

Degrassi Defies TV Taboos



On "Degrassi Junior High," nothing is unmentionable. Joey goes shopping for a condom for that important first date. Stephanie nearly drowns in her father's liquor cabinet. Lucy is sexually harassed by a teacher. Caitlin wonders if she might be a lesbian, and Spike experiences the age-old teenage catastrophe: "I think I'm pregnant."

These are just some of the challenges of adolescence that the televised students of "Degrassi Junior High" deal with from week to week. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation program now is seen in 40 countries the world over. It has won seven international awards and in the process has challenged all the old ideas about what can and cannot be talked about on television.

Fresh, realistic, and emotionally complicated, the show is the brainchild of director Kit Hood, producer Linda Schuyler, and a company of Toronto schoolchildren who act as both performers and field researchers. The concept originated 10 years ago with "The Kids of Degrassi Street" and continues with "Degrassi Junior High." Both series are watched by millions of kids from Iceland to Australia.

However, topics such as teen pregnancy and homosexuality scare television executives. In fact, last year the British Broadcasting Corporation refused to air four episodes. But "Degrassi's" creators have not backed down. In one episode this season, a student named Wheels loses his parents to a drunk driver. Children watching an episode such as this need more than the facile platitudes often offered on television to deal with tragedies.

"The main thing is to avoid adult fantasies about childhood," says Schuyler. To do that she and director Hood rely on the children themselves, who never miss more than three consecutive days of public school and supply the personal bases for most of the material.

Unwanted sexual advances, drug dealers, macho misconceptions, and censorship are just a few of the dilemmas faced by the kids of "Degrassi Junior High."

In the view of the show's creators, the traditional situation comedy with its patronizing advice from all-knowing adults sadly underestimates its young audience. "With our show, the kids help the kids," Schuyler explains. But even better than that, "Degrassi" gives them alternatives. It's not simply a case of: "You have to do this or such and such will happen." The show in fact portrays the students facing a variety of choices from which they try to make the best decision.

Hood and Schuyler have some tough choices to make too. Schuyler tells of how she is spending less time with her charges these days and a lot more time on the phone. The unfamiliar lure of big-time show business is leading this schoolteacher down an unfamiliar street.

"I'm resisting getting bigger," Schuyler admits. "In fact, I'm very happy with the size of the company the way it is. I guess that's the double-edged sword of success: once you deliver something that people really want, all of a sudden they want more of it — much more of it."

Undoubtedly, the show's irreplaceable element is its process. If they change the process, the production could become bigger and faster, and "Degrassi" could lose its soul. But the dilemmas associated with success are infinitely more desirable than the problems of failure. The fact remains that "Degrassi" is riding high and "the kids" are doing just fine.

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