



TELEVISION

Teenage wasteland

A new series vividly evokes the adolescent blues

STRAIGHT UP

(CBC, Mondays from Feb. 19, 9:30 p.m.)

Teenagers are the true existentialists. They make their absurd daily slog from math class to mall to MuchMusic, only to find themselves back in trigonometry the next morning. Blindly groping through a thick hormonal fog, they know all about fear and loathing. Convinced that no one has ever been as weird as they are, they feel terribly alone. Not even fully grown, they are obsessively morbid. Television has mostly refrained from visiting the teenage wasteland, opting instead to routinely dish up adult fantasies of adolescent life (the now-defunct *My So-Called Life* being a rare exception). *Straight Up*, however, tells it like it is. Created and produced by Adrienne Mitchell and Janis Lundman, the team that made the teen-girl documentaries *Talk 16* and *Talk 19*, the series of half-hour dramas is fresh, uncompromising, wry, disturbing—just like a real teenager. For adults, the show is a pungent reminder of how alienating adolescence can be. The question is whether young people themselves will watch this mostly reflection of their lives.

Viewers who tune in to the first episode, *Jam*, are in for a bit of a shock—but also some vibrant, convention-defying television.

The drama focuses on Marcia (Robin Brulé, whose performance, like those of the other main characters, is entirely credible) and her frustration at her boyfriend's disregard for her sexual pleasure. The show includes a masturbation scene and a discussion about faking orgasms. While that may sound prurient, in fact *Jam* is a humorous and sensitive look at a girl's struggle to assert herself and, yes, express her sexuality.

Not a whole lot happens in *Jam* or any of the other five episodes. True to their roots in documentary, producers Mitchell and Lundman—along with director Jerry Ciccoritti and writer Andrew Rai Berzins—present revealing slices of adolescent life, with all its anxiety, turmoil and unmitigated emotion. Wisely, they keep the focus of each half-hour episode on one or two characters, and on creating psychological depth.

The superb second show, *Dead Babies*, captures a day in the life of high-schooler Rory (Justin Peroff), a morbid dreamer who

Peroff (front left), Polley: an alliance based on experiences of death

is feeling distant from his sardonic grunge pals. He creates a stir when he reads a surrealist poem to his English class about the dead babies who laugh at him at night from their treetop perches. Adult viewers will be transported right back to Grade 11 English when they hear the burst of scornful male laughter that greets Rory's composition. "Goth" girl Lily (an unrecognizable Sarah Polley of *Road to Avonlea* fame), with her dyed black hair, corpse makeup, black attire and coffin-shaped purse, becomes intrigued by Rory and his poem. They strike an alliance based on their real, related experiences of death.

None of the kids in *Straight Up* is endearing in the usual TV way. And one mark of the show's bravery is that it spotlights a couple of difficult-to-like young people. At the centre of *Small Bang Theory* is Simone, a sullen overachiever who cannot forgive herself for overlooking a question on her physics exam—"91 per cent is nine-per-cent wrong," she says of her final score. She snarlingly refers to boys as "meat," spitting at or striking rude ones. She dreams of becoming an astronaut and never returning to the polluted Earth from space—"I could actually maybe be alone for once, me and the planets and stars." She proclaims that human beings deserve to be exterminated by a neutron bomb. The viewer is left slightly afraid of Simone, but also in awe of a certain strength and integrity in her anger.

Other episodes deal with racial issues, police harassment, jealousy between friends, parental abuse. But much of the series is taken up by the usual teenage diversions: various intoxicants, dancing, listening to music, sitting in fast-food joints. Ingeniously, one of the episodes focuses on teenage card-playing culture, and the feelings that can erupt over a game of euchre. *Straight Up* even explores that perennial adolescent complaint, boredom. The funniest episode, *Big Time*, plays like an underage *Waiting for Godot*, with three stoned boys wandering through back alleys on a Saturday night as they search in vain for a rave (a warehouse dance party), all the while talking about space and time.

Produced by Mitchell's and Lundman's company, Back Alley Film Productions Ltd., and Alliance Communications Corp. in association with the CBC, *Straight Up* also breaks new stylistic ground. The producers and director Ciccoritti—best known for the movie *Paris, France* and the acclaimed CBC drama *Net Worth*—have

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given the series a distinctive, striking look with lots of extreme close-ups, lighting tricks and freeze-frames. And the soundtrack blends new songs from Canadian bands with moody electronic sounds composed by Kevin Hearn.

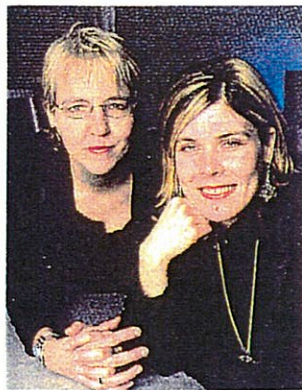
A big frustration in making the documentaries *Talk 16* and *Talk 19* was that producers Adrienne Mitchell and Janis Lundman were unable to use dozens of incidents from the lives of their five subjects and the girl friends. The film-makers simply had a surfeit of material, and the teenagers worried about their families discovering certain things about their lives. Many of the anecdotes meanwhile, seemed perfect for dramatic treatment. Three years ago, Mitchell and Lundman decided to pursue a television series. They visited Toronto schools to get more real-life stories. In addition, Mitchell 35, tapped into the experiences of her husband, Ian Esquivel, a high-school English teacher. Then, they set out to find a writer and director willing to, as Mitchell says "reinvent the wheel"—to create something that avoided the clichés of mainstream TV. "What was great about Andrew [Rai Berzins] and Jerry [Ciccoritti]," she adds, "was that it wasn't necessary to shake a TV-formula mould out of their systems."

The two women spent three months casting the series. After looking at more than 600 teenagers, they chose 74 young people, of whom 13 play principal characters. More than three-quarters of the cast had never acted before. They found the neophyte Justin Peroff (Rory), the drummer in a Toronto band called Cat Rocket, by piggybacking their actors-wanted message on voice mail advertising a rave.

In the interest of authenticity, the film-makers also hired a teenager to act as a consultant, 18-year-old Marina Filatow, a student of Mitchell's husband. Recalls Mitchell: "We thought it was really important to bring on somebody who could help us with looking over scripts, looking over wardrobe, listening to music. We'd ask her, 'Is this believable; is this something that you would listen to?' And she was really invaluable. So, here we are, we think of ourselves as cutting-edge producers. We say, 'OK, we're tired of teenagers being represented with clothing that's all so clean and ironed.' We wanted wrinkles. We wanted holes and tears. Marina had to come up to us and say, 'You know, the kids who are into hip-hop [black dance music], they wouldn't be caught dead wearing clothes like that. In fact, they like everything that's ironed and cleaned and without holes.'"

Liberty Street, the twentysomething series cancelled by the CBC last week, *did* get many of those kinds of details right. Often, however, its characters and plots seemed contrived. *Straight Up* delivers the straight goods, and deserves to survive beyond this season.

PATRICIA HLUCHY



Lundman (left), Mitchell: dark

FELIX BREGG/MACLEANS