Mister Sister

Sisters' PWA transvestite Chardonnay is simply producer Ron Cowen's latest AIDS plot

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When Swoosie Kurtz's TV daughter, Reed Halsey-Philby, was arrested for prostitution earlier this season on *Sisters* -- NBC's weekly drama about the lives of "four and a half" Winnetka-bred sisters -- many of the show's fans snickered in support: That double-crossing, back-stabbing, baby-abandoning, spoiled-ass rich bitch was finally getting what she deserved.

While most of us hoped she would be sentenced to a lifetime of cleaning grout with a toothbrush and wearing Jaclyn Smith fashions, she got only 400 hours of community service at an AIDS hospice. But as the weeks passed, Reed, an only child, also got a sister in the form of hospice-dweller Chardonnay, an HIV positive transvestite whose dose of reality so profoundly affected her, she actually started becoming a more sympathetic character.

Not only popular across demographics for its mix of camp and real-life issues, *Sisters* has made sure to tell the story of people living with AIDS from more than one angle. Remember when sister Georgie's son's HIV positive teacher fought to keep his job? Or how about the reunion between sister Teddy and her first love, a model, when she challenged the mainstream concept of beauty by allowing him to pose with exposed KS lesions in her magazine fashion ads? And let's not forget half-sister Charlie, who tried in vain to help an inner-city HIV positive pregnant woman kick her drug habit.

"In televison we have a responsibility to our audience," says *Sisters* creator and executive producer Ron Cowen. "There isn't just one plot when it comes to AIDS. Whether you're [HIV] positive or negative, the disease affects people in many different ways.

Cowen paved the way for prime-time HIV-TV in 1985 with his ground-breaking, Emmy award-winning *An Early Frost*, the story of a young lawyer (played by Aidan Quinn) who finds out he's HIV positive and goes home to reconcile with his family. Unlike many AIDS dramas, however, *An Early Frost* doesn't end in death.

"We wanted to put out a survival message," Cowen says.

But *Sisters*' most recent story line of Chardonnay's life in an AIDS hospice is more than another version of Cowen's message. It's a convergence of several efforts to express the reality of the epidemic's impact through performance. Chardonnay is played by K. Todd Freeman, who also

played Belize, the stoic, quick-witted best friend of the PWA prophet Prior Walter in Broadway's *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. And the fact that Cowen addresses hospice care and the process of dying is proof that he's willing to push audiences to think about all aspects of the disease. (When Reed showed up for her first day of "work" at the hospice, she was told that the one thing to remember was that no one in the house would be alive in six months.)

"The bond between Reed and Chardonnay has such a positive effect on her, it continues even after Chardonnay's death," Cowen says. "He tests Reed's sense of commitment and forces her to face pain, which is something she's never done before."

Like any well-organized drag queen, Chardonnay prepared for death by taking care of funeral details and, of course, deciding what he would wear.

"Just as Audrey Hepburn had Givenchy, Chardonnay had Teddy," Cowen says of the show's glam designer's decision to make Chardonnay's burial dress. And so it was that in a long-sleeved, floor-length, hip-hugging gold lamé gown with a matching Italian-hair wig, Chardonnay was fabulously laid to rest -- not to worry. In that *Sisters* way of mixing past and present so that no one ever *really* dies, Chardonnay comes back as a ghostly guide to Reed.

But when are we going to spend a whole season with an HIV positive character? As if Cowen could read my mind, he tells me his next AIDS-TV battle plan, details of which he won't reveal: "I'm currently working on a series for next fall where one of the main gay male characters finds out he's HIV positive in the first episode."

Living, loving and conniving on a weekly basis with a PWA? Move over, *Melrose Place*.

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