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HEADLINE: "Shebang" is just for fun

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BODY:

PERFECT Strangers' Mark Linn-Baker takes star billing tonight at 8 as General Motors Playwrights' Theater tries comedy for a change on the Arts & Entertainment channel.

The result is only mildly amusing.

Rich Orloff is the playwright, and ""The Whole Shebang" is the play, a fantasy of creation -- as in creation of the heavens and the Earth.

Linn-Baker is the ""student" creator who made heaven and Earth, and he's brought in his creation as his thesis project. He's there to be quizzed on that accomplishment, and he's brought along a couple of sample specimens to help his god-school classmates understand what makes human beings run. Martin Mull and Teri Garr are the too-human humans.

Another cable premiere, **HBO's ""Mob Stories,"** airs at 9 tonight, and it certainly proves one thing: Mobsters are natural-born TV talk-show guests.

Put a mobster on camera, and you can't shut him up. These **""Mob Stories"** guys spill everything. No blood oath of silence is a match for a shot at being a TV star.

There are five of these self-styled wiseguys, and they tell their own sordid stories in their own four-letter words. Mafia experts say there is some question whether all five actually live up to their own billing as onetime high-ranked Mafia insiders, and whether they just made up some of these awful stories to make themselves look better on television.

No matter. You wouldn't want to go to dinner with any of these bums, much less meet them in a dark alley. They're not just mobsters, they're murderers -- and proud of it. They're anything but the glamorous Hollywood version of organized crime.

They killed for the Mafia dons that some of them have now helped put in prison, and they tell every gory detail and brag about it. The Mafia isn't what it used to be, partly because of these hoods.

Fat Jackie Dinorscio is the only one who didn't turn informant. He's in prison now because he wouldn't squeal on his boyhood chums, the Luchese mob. He's their hero, and if he hadn't been a mobster, he might have been a comic. In prison they call him ""the Jackie Gleason of the mob. "

Big Dom Lofaro holds the Mafia title of ""the biggest rat. " He proudly recounts how he put John Gotti behind bars. The Mafia put a price on his head for doing Gotti, and Big Dom's hiding out but expecting to get his any time.

Joe Dogs Iannuzzi got even with the ""good friend" mobster who almost killed him with a meat cleaver. Joe Dogs turned the FBI on him.

Tommy Del Delgiorno is a Mafia capo who turned informant rather than kill the son of a friend. His boss was Little Nicky Scarfo, the dumbest don in a long line of dumb ones.

How dumb is he? So dumb, as Tommy Del tells it:

He can't find his way around his own city of Philadelphia, and when he goes off on vacation in Florida, he takes his whole mob along, just to cruise around on his new boat. There's nobody in Philly minding the store.

""This is supposed to be a secret organization, and 10 Italians with Rolex watches are eating dinner and nobody's got a job. You're all in Florida, but you live in Philadelphia. If you're not the mob, who are you -- the Sons of Italy? " Tommy Del scoffs.

The most unexpected storyteller is Brother Frank Minucci, whose favorite trick was to tie somebody to the bumper of his car and drag him along awhile, before he stomped and kicked and cut

him. Brother Frank has seen the light. "A simple little girl from Staten Island comes along and changes one bad guy," he snuffles through his tears, as his sweet-faced wife looks on. Brother Frank bought his way out of the mob, and he's now an evangelical preacher on Staten Island.

Al and Marc **Levin**, the father-son producer team of "Mobsters," had to go underground to talk to three of these former wiseguys, and they're seen "in disguise," since there are contracts out on their lives.

Several of them were paid "as consultants, a few thousand dollars and expenses," for doing this show. All of them had reasons for doing it, but Tommy Del was the only one motivated purely by revenge. The rest were all hoping to get a book or movie deal out of this show.

The last go-round

This is it, folks. The last chance to save a show worth saving.

"Homefront" is back, with seven new episodes, starting at 9 tonight on ABC and Channel 13. If it doesn't work this time, it's all over.

"Homefront" is one of those shows that had the deck stacked against it when ABC decided to shuffle it around from pillar to pre-emption. As one columnist counted up the scorecard, no more than four episodes ever aired consecutively since this fine series started. No wonder it could never claim enough ratings to stay in the game.

It's been on hiatus since January, but ABC promises that if the numbers go up this time, it's still in contention for next fall.

And, hey, "I'll Fly Away" fans: NBC still is expected to cancel the show, but now there's a new glimmer of hope that it could survive somewhere else. PBS is reported to be mulling the possibility of picking it up if NBC drops the ball.

CBS' "Brooklyn Bridge" is getting another shot, too. The

plans now are to run off the six new episodes remaining this spring, and if those do well . . . Well, never say it's over 'til it's over.

Pass the prize

For the first time, Houstonians voted for the People's Choice Awards. That Gallup poll of more than 5,000 viewers included five from Houston -- Johnny D. Gentry Jr., Tony Gonzalez, Carlotta Dwyer, Jerry Ford and Elonard Milsaps. Tonight's show (8 p.m., CBS and Channel 11) is the 19th People's Choice of favorite TV shows and stars, movies, and music . . .

He's baaack! Michael Jackson performs live at tonight's "Seventh Annual Soul Train Music Awards." He's being presented Soul Train's Humanitarian of the Year Award, and he's also a musical nominee. Showtime is 7 p.m. on Channel 39, and the hosts are Luther Vandross, Patti LaBelle and Natalie Cole. There'll be special awards to Eddie Murphy and the singing group En Vogue.

It's a round-trip this year for Soul Train -- and it's back again at 8 p.m. Saturday on Channel 39. Magic 102's Smokin' Tony and T.C.Bandit are in Hollywood to record the star-gazing for that special "Backstage at the Soul Train Music Awards . . ."

Tonight's other music show is for the country fans -- "The Music City News Country Songwriters' Awards" from Nashville, at 8 p.m. on The Nashville Network; at 9:30 p.m., TNN's Lorraine Crook and Charlie Chase will do a special Post-Awards Show with the winners.

GRAPHIC: Photo: Terri Garr, Martin Mull and Mark Linn-Baker star in "The Whole Shebang" (color)

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