Laughing Matters

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"It's been 22.3 years. AIDS is finally funny." So proclaimed the potty-mouthed, 8-year-old denizens of *South Park* in March. Producers Trey Parker and Matt Stone may be on to something, but they certainly didn't pioneer the use of AIDS as sitcom matter. That happened 15 years ago, when the ladies of *Designing Women* agreed to lend their decorating touch to the funeral of a young friend dying of AIDS. At about the same time, the *Golden Girls* underwent a testing scare from hospital volunteer work.

This season, HIV is really coming of age, and two shows seem to hit the right notes. A recent airing of *South Park* (Comedy Central) revolved around a homophonic mix-up when a celebrity proclaimed he wished everyone had "aides" like him, prompting a near-lynching. The cute, horny slutpuppies on *Queer As Folk* (Showtime) rip condom wrappers open with their teeth so frequently you'd think each had prophylactic product placement written into his contract. *QAF* is *the* poster program for sexual self-preservation and AIDS inclusion. Since the first episode, Uncle Vic (Jack Wetherall) has waged a very visible battle with AIDS, replete with drug cocktails and side effects. Last season, Emmett (Peter Paige) underwent every gay man's rite of passage, transmission panic (he was negative). And this season, hapless Michael (Hal Sparks) took a chance on love with HIV positive Ben (Robert Gant), to the consternation of his neggie buds and his mom.

Some producers and writers, however, really need to get a clue. We thought Darren Star, the creator and consultant for *Sex and The City* (HBO), was openly gay. But except for an occasional mention of condoms and an episode last season in which Samantha (Kim Cattrall) weathered an HIV scare (hmm, is there a pattern emerging here?), these girls hop in and out of bed with the impunity of barebackers. And if *Will & Grace* (NBC) were the sole popular window onto gay life, millions would be forced to ask, "How can gay men spread HIV... when they never have sex?"

Yes, television comedies operate in a bizarre parallel universe. Still, more producers are perfecting the art of portraying sexual responsibility while keeping the laugh-track rolling.

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