

WB: The Next Queer Network For Change?

By RUTH SADELLE ALDERSON

On a recent Wednesday, I was involved in not one, but two discussions of queer cultural representations. The first was in one of my classes, the second at a QNC meeting. In light of the discussions, and in preparation for the newly resurrected Lambda, I started to make a list of queer characters I had seen on television in the last season.

I first thought of Will and Jack from "Will & Grace." They're the most visible queer characters on television, but far from being the only representations we have. Willow and Tara on "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" are involved in a lesbian relationship. Jack from "Dawson's Creek" is gay. Drew's brother Steve on "The Drew Carey Show" is a transvestite. Then there are the queer identities represented on "Popular": Lily is questioning her sexuality, Harrison's mother is a lesbian. One episode centered on a shop teacher who wanted to go from being Mr. Don to being Ms. Debbie.

"Will & Grace" is part of NBC's all-important "Must See TV" lineup. "The Drew Carey Show" is on ABC. The other three shows are on the WB, an important distinction.

The WB is not a high quality network; my theory is that they want to be a low budget network but have too much money.

The network's advantage, however, is that it targets teenagers. This makes the effect of its shows far different from anything NBC or ABC can air.

The WB's audience includes people who are like Jack and Lily, teenagers who begin to question and talk about their sexual orientation in high school. It also includes people who, like Willow, fall in love with someone of the same sex after having an opposite-sex relationship for many years. It even includes people who, like Harrison, have queer parents. Even more important, the WB's audience includes people who, like Dawson, Pacey and Joey; Brooke and Sam; Buffy and

Xander, have friends who are going through those experiences.

In taking on queer identities, the WB has created teenage characters who recognize and choose to fight the oppression of and discrimination against members of the queer community. My hope is that this trend in the development of characters and storylines is one that will continue and carry over, not just into other shows and other networks, but also into the daily lives of the audiences.

The WB isn't a perfectly diverse world—most of its characters are still middle class and white—but it is providing teenagers, and the rest of us, with queer identities we may be able to relate to on television. There is such diversity in the queer community, as in any community, that no one image can ever represent all of us, but with an ever-expanding number of representations, we can all find something we recognize.

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