

Serena Does 'Time' and Drama Is Served

REVIEW

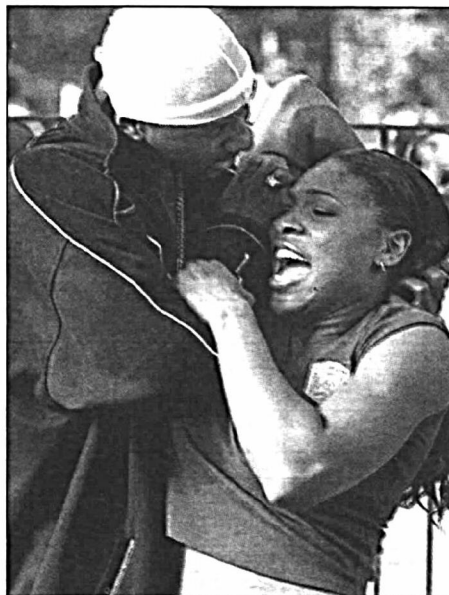
STREET TIME. Serena Williams struts her acting stuff on the provocative adult drama. Tonight at 10 on Showtime.

By Diane Werts

STAFF WRITER

It's hard to jump into a story mid-stream, but that's pretty much the point behind "Street Time," Showtime's underappreciated gem about life on parole. You just have to go with the flow and do your best — good advice for both parolees and parole officers, not to mention adult viewers who follow their exploits in this complexly layered saga of life on the New York street.

Tonight's a fine jumping-off point to look in on the drama, with a strong guest shot from tennis superstar Serena Williams as a recently released offender with a score to settle. Sure, it's stunt casting — "Street Time" needs the attention — but it pays off in every way you'd want. Williams holds her own as her character returns to the 'hood after four years in prison for, yes, a crime she didn't commit. Her old gang pulls her back, and pushes her away. Her double-dealing man actually may be triple-dealing. The parole officers played by Scott Cohen and Erika Alex-



Showtime Photo / Ken Woroner

Tennis star Serena Williams (with Chris Collins) plays a parolee in "Street Time."

ander have their own mixed emotions about this striking ex-athlete, now "crippled" (the character's word) and vengeful, yet hoping to create a new and straighter life for herself.

On the same path is series star Rob Morrow as a convicted dealer himself, who last season got so embroiled in his nutso brother's schemes that he had to make a deal with the feds to turn on his homicidal sibling. And he's strained by the on-again off-again attentions of his shifty wife. Just as their relationship is challenged, so is Cohen's with his estranged wife and two sons, thanks to his own gambling addiction, straying and 24/7 devotion to his all-encompassing profession. All these people get entangled, their principles get tested, and everybody's ethics become muddier by the second.

They certainly bend a bit for Williams' character. The aspiring actress fits in easily, comfortably conveying the ways in which her character's priorities are torn. She does it not by over-emoting — the curse of most "special" guest stars who avoid being stiff and awkward — but by welling up and closing down, revealing just enough of herself to connect with Cohen's character in the way such a guarded ex-con would. If her sticky situation gets sorted out a bit quickly, that's the way of the weekly guest here. "Street Time" has so many continuing threads to keep weaving. They're the real reward. And if guest stars like Williams can recruit new fans to savor that mature richness, Showtime should keep right on serving them. ■