

T.V.'s "Hometown" not-so-Big Chill

by Mark Wolfe

There has always been something disturbing, if not somewhat evil, in the way television trivializes or "normalizes" cultural and social situations. This fall's line-up of prime time programs — each a fresh albeit desperate lunge at the Nielson brass ring — promises to continue the lobotomy. There are several examples at hand but let me focus on one tailor-made yuppie-targeted effort: "Hometown."

"Hometown," is an intellectually watered-down version of Laurence Kasdan's "The Big Chill." Not that "The Big Chill" was any intellectual masterpiece, but geared to TV's lowest-common-denominator formula, "Hometown" is definitely a rung or two lower on the ole evolutionary scale. What is omnipresent in "Hometown" — as was in "The Big Chill" — is the degree of rationalization that goes on between characters and sometimes between a character and himself.

"Hometown" continues where "The Big Chill" left off; instead of the college friends returning to their worlds, the characters in "Hometown," although it is never clear why, have stayed and/or return every episode to this home town and to their close-knit extended-type family of college friends. "The Big Chill's" Kevin Kline/Glenn Close union is recreated in "Hometown" and serves here too as the focal point or axis of their multitudinous gatherings, leaving the impression de ja vu of this couple's role as surrogate parents of the college-friends-type-family. In other words, here, too, we see the 60s communal family image heavily refined and enriched with the big-house-chunky-crystal-ashtray-type-trappings of grown up and well-to-do baby boomers. Hence the rationalization of "The Big Chill" carries over into "Hometown": That what was fashionable then, viz. protests, long hair, drugs, Allen Ginsberg and the sexual revolution has, alas, merely given way to what is fashionable now. And yes, although integrity is important, in the long run it means a somehow cruder and deprived way of life. When one of the characters finishes a play after 15 years and is happy enough to have finished it at all, as opposed to selling and producing it, the rest of the cast respond with a chorus of moans and groans. One even says: "That's dumb!" So much for the sixties.

There are a few character changes from "The Big Chill" to "Hometown" but basically the premise is the same: as a group of successful, upwardly mobile young professionals, struggling with the neuroses of changing values in mid-stream, raising children in the shadow of atomic doom, and coming to terms with dashed hopes and good intentions, we — and you better believe it, fella — are all we got. Curiously absent, then, are references to their parents or other family members, and to their everyday working lives which we are left to fill in from imagination. We know what they do — one is a prominent journalist who's been on "Meet the Press" and who seems to remain a prominent journalist in spite of the fact she's always in the hometown while jumbo airliners are being shot down, etc.; another is a sometimes jaded sometimes self-deprecating rock star who always complains of the rigours of concert tours in spite of the fact he's always around to offer his glib come-backs and one-liners.

We never see these day-to-day aspects, these pressures of the so-called "real world" come forth in the characters. Instead, the show is nothing beyond an endless series of gettings-together for a lot of great food, great friendship and a whole bunch of inane soul-searching-cum-rationalizations. Thus, the feel to the program is alien, in spite of the fact the characters "appear" to be dealing with specific problems present in the yuppie morality.

Yet, like "The Big Chill," there are moments when one cannot help oneself, moments when the writing is not bad at all and one surrenders an embarrassed chuckle or feels a begrudging sympathy with the character(s). But these minor reprieves are all too rare and the show bogs down under the greater weight of formula television. There are too many obvious and extended cues, followed by pre-packaged insights, come-backs and moral rejoinders. The quality of acting is not bad — as far as television goes — but one gets the feeling that the actors and actresses themselves don't quite believe in what they're doing in this show. And al-



though it's not "Three's Company," it hasn't adequately dealt with the intelligent audience it is targeted at and purports to represent. It trivializes and, because it's television, normalizes this kind of behaviour. Of course, it is also on these grounds that the

show will fail miserably, for there's nothing worse than last year's fashion.

Beyond all this, "Hometown" is interesting because it is the first prime time program to deal specifically with the yuppie morality. But even when it does fail it will nevertheless

end up in television libraries and remain an icon of this generation, a thought which is particularly revolting given the not unfounded belief that, since reading will become obsolete in the not too distant future, television re-runs will be the media of history. (We've already seen a glimpse of this in "Back to the Future" where the 50's are depicted and/or represented by what people are watching on TV and what film is playing in the town square. Marty, played by Michael J. Fox, is naturally disoriented when he first arrives in the 50's, but is suddenly "at home," so to speak, when his grand-father-to-be switches on "The Honeymooners." Marty suddenly forgets he's back in the 50s and begins to announce the program's plot; which is unusual since it's the first time the program has been shown. It's as if, though, Marty has suddenly found something in this new time-frame that he understands. And that is a peculiar comment on our modes of history.

Of course, "Hometown" is not likely to become a classic and so we needn't worry about future generations holding us to that. But then the question arises: Why even attempt such a project? Surely the creators of this program realized the limited nature of their subject matter. And perhaps that is a peculiar comment on how we see ourselves, or at least what we will allow to stand as how we are seen. No doubt somebody has made money from it, and that of course, is the most peculiar irony of all: the self-sufficiency of the nouveau money culture.

One cannot feel somewhat helpless, though, as if our self-image as a generation is really that low, or the technological Oracle of Delphi is a compulsive liar, or both.

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