkling leading lady in this richly textured love song to a city. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

On the bubble, *Hack* is a real Philadelphia story.

by Harris Steinberg

I have to admit to a guilty pleasure. I love watching *Hack*, the Philly-based crime drama of a cop who fell from grace and spends his days plying the streets of Philadelphia driving a cab and helping people. Mike Olshansky, laconically played by David Morse of *St. Elsewhere* fame, isn't your everyday hack, or cab driver.

Rather, he's a one-man vigilante, who, with the help of his former partner, Marcellus Washington, does right by the people of Philadelphia. An inveterate do-gooder without a trace of a smile, Olshansky navigates the highways and byways of the City of Brotherly Love responding to an ongoing offering of citizens in need.

But the real player, the real story, is Philadelphia -- the city. From the streetcar "suburb" of Spruce Hill in West Philadelphia to the decimated Badlands of North Philadelphia to the glories of Boathouse Row on Kelly Drive, *Hack* unabashedly shows Philadelphia as she is, as we know her -- warts and all.

And that's what I love about the show: Philadelphia, the silent, sullen and at times sparkling leading lady in this richly textured love song to a city. Shot entirely on location, *Hack's* Philadelphia is no mere backdrop -- not the perfunctory shot of City Hall or Delancey Street such as on the also current *Cold Case*, another Philadelphia-

based crime drama in which an obligatory shot of Elfreth's Alley masks the real action on a sound stage in Toronto.

No, *Hack's* Philadelphia is real, alive, thrumming -- a study in contrasts -- of black and white, light and dark, rich and poor, new and old, sunshine and shadow. Her colors saturated and rich as the camera candidly cross-cuts from the rosy halo of a sunrise over the gleaming towers of Center City to cracked paint crazing across the doorframe of a crack house.

On a recent episode of *Hack*, warm jewel tones of the mahogany paneling in the upper lobby of the Kimmel Center envelop Olshansky and his date as they dine in hushed elegance -- the Kimmel never looked so intimate, sensual and inviting. On Broad Street, shards of cerulean neon pierce the darkness, punctuating a scene in which ghosts from his past are hounding Olshansky.

On *Hack*, the porches of Spruce Hill extend toward infinity and the bark of the London plane trees in Rittenhouse Square peel in real time in the background. Billowing clouds of steam, backlit under the decaying arches of the Reading Railroad Viaduct in the Callowhill Loft District, heightens the threatening menace of thugs attacking an innocent lost soul.

These are the textures of the city that we know -- the sights, sounds, smells and subliminal cues that we take for granted day in and day out -- textures that in their totality are the sum total of the warp and weft of the urban fabric of our daily lives.

Hack, which may be canceled by CBS next month (spawning a feverish fan effort to save it), is not saccharine or pretty. It's dark and troubling, with characters like Philadelphia herself searching for a way out of the darkness -- looking for a way to capture the brilliance and promise and hope that that is embedded in our collective DNA as we're locked in the vice grip of a post-industrial struggle for survival.

This is the Philadelphia that I know and love -- a city scuffling to save its soul -- a city trying to maneuver between right and wrong. A city with a storied past and rich physical fabric that is frayed and torn and tattered at the edges. A



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confront the scourges of crime, drugs, disaffection and disinvestment -- a

ma in Philadelphia in which a federal probe is investigating allegations
our civic life. Of the recent departure of our own Gary Hack from the
City Planning Commission who was thwarted in his attempts to help guide the city toward her world-class potential. Of
a city in which a plethora of grassroots civic organizations strive mightily to maintain baseline quality of life as
backroom deals enrich the powerful and the connected.

Which begs the question of leadership? Who's driving this cab? In *Hack*, Olshansky cruises under the radar screen in a
world seemingly devoid of civic and political leadership. What about us? Are we still, in the words of Lincoln Steffens, so
"corrupt and contented" that nothing will break the logjam of partisanship and patronage that drains the spirits of
Philadelphia?

Or is it time to look honestly at the tough beauty reflected in the lights splashed across Olshansky's windshield and take
it as a signal for action -- collective action toward shaping a new Philadelphia. A Philadelphia in which we work together
across political, racial, social and economic lines to make her the best she can be -- physically, socially, economically,
intellectually and spiritually. Don't we owe this to ourselves and our children?

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