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HEADLINE: SHOWTIME'S FINEST RETURNS

BYLINE: David Kronke, Tv Critic

BODY:

IN THE PAST two years, a new kind of cop show has been gestating on cable - the anti-cop drama, in which the heroes are at least as trapped and hopeless as those they pursue. Jerry Bruckheimer's sundry crime procedurals make crime-fighting look downright glamorous, and while the good guys on "Boomtown" and "NYPD Blue" may seem gritty and wounded, at least they almost always get their man.

But the cops in FX's "The Shield," HBO's "The Wire" and Showtime's "Street Time" - which returns for a second season tonight - are virtually beaten men and women, battling their own inner demons and departmental regulations as much as they are the bad guys. "The Shield's" hero is only a smidgen less awful than the gangbangers he roughs up. "The Wire's" best cops are buried under an avalanche of lousy, unforgiving cases and internecine internal politics. And "Street Time's" New York parole officers' offices are at least as grim and dingy as the jail cells their clients are fresh out of.

Last season, "Street Time" featured a compelling cat-and-mouse game between James Liberti (Scott Cohen), a dedicated but highly beleaguered federal parole officer (gambling problem, lousy marriage), and Kevin Hunter (Rob Morrow), a high-rolling pot dealer setting up one last big score who was arrested on a technicality just as his wife went into labor. This season opens with Hunter back in prison, awaiting a parole hearing that conveniently gets kicked back repeatedly (in three episodes available for review, Morrow naturally hasn't had a lot to do).

Liberti's only functional relationship is with his partner, Dee Mulhern (Erika Alexander), who enlivens her job by messing with her parolees' heads. Tonight, they meet their new boss, Lucius Mosley (Terrence Dashon Howard, an inspired addition), a soft-spoken, vaguely disagreeable sort who, it's hinted, has a few issues of his own regarding his new post.

Creator Richard Stratton crafted an elegant, complex story arc last season (not, however, as complex as those on "The Wire"), but this season he seems to have been given the edict to write more self-contained episodes. Tonight, Liberti and Mulhern chase a Gulf War I vet who killed a colleague neither of them particularly liked. Next week, Liberti baby-sits a West Coast rapper targeted in the hip-hop wars while Mulhern investigates a halfway house whose inmates are going all the way.

But gritty atmosphere transcends plotting in "Street Time," and episode three (directed by Morrow) is the best so far of the season, a mood-soaked slice-of-life as Hunter's cellmate's escape causes a lock-down in his prison while Liberti and Mulhern get desperately backed up on their caseloads; Lucius doesn't seem to be too sympathetic.

"Street Time" is alive with character and nuance more than procedural storytelling; its documentary-style hand-held cameras and muddy visuals may be in danger of becoming a cliché, but they serve their purpose well here. It's a bleak but eminently nervy production in which the victories come not from nabbing wrongdoers but simply from surviving the day.

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STREET TIME - Three and one half stars

What: Hardscrabble cat-and-mouse games between parole officers and their parolees.

Where: Showtime.

When: 10 tonight.

In a nutshell: Grimly gripping.

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