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HEADLINE: HBO EXAMINES LIFE, DEATH OF THOSE SENTENCED TO DIE IN TEXAS

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BODY:

HBO's often excellent America Undercover **documentaries** will go behind bars tonight for a look at the deadliest Death Row in the United States.

The **Execution Machine:** Texas Death Row travels to Huntsville, Texas, home of Ellis Unit 1, the busiest Death Row in the nation and, with more than 400 men, by far the largest.

The average stay in Huntsville's Death Row had been nine years, but a new law limiting appeals should cut that figure at least in half. The results already have begun: Texas increased its executions to as many as four a week and, as of August, 25 men had been executed this year, a record for the state.

Executions, once held at midnight, are now at 6 p.m. - more convenient for spectators and in time to lead the evening news.

Filming over the course of a year, producers had unprecedented access to the prison complex. They interviewed inmates about life on Death Row and talked to the three men who were executed during filming.

When viewers see Joe Gonzales, who robbed and murdered his ex-boss, the convicted killer freely admits his guilt and makes it a point of honor that he has refused all appeals. As a result, Gonzales becomes the fastest execution in Texas history - eight months after he arrived in Huntsville.

David Lee Herman, a seemingly mild-mannered middle-class businessman, killed a woman in an apparently horrific episode.

Herman expresses remorse, even astonishment for his crime, and tries to cheat the executioner by slitting his throat and wrists the day before he is scheduled to die. Prison officials patch him up - then strap him down the next day for his lethal injection.

David Wayne Spence, convicted of murdering three teen-agers, staunchly maintains his innocence. Key witnesses even recant their testimony against him. But he is put to death anyway.

With its verite style of eschewing commentary and allowing the pictures and people to speak for themselves, The **Execution Machine** is a riveting hour. It reminds viewers of the price that criminals - and society - pay for their deeds.

More weekend fare

The Practice will premiere at 10 tonight on WSYX (Channel 6). The acclaimed ensemble law drama introduces a new cast member this season, Lara Flynn Boyle (Twin Peaks), as tough assistant district attorney Helen Gamble, who collides personally and professionally with the firm.

King of the Hill, the witty animated series from Mike Judge, the creator of Beavis and Butt-head, will premiere at 8:30 p.m. Sunday on WTTE-TV (Channel 28). In this episode, "How To Fire a Rifle Without Really Trying," Hank (voice by Judge) discovers that his unathletic son, Bobby (Pamela Segall), has an unexpected gift for shooting. The episode reaches its climax at the Arlen Father-Son Gun Shoot - "sponsored by the Arlen Endowment for the Arts."

Gibson understudy

Former Fox After Breakfast host Tom Bergeron was hired Thursday to be a backup for Charles Gibson on Good Morning America.

ABC officials shot down rumors that Bergeron eventually will replace Gibson but said the former Fox host would be the regular fill-in whenever Gibson takes time off.

Joan Lunden, Gibson's former partner on ABC's morning show, left this month and was replaced by Lisa McRee. Gibson has said he has thought about leaving but has made no decisions.

'The Site' canceled

MSNBC has canceled The Site, an Emmy award-winning technology show, because it does not fit the cable channel's all-news format.

GRAPHIC: Photo, HBO, Excell White, shown in his cell in Huntsville, Texas, has been on Death Row for 23 years - longer than any other Texas inmate., HBO, David Wayne Spence, convicted of murdering three teen-agers, was executed April 3.

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