

Soap Opera in a Multicultural Australia: Home and Away v Heartbreak High

Hawthorne, Leslyanne "Soap opera in a multicultural Australia: Home and Away v. Heartbreak High" Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research Bulletin, No. 15, 1995, pp 32-35.

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Representing Difference? The Australian Media

A UK soap opera was recently designed to present the life, loves and (occasionally) work of an attractive female research scientist. The explicit aim in this was to persuade British teenage girls to view science as a potentially 'feminine' and charismatic career. In taking such an initiative, science planners were saluting a fundamental principle of advertising - that if you wish to reach an audience, and influence its values, you target the appropriate media to do so.

In relation to this it is a fascinating exercise to analyse the extremely popular teenage soap opera genre in Australia to consider the messages implicitly and explicitly transmitted about the nature of Australian society, including the acceptability of ethnic diversity.

'Home and Away', the Seven Network's top-ranking, long-running soap opera, is set in Summer Bay, a place of sea and perpetual sun on east coast Australia. Given its programming frequency (five nights per week), for many committed adolescent viewers 'Home and Away' fictional families will almost certainly be the prime families known outside their own, and highly influential. While the series sells itself as

modern, dealing with 'hip' issues such as street kids, incest, drug taking, teenage anorexia and pregnancy, the first thing to note in relation to 'Home and Away' is the extreme social conservatism of the genre. Summer Bay men undertake a fair range of jobs. The women, by contrast, fundamentally feed and nurture - even the few female teachers promptly find additional catering work at the Diner.

Despite Sydney being a mere hour away by bus, Summer Bay kids confound contemporary educational patterns by rarely electing to proceed to tertiary study. Bright girls, in particular, abandon their dreams of law or medicine to become teenage mothers or brides, to stay at home and serve coffee or milkshakes. These destinations are sanctioned by the example of Pippa, the earth mother who centres the series, an ex-nurse with a voracious maternal instinct, who bakes up a storm while civilising a succession of foster children. The arrival of these children in fact is crucial, for like many soap operas, 'Home and Away' offers viewers a modern version of the morality play. Teenage runaways are brought to Summer Bay in a state that is preferably feral. Their problems are explored and resolved with considerable voyeuristic zeal. In the process, homeless deviants are socialised into good, upright citizens.

How, you might ask, does 'Home and Away' connect with the topic of cultural diversity? The answer is simple. It doesn't.

What the series offers viewers, instead, is ethnic invisibility of the highest order, a comforting pre-mass migration vision of Australia, peopled with unassailably Anglo citizens. Unlike the bulk of Australian country towns, Summer Bay lacks even an Italian Pizza Parlour, a Chinese

restaurant, a Greek or a Lebanese milk bar. Over more than six years of watching the program, I have seen four vignettes centred on 'alien' Aboriginal, Yugoslav, Italian and Chinese characters. Each was ruthlessly despatched within a matter of episodes, the Chinese girl recalled overseas, the Yugoslav father killed in a light plane accident, the Italian exchange student obliterated by an express train.

The device of centring 'Home and Away' around a succession of fostered children in fact provides a brilliant rationale for systematic ethnic exclusion. NESB-origin actors may occasionally be cast in the series, in at least one case as Anglo (Sophie). Two boys (Frank and Jack) are briefly acknowledged as being of Italian and half Lebanese descent. Yet by definition each has been abandoned by his natural family, leaving him free to identify as 100 per cent Australian in terms of language, culture and personal style.

Such patterns should come as no surprise perhaps, in a place like Summer Bay a fictional construct based on a huge nostalgia for 1950s Australia. It should be different in relation to 'Heartbreak High', an infinitely superior teenage series set in contemporary eastern Sydney, proclaimed from the start to be culturally inclusive. Within the first series we were indeed presented with an overwhelmingly ethnic school, reflective of the newer as well as the older migrations which are a vital hallmark of Sydney. In Hartley High, the 'Skips' were outnumbered by kids of Greek, Italian and Lebanese origin, as well as by large numbers of relatively new arrivals from Southeast Asia. The key characters in this first series included Nick, the resident Greek stud, his process worker father, and kid sister Effie; Con, Nick's Greek-Italian cousin (a marvellous hustler); Rose a Lebanese girl with serious career aspirations; Jack, her Vietnamese boyfriend; Yola, the Lebanese student counsellor; and Christina, a teacher of southern Mediterranean origin.

These genuinely diverse core characters were set against a sea of background faces, offering a powerful visualisation of contemporary Sydney

migration, a huge media advance it would seem, in line with the program's promotion. Yet even within the first series, before ratings pressure bit, clear inconsistencies were evident in the program's characterisations. Yola, the 'Lebanese' counsellor, was presented as a powerfully hip young Australian woman - a cheerful libertine with no family or Lebanese values in sight. Apart from Vietnamese Jack, not a single ethnic character spoke with a trace of a non-Anglo accent, not only second generation kids, in whom this was predictable, but the first generation.

Despite such anomalies, 'Heartbreak High', was definitely promising and far more 'real' than the standard teenage fare on commercial television. The focus began to insidiously change, however, through the second series. By the third (currently underway), the changes had amounted to a covert transformation of the program's explicitly stated values.

Concurrent with the struggle of 'Heartbreak High', for ratings, a none too subtle process of purging was progressively being carried out. In the second series Nick (the Greek stud) was killed off in a disastrous boxing bout and replaced by Matt, a NESB origin actor actually cast as an Anglo. Jack, the Vietnamese high-achiever, was transferred out of the series to continue his education at a selective entry high school, presumably designed as a prestigious exit. Prior to leaving Hartley High, Jack impregnated Lebanese Rose, returning briefly in the third series to marry her in a charming Vietnamese-Lebanese wedding, before she in turn was promptly exited!

With one exception, these 'ethnic' characters were replaced in 'Heartbreak High', by Anglos, entering the series in the guise of incoming students, a long-lost sister, or new girlfriends. An identical pattern prevailed in relation to teachers. Christina left suddenly after marrying an Australian academic and departing for Indonesia (a somewhat deviant destination for a good Greek girl). Yola, the Lebanese student counsellor, became pregnant to an Australian policeman and was also abruptly transferred out,

replaced by an Australian spunk named Sam, with a taste for full-throttle motorcycling, male students and leather. (Fertility seems a besetting problem for Lebanese females in the series.) Simultaneous with this process, a progressive and unexplained obliteration of the Asian and Middle Eastern faces originally thronging the classrooms was occurring. Not one Asian or Middle Eastern character currently retains a speaking role in the series. Further, a re-assignment of class was being imposed, ensuring the ethnic lifestyles more closely approximated the Doncaster/Chatswood dream of migration. In the process, Effie's blue-collar father was despatched to Greece, despite the previous strength of his attachment, facilitating the relocation of Effie to the home of her wealthy uncle and aunt (Con's parents). Architectural preferences aside, this uncle and aunt appear extraordinarily mainstream in terms of social values, even to the stage of encouraging the 12-year-old Effie to accept an Australian boyfriend.

By early September the series increasingly revolved round Anglo-Australians named Steve, Matt, Jodie and Peter, enlivened by the wit of Con and the nubile presence of Katerina. Despite the series' many virtues, what we are progressively getting in 'Heartbreak High, is representation of an 'acceptable' cultural diversity, delivered by Greek or Italian origin actors not stigmatised by significant differences related to race, accent or style. Why has this purging occurred? The reason is simple. Like 'Home and Away', 'Heartbreak High', screens on a commercial channel (Ten), where programs live or die by ratings and the determination of content is unfettered by principles of non-discrimination or ethnic inclusion. 'Heartbreak High', has not rated well in Australia, despite commitment to quality production standards and the recruitment of excellent calibre actors. Reportedly the series has survived so far due to international ratings, as well as local content requirements.

You may ask whether these issues are significant. I would argue that they are. We are talking here about issues of visibility versus invisibility, with potentially profound implications for personal

and societal acceptance.

'Home and Away' offers a clone of 1950s Australia, a place whose surface acceptance of NESB migrants masked a collective will to conformity and a loathing of difference. 'Heartbreak High' offers an initially brave attempt at ethnic representation, punished by major ratings problems, resulting in an attempted 'solution' based on abandonment of any real sense of inclusion.

The thinking behind such contemporary program 'adjustments' seems clear - if you get rid of the accents, the factory jobs and above all the Middle Eastern and Asian characters, this show may survive. These are powerful subliminal messages for teenage Australians. They may be particularly potent for teenagers who happen to be racially or culturally different.