The Perez Family

Charles and Rosie Perez deliver HIV test results on TV -- muy differently

August 1, 1995 By Doug Ireland

Charles Perez is a semi-cute twink with empty, untroubled eyes who, after stints producing daytime TV talk for Montel, Ricki and Jenny and a taste of airtime as Norm Korpi's boyfriend on MTV's *The Real World I*, launched his own syndicated version of tabchat. One of his June Sweeps Week offerings: A show in which T.J., a 21-year-old gay student, received his HIV test results on the air.

A few days before, Rosie Perez, the effervescent Nuyorican actress and AIDS activist, had hosted ABC's *In a New Light: Sex Unplugged*, the fourth in a series of annual specials on (as the network's press release fastidiously put it) "the health risks young people are facing in today's sexual climate." In the course of the hour-long doc, a heterosexual girl named Chrissy is shown receiving her test results.

There, the similarity between the two broadcasts ends.

On Charles' show, T.J., a dark-haired Irish lad, is presented with his boyfriend Scott, a thirtysomething blonde yuppie. The couple had unsafe sex on their first date; Scott, who had previously been tested but "didn't stick around for my results," proclaimed that T.J. should have known about Scott's promiscuity because they met in a small-town gay bar where "everybody knows everybody else's business" (as if only the promiscuous can get or transmit HIV). T.J. seemed at somewhat of a loss to explain why he willingly agreed to unsafe sex, commenting that many depressed kids are having unsafe sex as "a '90s form of suicide."

A host of fascinating and important questions were raised by this intro, but they were quickly skirted by Charles, who couldn't wait to give his audience a chance to have at the two queers, with Scott emerging as the enemy of choice. A certain Dr. Blau, who administered T.J.'s test for the show, was shown intermittently on camera but never given the floor; none of the counseling that should normally accompany an HIV consultation was shown. The word "condom" never passed Charles' lips: The host preferred the formulation "unprotected sex."

After a commercial vaunting the sexual attractiveness one can manufacture at Jack LaLanne's, T.J. was finally given his test results. They were negative, thankfully, and T.J. collapsed sobbing into Scott's arms. Asked what he's going to do now, T.J. whimpered, "I'm going to St. Pat's." He'd have been better off taking Scott to a drug store to shop for condoms.

Charles at one point disingenuously insisted that he had “reservations” about telecasting an HIV test “live.” During Sweeps Weeks? Sure, Charles. If T.J.’s results had been positive, in the absence of any real education context about treatment and survival, this show would have had the feel of a live-on-TV execution.

By contrast, *Sex Unplugged* had to be one of the most effective sex-ed shows ever aired by the commercial grids in prime time. Rosie Perez hammered home the importance of latex condoms, and the question of how difficult it is for young people to interrupt a moment of passion, intimacy and love to negotiate safer sex was at the center of the discussion. The possibilities of fulfilling relationships between seropositive and seronegative persons were sensitively portrayed.

Dotted with cameo appearances by Melissa Etheridge, Jon Stewart and Jared (*My So-Called Life*) Leto, the ABC special was the first prime-timer on the Big Three networks that I know of to make a strong case for the sexual education of children before they begin active sex lives. A mother is shown discussing with her 11-year-old daughter how safer-sex talks brought them closer together, and a sex class with the child and her peers that include play with condoms was hearteningly sensible. ABC deserves credit for airing this smart, life-saving, intelligent documentary produced by Joseph F. Lovett. Too bad that this series comes only once a year.

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