

Television's ongoing flirtation with gay and lesbians

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America ideas about what we are like*

B Y E D S C H I F F E R

In the quick but somewhat confused response to the Andy Rooney affair, many of us found ourselves arguing simultaneously for Rooney's muzzling and for increased media access for gays and lesbians. Never mind that censoring Rooney displays the same mind set which prevents positive (or even recognizable) depictions of gay culture on television; we're mad as hell and not going to take it anymore.

But unlike the disgruntled viewers in the movie *Network*, we would do well not to throw our TV sets out the window. True, reviewing TV's images of gays and lesbians can seem a little bit like reviewing an art exhibition in which most of the paintings are turned to the wall. But television is giving heterosexual America some ideas about what gay and lesbian people are like. We need to consider the variety of ways in which television talks about us if we are ever to get it to talk to us.

By far our most common appearance on the small screen comes in single episodes of established shows. Last month, *Designing Women*, CBS's sitcom about four women who run a decorating business, featured a plotline with a lesbian theme. A generally enlightened show (two years ago, it was among the first series to feature a sympathetic AIDS storyline), *Designing Women's* treatment of lesbianism nevertheless revealed several problems with the presentation of gay themes on television.

The episode centered on Suzanne Sugarbaker's relationship with an old friend from her days on the beauty pageant circuit. The old friend, now a successful weathercaster, had recently "come out", and once the self-

involved Suzanne realized her former rival was not talking about debutantes and cotillions, she retreated from the friendship in classic homophobic fashion.

There were several good things about the show. With the help of the three more progressive designing women, Suzanne was made to confront her stereotypes, and the episode took pains to show how even the self-proclaimed liberals harbored irrational fears about lesbians in their midst. Suzanne reconciled with her lesbian friend, but the episode ended with her declaring "If they can put a man on the moon, we can put one on you."

In some ways, the episode's creators were not simply indulging some homophobia of their own with that line. It is entirely in character for Suzanne to resist having her consciousness raised, and by giving her such an absurd last line, we're reminded that people are not easily converted. It would be nice to think that's what the show's writers were getting at; that they were winking at us with that finale, but unfortunately, their "realism" ends up winking at the very prejudice the rest of the show worked to discredit. Ever since *All in the Family*, liberal TV viewers have had to worry whether the depiction of prejudice exposes its dubious assumptions or whether it actually serves to endear to us this all-too-human failing.

The answer, of course, is that it works both ways, depending on who's watching. If the makers of *Designing Women* made sure that a whole spectrum of straight viewers could "plug into" the show, any gay or lesbian watching the episode would have to note the curiously superficial characterization of the lesbian and conclude that homosexuality is, after all, just something that impinges on straight people from time to time.

There is some encouraging evidence, however, that television is finding alternatives to this "heterocentric" way of presenting gays and lesbians. The unlikely force for change

here has been the Fox network, whose two variety programs, *The Tracey Ullman Show* and *In Living Color* (now seen back-to-back on Saturday nights at 9), have demonstrated a willingness to grapple with gay people themselves, rather than the problems they pose for straights.

Among the various recurring characters featured on the versatile Ms. Ullman's show is Francesca, a teenaged girl who lives with "Daddy and William." Skits involving this gay family have focused on such "issues" as how to present themselves when buying a co-op and whether William gets to accompany his lover on business trips, but these are simply treated as the kinds of problems nice ordinary gay parents run into.

A similar matter-of-factness characterized the gay skit on the April debut of Keenan Ivory Wayan's *In Living Color*, a show that already deserves ample credit for putting a black point-of-view on the small screen. A parody of Siskel and Ebert, "Men on Films" featured Blaine and Antione, two flamboyant black film reviewers. Interpreting *Do the Right Thing* as a call to come out of the closet, they proceeded to wax rhapsodic over the possibilities of the relationship at the heart of *The Karate Kid*, Part III. Self-consciously over the top, the skit flirted with queeny, misogynistic stereotypes of gay men, even as it flaunted Hollywood's undeniable homoerotic undercurrents.

The complicated satire of both Fox variety shows points up a different sort of problem afflicting gay content on television. The "girls" hosting "Men on Films," like the overly prissy "William and Daddy," are presented as variations on familiar stereotypes, and it's easy to feel guilty laughing so hard at them. It's easy to imagine unsympathetic viewers taking these characters seriously and using them to confirm their prejudices. Even without knowing the sexual orientation of these skits' writers, though it's clear where their sympathies lie. For all their exaggerated mannerisms, Blaine and Antoine and William and Daddy are vital, self-affirming characters who occupy center stage in their own lives. And that's rare enough in television's ongoing flirtation with homosexuality.

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