

THE GLOBE AND MAIL
THE ARTS

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Television

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**Straight Up
a bold strike
in teen wars**

STRIGHT Up (CBC at 9:30 p.m.) is one of the most daring, honest and innovative drama series ever produced for network television. It is daring because it flouts all the formulaic, narrative conventions of TV; honest because it lays bare the naïveté and nihilism of teen-age culture without offering any comforting, morally correct nostrums; and innovative because it blends realism and fiction together with a jarring and imaginative visual style.

Straight Up consists of six tautly interlocking vignettes of contemporary, urban teen-age culture that explore the emotional essence of late adolescence with an authenticity almost entirely alien to mainstream television.

Far from being any sort of earnest, naturalistic documentary, this limited series produced for Alliance Communications' is dazzlingly shot and edited, pulsating with the hormonal rhythms, fear and anger of its confused characters. Director Gerald Ciccoritti (*Paris, France*, 1993) brings an often dark and yet always empathetic sensibility to the episodes, drawing unselfconscious performances from a superbly cast group of youngsters.

Visually, the series is rarely less than stunning. The camera swoops and jerks in a way that viscerally mimics the emotions and physical energy of the characters. *Straight Up* documents the ordinary conflicts of teen-age life with acuity, and the writer, Andrew Rai Berzins, has done a fine job of catching the tones, inflections and improvisatory flow of the adolescents' conversation.

Each episode is shot through with tension and discontent, and many of the scenes are uncomfortably, and unavoidably, intimate. Tonight's opening episode, *Jam*, chronicles the final moments of a relationship in which a girl is struggling to communicate her sexual and emotional needs to a boy who is, well, a boy, full of selfish, insecure bravado and terrified of the intimacy and honesty that a relationship demands.

The Small Bang Theory is a touching, stylized portrait of a gifted and tortured girl who feels nothing in common with her peers and what she views as their mindlessly conforming, willful stupidity. Other episodes examine such subjects as friendship, alienation and racial tensions, but none of the shows are linear, traditional TV narratives with predictable dramatic curves and pat conclusions.

Straight Up may have its roots in the kind of docudrama explorations first created by director John N. Smith at the National Film Board, which resulted in such terrific films as *Train of Dreams* and *Sitting in Limbo*. In fact, producers Janis Lundman and Adrienne Mitchell are merely continuing the work they began with their successful documentaries *Talk 16* and *Talk 19*, but with *Straight Up*, the form has evolved into something even more artistically challenging.

This is not *Beverly Hills, 90210*, not some glossy prime-time teen fantasy for kids. But I think kids will see themselves portrayed for the first time with honesty and accuracy — and parents might well begin to understand their children's fears and insecurities a little better. *Straight Up* falls somewhere between the predatory sexual anarchy of the movie *Kids* and the emotional verisimilitude of *My So-Called Life*, but it is neither as despairing and ugly as the former nor as pretty and reassuring as the latter. It is, in brief, utterly unique and remarkable.