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## The Kelley Curse

### Will *Boston Legal* fail the way David E. Kelley's other shows have?

By Dana Stevens

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Will the Kelley curse befall *Boston Legal*?

freshness over time, but Kelley's seem particularly prone to sudden and precipitous declines.

*Boston Legal*, the new *Practice* spinoff from legendary writer-producer David E. Kelley (premiering Sunday, 10 p.m. ET, ABC) is provocative, hammy, absurd, and irresistible—so far. But, as has been widely observed in the 12 years since his first series, *Picket Fences*, Kelley's shows tend to start strong and peter out after a few seasons, all of them following remarkably similar trajectories of decline. An attractively oddball cast of characters becomes an annoying bundle of tics and catchphrases; a bold narrative sensibility becomes an ever-more-absurd collection of unlikely plot twists. Of course, every TV series loses its

For a while in the '90s, the wildly prolific Kelley was the industry's darling, not least because of his shaggy, boyish good looks and his enviable marriage to screen goddess Michelle Pfeiffer. Between 1997 and 2000, he had four series running simultaneously on television. In 1999, he was the first producer ever to take home Emmys for both Best Comedy Series (*Ally McBeal*) and Best Drama (*The Practice*). But by its fifth season (in 2002), *Ally McBeal*—never a show known for its subtlety—had devolved into a circus of dancing babies, computer-enhanced dream sequences, and one of the surest symptoms of late-season Kelley syndrome, revolving-door cast changes. After Robert Downey Jr., who played a fourth-season love interest, was busted for possession of illegal substances and left the show, *Ally* began dating her sexy handyman, played by rocker Jon Bon Jovi. When a 10-year-old girl claiming to be *Ally's* long-lost daughter showed up at her door (egg donation—don't ask), it was all over. By the time the final episode aired in spring 2002, *Ally McBeal* had become a joke.

*The Practice's* death throes also weren't pretty to witness. Fans of the once-taut legal drama differ on when, exactly, the show jumped the shark. The last time I remember voluntarily tuning in to *The Practice*, the very pregnant Lindsay (Kelli Williams) was passionately arguing a case in court when she suddenly went into labor—a very easy labor, apparently, because minutes after the first contraction,

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there she was, delivering her baby—right in the courtroom. In 2002, ABC moved *The Practice* from its comfortable Sunday night spot to Monday night, where it quickly began to hemorrhage viewers. In a last-ditch effort to turn the show around and cut costs, Kelley [fired nearly half the cast](#)—including Williams, Dylan McDermott, Lara Flynn Boyle, and Lisa Gay Hamilton—virtually guaranteeing that *The Practice* would limp toward a classic Kelley-ian demise.

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In the final few episodes of the season, Kelley brought in two new characters—the "morally challenged" civil litigators Alan Shore (James Spader) and Denny Crane (William Shatner)—for the express purpose of springboarding viewers into the upcoming spinoff. Both actors picked up Emmys for their turns on the dying show. *Boston Legal* may not have pushed *The Practice* off the air, but it certainly profited from its demise. Like the smooth lawyers it depicts, the new show is an ambulance chaser, preying on *The Practice*'s dying gasps to move shamelessly into its original Sunday night slot. So, is the new show doomed to suffer the same unlovely fate?

*Boston Legal* splits the difference between *Ally McBeal* and *The Practice*. It's lighthearted and deliberately over-the-top like the former, yet also concerned with legitimate social questions like the latter. Should a divorced father have the right to prevent his ex from moving with their children to another state? Is a lawyer justified in using unethical means—like, say, entrapment and extortion—if his end is noble? All Kelley's familiar tropes are in place: the courtroom setting (Kelly himself was once a Boston lawyer); the loopy office high jinks (a partner shows up at a meeting naked from the waist down, only to be wheeled away to the funny farm); and the pretty, insecure lady lawyers competing for male attention (here played by Rhona Mitra, Lake Bell, and Monica Potter).

At one point in the first episode, self-mythologizing blowhard Denny Crane (perfectly played by self-mythologizing blowhard William Shatner) gives a colleague a piece of advice about what to do when faced with a particularly intractable case: "Pull a rabbit out of your hat. That's the secret both to trial law and life." Rabbit-pulling is exactly what David Kelley does as a writer, show after show, plot twist after plot twist. (In this pilot, for example, the rabbit takes the form of a scene-stealing surprise guest that critics have been asked not to reveal.) But as the rapid decline of Kelley's past series

suggests, there's a limit to how long audiences can continue to be amazed by bunnies emerging from top hats. *Boston Legal* would do well to limit the narrative hocus-pocus and concentrate on its strength—the chemistry between the two fine main actors.

Kelley has always had a knack for casting, and James Spader is perhaps the quintessential Kelley actor. Like Tom Skerritt on *Picket Fences* or Peter MacNicol on *Ally McBeal*, he has a wholesome, boyish face that at the same time hints at secret perversities and unknown depths. He's a great cultivator of mystery: Watch the final scene of *Boston Legal*'s pilot, in which he mouths the name of his colleague and ego ideal in an almost inaudible whisper: "Denny Crane." You can't help but wonder: What the hell is he thinking? What's his story? Spader's ability to invest even humdrum dialogue with hidden meaning could carry this show through some low moments—though at this point in the series, the writing is still pretty good. As for Shatner, his plummy bonhomie is the pitch-perfect counterpart to Spader's cagey restraint, and their scenes together make the sillier subplots worth sitting through.

Kelley has owned up to his ADD tendencies as a writer, saying that he prefers television as a medium because "[With movies] you lose control, and it's so protracted. So many other factors go into it that it stalls the momentum. ... My attention span isn't cut out for it." But arguably, a long-running commitment to a successful series is even more difficult to sustain. If Kelley can rein in his imagination and avoid the kind of pyrotechnic stunts that tend to sink his series after the first few seasons, *Boston Legal* could reverse the Kelley curse and stick around for the long haul.

Dana Stevens is **Slate**'s television critic. Write her at [surfergirl@thehighsign.net](mailto:surfergirl@thehighsign.net).

Photograph of David E. Kelley by Mark Sullivan/WireImage.com.

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