

LA Law aware of gay issues

"Outing" linked to AIDS, alcoholism and gay teen suicide

BY E D S C H I F F E R

If the future of gay and lesbian rights depends on our increased visibility, we should be heartened by the increasing number of television shows willing to spotlight gay themes. When an episode of a television series addresses gay issues, not only is there the opportunity to educate millions of Americans; there is proof that such matters have entered the mainstream and become legitimate subjects for debate.

TV

NBC's *L.A. Law* has always been uncannily topical in choosing its storylines, so it seems particularly significant that its May 10 episode examined the issues behind the phenomenon of "outing," which has so divided the gay community in recent months. Series regular Michael Kuzak (Harry Hamlin) represented a hero cop who had been dragged from the closet by a crusading gay journalist. While the legal issues (freedom of the press vs. invasion of privacy) clearly led to a decision in the journalist's favor (he was only printing the truth about a public figure), the show managed to do a surprisingly thorough

job of presenting both sides of the debate over "outing."

"Outing" exposes closeted politicians who vote against gays, as well as celebrities who are popular enough to help change people's perceptions of gays and lesbians. By choosing an example of the later, *L.A. Law* appeared to stack the deck against the practice. Without the charge of "hypocrisy" that is usually levelled against the political targets of "outing," the episode's "outtee," who had lost his family's acceptance and been forced to resign as a policeman, did indeed appear to have been victimized in the name of a social cause.

But for the first time on national television, the dimensions of that "cause" were fully delineated. Again and again, the defense attorney (subtly identified as a lesbian and played by the accomplished Lindsay Crouse) parried Kuzak's attempts to portray the cop's victimization with eloquent testimony about how the closet victimizes even more. For once, the philosophy of "outing" was clearly explained and linked to the larger issues of AIDS, alcoholism and gay teen suicide.

If that sounded a little dry and preachy, note how the issues surrounding "outing" resonate within the larger context of the show. Regular viewers may remember that last season, Kuzak represented a gay Olympic athlete who had lost endorsement contracts when he came out. In that episode, Kuzak had flirted with the sleazy tactic of blackmailing

the closeted judge, so it was almost as if his newfound fervor in protecting the cop's privacy was the result of guilt over his own misguided attempts at "outing." What's more, the cop's story played interestingly against the episode's other plotlines: Kuzak decided to move to New York to be near the dying father he had long ignored; Benny decided he didn't trust his sweetheart enough to marry her; and Arnie decided to marry his girlfriend in a desperate attempt to protect himself against his own promiscuity. These realistic depictions of "normal" heterosexual families only undercut the cop's claims to have lost his family. Without minimizing his pain, the show managed to suggest — perhaps even more than it realized — that he was well rid of the illusory life he had struggled to maintain.

It remains true that network TV is committed to maintaining an artificially sunny view of the traditional American family. The very depiction of homosexual lives sheds a rather harsh light on that view of things, as the Rev. Donald Wildmon and other right-wing activists preaching a gospel of "family values" recognize only too clearly.

Television's nervous approach to the challenge presented by the true range of domestic possibilities in American life may be seen in all those shows featuring same-sex roommates. CBS may have removed the lesbian overtones from *Bagdad Cafe* in making it a sitcom, but Whoopi Goldberg injects a rather strong feminism into a show about two women who have left their husbands. Like *The Odd Couple* before them, shows such as *My Two Dads* and *Full House* feature men living together in unorthodox but viable "families." The Rev. Wildmon has not

protested against these shows, but I doubt very much he likes them. For all their insistence on healthy heterosexuality, they create imaginative space for alternative lifestyles.

The point is not that there are two or three queens lurking in that "full house," but that America is maturing to the point where it might tolerate it *if there were*. Of course we're not there yet. Both *My Two Dads* and *Full House* seem to resist the implications of their own premises by regularly featuring moments of "heterosexual panic" in which the men who live together must use jokes to exorcise the possibility that they are more than good friends. But even here, the defense mechanisms of mainstream American culture are showing signs of wear. When Bob Saget and Dave Coulier donned drag in a recent episode of *Full House* and ended up in jail, the predictable homophobic jokes gave way to campy good humor.

Still, "heterosexual panic" is likely to get worse before it gets better. For things to get better, we must work to rid the airwaves of things like the Kraft cheese commercial that has been playing for several months. In it, several young children in mouse costumes are preparing a school play. The announcer's pitch for preferring Kraft Singles over its rivals — "things that look alike aren't always the same" — takes on new meaning when one boy mistakes a male classmate for a female one: he recoils in horror upon discovering that the object of his affectionate gesture is another boy. As long as children are given cues for heterosexual panic, the calmer counsel of shows like *L.A. Law* may make little difference to their parents. ▼



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