

Abseilers Do It On TV

If homosexuality can be promoted, reflects **Pratibha Parmar**, viewing figures for the Channel 4 series *Out On Tuesday* will surely grow larger by the week

Imagine turning on your television and finding a 30-second advert promoting homosexuality. This is exactly what many viewers saw when they tuned in to the first programme of the new Channel 4 series *Out On Tuesday*. Persuading Saatchi and Saatchi, the agency most famous for promoting Thatcherism, to devise an advert to promote homosexuality was something of a coup for the series. Watching the earnest, male copywriters fumbling to articulate the positive aspects of lesbian sexuality made for some interesting viewing.

Section 28 was an attempt to suppress the growing visibility of lesbian and gay culture and to stop the so-called promotion of homosexuality. But, ironically, one of its more permanent effects has been to increase the self-confidence of, and give a higher profile to, Britain's lesbian and gay community. This series was commissioned long before Section 28 appeared on the political agenda. Caroline Spry, the commissioning editor from Channel 4 explains: 'Since the days before Channel 4, there have been calls for a regular slot dealing with lesbian and gay concerns. Two or three years ago our department decided to take up the idea of a coherent and newly-commissioned series.' The production company, 'Abseil', has devised a magazine format combining current affairs and cultural features. The company name refers, of course, to the lesbians who abseiled into the House of Lords, in protest against Section 28.

Out On Tuesday distances itself from series such as *Gay Life*, which was made by London Weekend in the late-70s. That series has been described as an attempt to explain to, convince, or educate heterosexual audiences ab-

out lesbian and gay 'issues'. The programmes often tried explicitly to challenge anti-gay prejudice. This new series deliberately targets a lesbian and gay audience. Mandy Merck, the series editor, is quite clear about this: 'We have gone for a much more straightforward address to gay and lesbian people. Straight people are quite likely to tune in to the programme. Paradoxically, the more we address people like ourselves, the more they are likely to tune in. People are most curious about the things that they think are not addressed to them! That's fine by us but we never apologise and we never explain.'

Many of the programmes reflect this concern to capture the imagination of the lesbian and gay communities. 'Fag Hag And Drag: The Role of Women In The Gay Male Bar', for example, faces up to significant divisions among lesbians and gays. This and items such as 'The Dyke Detective' and 'Lesbian Sex' were selected after extensive interviews and research. Fears that the series might not cover more hard-edged political issues are allayed by items like *After Stonewall* which marks the 20th anniversary of the origin of the modern gay movement and examines how gays can best pursue their political interests today.

While the magazine format reflects a variety of lesbian and gay concerns, the marginalisation of the cultural and racial diversity within these communities remains. Unfortunately, an exploration of the divisions that exist within these communities, particularly around racism and the subjective experiences of black lesbians and gays, are absent from the series. The excitement and vitality around the growth of



Out On Tuesday: Targeting a lesbian and gay audience

the black lesbian and gay movement in the last decade is largely invisible. A notable exception is the film *Looking For Langston* by the black film-maker Isaac Julien.

Looking For Langston is a beautifully filmed, imaginative 'poetic meditation' on the poet Langston Hughes, which weaves erotic images with a haunting text. It is a milestone because it makes black gay men visible on their own terms as well as using historical memory to explore the absence of black, gay sexuality within the American artistic movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. *Looking For Langston* and Stuart Marshall's *Desire*, a moving and powerful history about gay concentration camp survivors, were originally commissioned by Channel 4's Caroline Spry and they are significant contributions to the series. Their inclusion confirms the Channel's commitment to small, independent film companies and individuals.

But what does the future hold after the deregulation of existing broadcasting organisations and the proliferation of satellite and cable tv?

Caroline Spry is cautious about the implications of these radical developments: 'It is difficult to see how small independent companies won't be affected by the changes.' Of companies working in controversial areas or catering for minority audiences, she says that 'their future is clearly uncertain in a broadcasting system that will probably have to take fewer risks'. This is borne out by signs that ITV is already gearing up to shed its statutory obligations to religious and minority programming in a bid for the highest advertising revenue.

And where, indeed, is the advertising revenue going to come from for future lesbian and gay programmes? Maybe Saatchi and Saatchi will have been so successful in their promotion of homosexuality that ever larger audiences will emerge. Optimistic maybe, but apparently not impossible as far as the supporters of Section 28 are concerned. Meanwhile, *Out On Tuesday* is coming out with a vibrancy and panache long overdue from the lesbian and gay communities. •