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Meet the real kings of Canadian TV: the Timber Kings

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Sometimes, this column is all about the hits.

You can have your obscure sitcom and enjoy it. You can have your earnest documentary and feel the better for watching and agreeing with it. Knock yourself out. I'm with you a lot of the time. But, every now and then, a question arises – What are the masses watching on TV and getting a kick out of, week after week? To answer this we have to start by acknowledging that, in prime time, loads of people are not watching the major networks. They're watching something like HGTV. Home and Garden TV. Fixing stuff. Decorating stuff. Selling houses.

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We spend the winter watching these shows and making plans to do things when spring arrives. Look, it's more entertaining and rewarding than some CBS sitcom about scarily callow twentysomethings going on dates and having issues with mom that are worked out when everybody goes shopping. Okay, it might be just as much fantasy – like, are you really going to build that deck? – but it's fun, fun, fun.

With this in mind, I wondered what's hot on HGTV. To my small astonishment I read this: "Timber Kings becomes HGTV Canada Royalty as #1 Series in the Network's History."

Apparently, it's true. The hottest show on Canadian TV might be this thing, which



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chronicles the adventures of the master log smiths at Pioneer Log Homes in Williams Lake, B.C. Yep, they are the world's largest handcrafted log-home builders. And we, or a lot of us, anyway, are galvanized by their day-to-day work. Talk about hewers of woods and drawers of water. We do worship our core activities in this country.

Like many successful shows on specialty channels, *Timber Kings* (there's a marathon of episodes, HGTV, almost all of Friday, and you can find all the episodes online) is a curious hybrid. Although it's a reality show about people doing their jobs, there's a sitcom element. The people at Pioneer Log Homes are emphatically established as characters who argue, joke and curse their way through an episode.

As André Chevigny, the general manager of Pioneer Log Homes, says in an early episode, the customer who wants a log house, whether it's a small cabin or a mansion, has fantasized about it for a long time, and it's his crew's job to make the fantasy real. That means 18-hour days, seven-day work weeks and often dangerous tasks in hostile conditions.

Mostly, on the show, it means a lot of footage of enormous logs and guys going around with chainsaws. Each house they build is handcrafted on-site, then taken apart, shipped and reconstructed wherever the client wants. On the evidence of a few episodes, every client is demanding and wants the house finished in an unreasonably short time. This is the key dramatic element – a race against the clock as tempers rise and safety becomes an issue.

There is swearing galore – “You frickin’ dumbass, are you trying to kill me?” is a question frequently tossed around. It's mostly guys, but Danielle, a crane operator, is one of the key people, usually telling some agitated guy to chill. A lot of it seems arch, the conflicts and resolutions that unfold in this dysfunctional family/team, but the allure of the show is authentic, hence the ratings.

Mind you, for all of the real work we see – the craftsmanship is enormously impressive – the show is dizzy escapism. This impressive company might have started out making small trappers' cabins; it now caters to people with many millions to spend on elaborate home of near-hallucinatory grandiosity. And what you see done in a one-hour episode is many months of toil edited into a neat package. The rhythm and outcome is as predictable as any CBS sitcom.

Timber Kings is a hit because, essentially, it's a show for burned-out people. Burned-out daily by this digital age. By technology, by the feeling that with all the work we do, we create nothing substantial. Here on the show people work with huge logs and, after all the tension, there's a real, substantial creation left behind. Something you can touch.

Airing tonight

Unusually Thicke (Slice, 10 p.m.) is another celeb reality show, this one devoted to the doings of the Canadian TV star of the 1980s, Alan Thicke. It is, in truth, like a downmarket *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. As Entertainment Weekly described it, “There's an inexplicably hypnotic appeal to the fabulously banal life of former eighties star Alan Thicke. The beauty is that Thicke doesn't actually realize he's hilarious, especially when the topics are his loose grip on technology or his tight hold on the eighties.”

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