A Tomb With a View

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The new HBO series from *American Beauty* writer Alan Ball -- who's openly gay, no word on his blood type -- has a sense of humor like *Twin Peaks*, but without the whodunit. Set in a California family funeral home -- viewing rooms downstairs, bedrooms upstairs -- the Fishers lose their patriarch in the first five minutes of the series when his brand-new hearse is hit by a bus. The eldest son, Nate (Peter Krause) is home for the holidays and gets stuck with half the business, but it turns out he's got an empathetic gift for dealing with the grief stricken. The younger son, David (Michael C. Hall), is a gay mortician (see "Snap Shots") and a deacon in his church -- not bad for referrals.

The show's humor is dry and diseased, though likely less shocking to the virally enhanced than to a general audience. The characters are casual in their acceptance of the importance of death to both life and business -- when Nate wants a weekend off, he defends the request by pointing out that one client's "going in the ground tomorrow" and the next "will be dust by Friday." Yet the show is reverent in its insistence that dead people are worthy of respect.

Ball's got a lot to say about how we sanitize both corpses and grieving rituals, and there's a surreal, almost-sanctified touch to the way the show is structured: Each week's episode opens with the demise of someone whose corpse eventually finds its way to the Fishers, and segments fade to heavenly white light instead of black. Solid performances and high hopes led HBO to renew for a second year even before the show debuted, a first for the premium channel. The 13-ep season will wrap up in late August. Check www.hbo.com/sixfeetunder for a rerun schedule.

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