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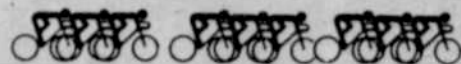
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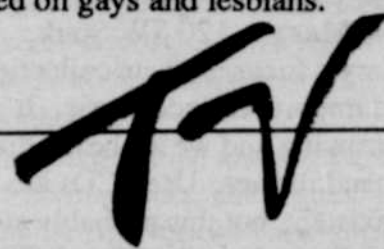
just entertainment

Throwing curves

There is something quietly subversive about making a gay character play "straight" man to his straight brother

BY ED SCHIFFER

Television has often pounced on homosexuality as a good plot line for well-intentioned episodes of well-established series, but it has seldom wanted anything more than a one-night stand. Given the sorry history of shows featuring token gay characters (e.g. *Hooperman*, *Heartbeat*), it makes a sad sort of sense that network television would build a series around someone with Down's syndrome before it focused on gays and lesbians.



And while it's not yet possible that a series called *Life Goes On* could be about a gay man with AIDS, the current season has thrown some interesting curves into otherwise straight and narrow airwaves. By far the best publicized case has been the fitful development of a gay character on ABC's *thirtysomething*. Originally conceived last season as a confidant for Melissa, the show's resident bohemian, the character of Russell took center stage in a controversial November episode. In it, the gay artist's budding romance with a marketing director paralleled Melissa's own ambivalent affair with her young beau, and for the first time on TV, two men were seen in bed together.

That was more than enough for the fundamentalist media watchdog, Rev. Donald Wildmon, whose threats of boycotts led several sponsors to yank their ads from the episode. While the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) made rumbling about launching their own boycott of squeamish advertisers, the net result appears to be a stand-off, with the makers of *thirtysomething* vowing to stand by their (gay) man.

It remains to be seen what that vow means, for Russell (played by David Marshall Grant) has yet to appear in any subsequent episode. Given the show's focus on a tight-knit group of old friends, there may be dramatic as well as political difficulties in working him into plots. But the program's producers would do well to expand his role. The series' great strength lies in its excruciating examination of baby boomer expectations, and a gay character adds resonance to the chorus of doubts and fears. Russell's fear of intimacy and his longing for children have already been used to counterpoint Melissa's feelings, and one can easily imagine how his anomalous presence could provoke Michael and Hope, the smug couple at the staunchly heterosexual

heart of the show.

While the drama-within-the-drama of *thirtysomething* continues to unfold, gay and lesbian viewers may be heartened by developments on CBS's quirky Monday night comedy *Doctor, Doctor*. A summer experiment that was revived in November as an emergency replacement, the show features four doctors in a small Providence, Rhode Island, practice. Setting the tone for the series is Matt Frewer, who plays Dr. Mike Stratford in a manner reminiscent of his previous incarnation as Max Headroom. And while Mike seems straight in a queer sort of way, he shares a house with his brother Richard, a decidedly gay English professor.

Although this set-up sounds like more well-meaning tokenism, the show has consistently delivered episodes in which Richard's gayness has been used shrewdly. In one, Mike's yuppie partner Grant found himself forming a close friendship with Richard, only to be horrified by others' matter-of-fact assumption that he was gay. The well-written episode allowed Grant to emerge with his heterosexuality intact, but not before dissecting his homophobia.

Even more impressive, perhaps, was an episode about HIV, in which one doctor refused to treat a gay patient after learning he was positive. She did so, it turned out, because she was reacting to the news that her bisexual ex-husband had just tested positive. Aside from scoring several points for underlining the difference between AIDS and HIV, the episode deserves some credit for not exploiting Richard. Only towards the end does Mike ask his brother how he deals with a disease that, like the Wicked Witch, seems to promise, "I'll get you, my pretties." "Do you practice safely? Are you laminated?" And Richard's simple guardedly optimistic response that his two years of celibacy will soon come to an end rang true and sad.

This fraternal exchange is typical of the show, and it suggests why the humor is so effective. There is something quietly subversive about making a gay character play "straight" man to his straight brother. Mike's manic mugging creates a comic atmosphere in which anything goes. He may express a preference for women, but his imagination is polymorphously perverse, and he's addicted to puncturing others' self-importance. When Grant asks him what it's like having a gay brother, Mike replies, "I don't know, why don't you sleep with him and find out?"

Dramatic shows which "treat" homosexuality are all too often bogged down by ponderous discussion of the issues (e.g. the recent "lesbian episode" of *21 Jump Street*). By refusing to pull any comic punches, *Doctor, Doctor* manages to land far more powerful blows for the cause. ▼

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