

TV Review: TNT's 'Raising the Bar' Presents Opening Arguments For Season Two

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on June 8, 2009 - 1:49pm

- [Brian Tallerico](#) [2]
- [Currie Graham](#) [3]
- [DVD Review](#) [4]
- [Gloria Reuben](#) [5]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [6]
- [J. August Richards](#) [7]
- [Jane Kaczmarek](#) [8]
- [Jonathan Scarfe](#) [9]
- [Mark-Paul Gosselaar](#) [10]
- [Melissa Sagemiller](#) [11]
- [Natalia Cigliuti](#) [12]
- [Raising the Bar](#) [13]
- [Stephen Bochco](#) [14]
- [Television](#) [15]
- [TNT](#) [16]
- [Theater, TV, DVD & Blu-Ray](#) [17]

CHICAGO – I'm a huge Stephen Bochco fan and like most of the cast of TNT's "Raising the Bar," returning tonight to start season two and recently released on DVD in a first season set. But I can't handle the tone changes, two-dimensional characters, and complete lack of judicial realism on this show, one that has promise on paper but has never worked in episode form.



Television Rating: **2.0/5.0**

I've always had a problem with shows that feel like they intentionally set out to "make a difference". Good television starts with characters first and difference-making messages come from them. You can't write theme. Write plot and let theme come organically from the plot. "Raising the Bar" is ALL theme and all message.



Melissa Sagemiller and Mark-Paul Gosselaar

Photo credit: Danny Feld

Proof of this is right there on the back of the season one DVD, "From Emmy-winning producer Steven Bochco comes the powerful new legal drama about the fight for truth and honesty..." It's not about people. It's about "the fight". That leads to melodrama.

"NYPD Blue" was about the daily life of cops who also fought for truth and honesty, not the other way around. It may seem like a small difference, but it makes for two-dimensional characters when they are so clearly the product of a message-delivery machine and not believable themselves.



Gloria Reuben, Mark-Paul Gosselaar and Jane Kaczmarek
Photo credit: Art Streiber

"Raising the Bar" is about a group of young public defenders and district attorneys who may drink and sleep together outside of the courtroom but stand on opposite sides when the legal process comes to call. The earnest and driven Jerry Kellerman (Mark-Paul Gosselaar) leads the way against friends (and even lovers) like Michelle Ernhardt (Melissa Sagemiller) and Marcus McGrath (J. August Richards) on the other side. Other cast members include Teddy Sears, Currie Graham, Jonathan Scarfe, and Gloria Reuben of "ER".

The cast may be good but the legal issues on "Raising the Bar" drive me crazy. I have yet to see an episode where I didn't cry foul at the over-the-top behavior of Judge Trudy Kessler (Jane Kaczmarek) or one of the rebellious young legal eagles played by Gosselaar, Sagemiller, or Richards.

In the premiere of season two of "Raising the Bar," Kessler is back being her crazy self (she would have been disbarred years ago in real life) and a divorce attorney tries to use pictures of people hugging at a birthday party as leverage. The number of times I think "that would NEVER happen" during a legal show is directly related to my overall opinion of said show. It happens often in "Raising the Bar".

So, what *does* work about "Raising the Bar"? Sagemiller and Richards are interesting actors and Reuben is always good. She brings the idealism of the show in check and makes her case in the first episode, which involves assault with a hot dog, feel believable and genuine. But a talented actress like Reuben shouldn't have to struggle against over-played themes to feel genuine.

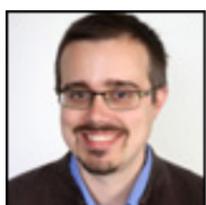
Ultimately, "Raising the Bar" is for hardcore legal drama fans only. There are clearly enough of you out there to bring the show back for season two and if you can get past the idealistic melodrama, I could see law show junkies finding something to like in this TV courtroom. For me, I've seen shows like this too many times before and "Raising the Bar" doesn't do anything interestingly enough for me take the case.

If you see the season two premiere tonight and want to see where it all began, Buena Vista Home Video released the first season on DVD last week. All ten episodes are presented in widescreen with a 1.78:1 aspect ratio and a Dolby Digital 5.1 Surround Sound track.

Special features on "Raising the Bar: The First Season" include audio commentaries, "Sworn Testimony: True Stories of a Public Defender," "Behind the Bar: An After Hours Roundtable With the Cast," and "Mistrials: Bloopers From Season One".

'Raising the Bar,' which airs on TNT, stars Mark-Paul Gosselaar, Gloria Reuben, Jane Kaczmarek, Teddy Sears, Natalia Cigliuti, Melissa Sagemiller, Currie Graham, J. August Richards and Jonathan Scarfe. The second season premiere airs on Monday, June 8th, 2009 at 9PM CST.

'Raising the Bar: The Complete First Season' was released by Buena Vista Home Video. The 3-disc set was released on June 2nd, 2009.



[18]

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