

ENTERTAINMENT

Monday, February 19, 1996 Page B4



REAL TEENS: Marc Cohen, Justin Peroff, Noam T.C.S. Lior and Sarah Polley star in six-part CBC-TV series, *Straight Up*, which starts tonight at 9:30.

Real teens on TV tell it straight up

New CBC series bold experiment that works well

By GREG QUILL
TELEVISION CRITIC

When the lights were turned up in a west-end high school classroom one afternoon last week, the faces of about 30 grade 12 and 13-ers were drained, blank.

They seemed in shock. They'd just seen something that had challenged them, amused them, maybe even shaken them.

They'd seen three episodes of *Straight Up*, a new made-for-CBC-TV series that premieres tonight at 9:30 on Channel 5.

One dealt quite graphically with a sexual relationship that soured because the boy got his jollies at his girlfriend's expense — and that also ruined their successful micro-business, a street-corner T-shirt sales operation.

The second was about a might-been basketball star who loves taunting authority figures, particularly the police, and whose world starts falling apart when his appetite for mayhem alienates and endangers his closest friends.

The other episode was about the dreams of a bright, lonesome, awkward, troubled young woman whose ambition, against almost impossible odds, is to become an astronaut. In the final scene, she's looping through the air in a gravity-defying bungie-jumper designed overnight by her single dad.

That's *Shirone*, played in *Straight Up* by Mona Atwell.

Atwell, a former runaway and street-dweller whose penchant for performing has developed into a promising career, was at the screening with teenagers only a few years younger than she is.

So was Merwin Mondesir, who plays Dennis, the rapidly deteriorating hood 'n the 'hood. He's a charming, marginally trained young actor who, unlike Atwell, seemed a little distanced from kids who, a couple of years ago, would have been his peers.

Both Atwell and Mondesir, maybe because they were in the classroom, won oblique praise for their performances in their respective episodes. Several students after the preview said the characters they played were "real ... credible ... strong, screwed-up, crazy, like people I know."

That was an important endorsement for *Straight Up*'s creators, Janis Ludman and Adrienne Mitchell, award-winning documentary filmmakers whose feature *Talk 16* and its follow-up, *Talk 19*, chronicled the values, attitudes and activities of a number of very different Canadian female teenagers in a manner that shocked audiences as much as it informed them.

"*Straight Up* grew from *Talk 16/Talk 19*," said Mitchell, who was also at the preview and answered students' questions. "We were astounded by the abundance of stories and the diversity of characters in the documentaries. They suggested a dramatic treatment."

Real stories about real teenagers are rarely successful. *Straight Up*'s only real TV predecessor is the brilliant Ameri-

can network series *My So-Called Life*, which earned heaps of rave reviews from critics, but which was cancelled, long after it should have been, because it never found an audience. It was perhaps too real. Teenagers found it revealing in the extreme, adults didn't want to know about their kids' secret lives and fears, and advertisers were scared of its explicit content.

So, *Beverly Hills 90210* and its sundry offshoots thrive.

"They're fantasy," one female student said at the preview. "Kids don't really believe life is like that. Those shows you can escape into, they're a joke."

"But I will watch *Straight Up*," she said. "I didn't miss the (Los Angeles) palm trees and the muscle cars and fabulous estates. I loved that *Straight Up* is obviously shot in Toronto, on the streets we all know. I'd rather watch something realistic, something authentic."

Straight Up is nothing if not authentic. This six-episode show is nothing less than revolutionary, likely the most inspired TV experiment I've seen in years, and, apart from the recent CBC-TV movie *Little Criminals*, the most disturbing.

Shot in a frenetic, on-the-run style by Jerry Ciccoritti (the TV movie *Net Worth*), it's essentially a day or two in the lives of six loosely related characters who affect each other directly and indirectly, and it's built around events and locations that become familiar to the viewer in time.

The grainy, over-exposed, in-your-face music video look of the thing only enhances the quality of performances —



MERWIN MONDESIR: Plays Dennis, the rapidly deteriorating hood.

about 10 of the 13 regular cast members are inexperienced or first-time actors culled from 600 audition sessions — and of the writing of Andrew Rai Berzins (*Blood & Donuts, Due South*), whose interweaving, multi-layered yards, adapted from hundreds of taped interviews with Canadian high school students, street kids, and others, could actually form the basis of a stand-alone three-hour movie.

In one episode, *Dead Babies*, Sarah Polley (*Road To Avonlea*) is all but unrecognizable as a ghoulish, vampire-like kid with a dreadful secret. In another, *Big Time*, a young man in search of Saturday night kicks, is finally forced to confront his own inner loneliness.

The creators expect an extreme reaction.

"Some viewers won't want to see what's really going on in the lives of young people," said Mitchell. "Some will see the show as a shedding light. Some will be annoyed because it's not fantasy, others will be happy it isn't."