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Tanner(?) Closing In on Dukakis, Jackson

Which Democrat will win Tuesday's California primary? Michael Dukakis, Jesse Jackson or Jack Tanner?

Front-runner Dukakis is the short white guy with heavy brows and no personality. Jackson is the tall black guy with charisma. Tanner is the funny guy.

Tanner?

Yes, HBO's unsure, unsteady but gaining presidential candidate—likable former Congressman Jack Tanner (Michael Murphy)—returns at 10 tonight for another wonderfully needling, spoofing half-hour of "Tanner '88."

The timing is perfect.

The fictional Tanner and his campaign staff are now operating out of Los Angeles, where the candidate enthusiastically discusses issues with preschoolers ("When I get to be President, I'm gonna change all this. . . .") and reluctantly schmoozes with young supporters at an unctuous Hollywood pool party hosted by actress Rebecca de Mornay.

"Tanner '88" writer Garry Trudeau ("Doonesbury") and director Robert Altman are in complete sync as shrewd observers of human behavior and the vagaries of the political process. They also understand the fine line between reality and absurdity.

There are both in this sixth edition of "Tanner '88," an amorphous candidacy that began modestly in the snows of New Hampshire and has been ignored by Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw and Peter Jennings as it swiftly rose from hilariously hapless to hilariously hopeful.

Tanner placed a surprising fourth in the New Hampshire primary, stumped in Nashville before placing third in Super Tuesday balloting and then got some campaign advice in Washington, D.C., from former Democratic candidate Bruce Babbitt and others. He's also spoken to Bob Dole, Gary Hart and other since-fallen presidential candidates who brilliantly played themselves for the "Tanner '88" camera.

Along the way, Murphy has been perfect as the engagingly vague and ambivalent Tanner, a bright, decent, Woody Allen-quoting man of uncertain ambitions beyond doing good.

By now, he is less an uncompromising idealist than an honorable pragmatist, pushed into making relatively small concessions to keep his campaign alive.

Tonight they include reluctantly keeping on a disgruntled staffer to stop him from revealing that Tanner's girlfriend is deputy campaign manager for, uh, Dukakis. Tanner also hears from a political consultant that he, unlike his opponents, lacks "definition" as a candidate: "Mike is all brains. Jesse has got the market cornered on compassion." And Tanner learns the art of the "eye



Michael Murphy as presidential candidate on HBO.

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TANNER: Funny Guy in the Race

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click" from a media coach in preparation for his televised debate with "Mike" and "Jesse."

Underplaying to the sophisticated hilt, Murphy delivers just the right mix of innocence, irony and weary bemusement, while Trudeau's conversational dialogue and Altman's fluid camera have you almost forgetting that actors are reciting lines from a script.

Just as actual political candidates do,

In fact, a mere hairline fissure separates "Tanner '88" from political truth and the often cynical reality of campaigns. Trudeau has managed to touch upon the broad topical issues of the current campaign with biting satire while giving Tanner tasks, from image polishing to fund raising to glad-handing, in settings of compelling authenticity.

"Tanner '88" is so very, very close to the real thing that some viewers who tune in probably don't realize what they are watching and tune back out. Perhaps that is one reason why, according to HBO, the limited series is reaching a disappointingly tiny audience. Another reason may be lack of continuity.

Unlike the marathon presidential campaign, tonight's program is just too brief. Unlike a typical stump speech, it has you longing for more. But don't hold your breath.

Before moving on to next month's Democratic National Con-

vention in Atlanta, "Tanner '88" will devote another episode to the California primary, with Linda Ellerbee dropping by for a pre-debate chat with Tanner, and the candidate making a casual remark about Jackson that gets him into trouble with the press.

But inexplicably, that episode will air June 20—13 days *after* the California primary.

That is no way to campaign—either for viewers or voters.