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No Offence, But...

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A whole lot of controversy has surrounded cult Australian comedy series *Summer Heights High* in its home country. From Tongan bully Jonah Takalua calling a schoolboy a "homo" and school kids adopting his catch phrase, "Puck you, miss", in classrooms all over Australia, to Mr. G's thoughts on "special kids" and plans to put on a musical extravaganza about "slut" Annabel Dickson's drug-related death, to rich bitch Ja'mie King's comments about "being povvo" (meaning poor) and starting her sentences with the opener, "No offence, but...", it's almost a wonder how it became such a mainstream success.

Here in the UK, *Summer Heights High* is also, of course, an acquired taste. Having been sent the DVDs over from Oz about six months ago and raving on to anyone who'll listen about how clever it is, sitting them down to watch certain scenes and waiting for their reaction - which I always expected to match my enthusiasm - the reactions I got were often met with a screwing up of the nose and a "this is a bit too much for me", or, "I can't believe they put this sort of thing on TV".

However, comedian Chris Lilley's "offensive" series in fact offers an insightful, albeit exaggerated, exploration of the human condition and life in the Australian government-school system, an environment in which people from varying social backgrounds are forced to interact with each other on a daily basis and, as such, is affected by very real issues including bullying, profanity, social cliques, racism and homophobia. Lilley is not afraid to point out that the issues of class, race and sexuality still very much matter today. The series also humanises, at the same time as it caricatures, those people who fall through the cracks of this environment - this is no mean feat, proving just how much of a genius Lilley is as both a character actor and a social commentator.

Lilley's response to the inevitable controversy surrounding the confronting satire reminded his audience and critics that his aim was to be as aesthetically, stylistically and thematically authentic as his mockumentary would allow: "I went to a lot of trouble to make sure the show was very real and we shot it in a real working school with real kids. So when you've got a big comedy character like Jonah swearing and being inappropriate in this real environment, that's what upset a lot of people." Lilley's collaborator and co-producer, Laura Waters attests to the authenticity of the program when she explains that the pair "do a massive amount of factual research at the same time as working out story lines and character thoughts, exactly as if we were, in fact, making a doco. We want to create as authentic a world as possible in which these characters exist alongside people from real life". In fact, many teachers comment on how true to life *Summer Heights High* actually is.

Overgrown, testosterone-fuelled Jonah - the "square peg in a round hole", as the school counsellor, Mr. Petersen, describes him - is introduced to us when he is pulled into Petersen's office and reprimanded for bullying a ginger-haired year eight boy and calling him a "ranga" (slang for "orang-utan"). Leon, Jonah's friend, seems familiar with the sort of language that's regularly used against minorities when he attempts to justify his group's bullying of the red-headed boy by arguing that "...there's heaps of 'em, they're everywhere". Indeed, Jonah complains about that the "teachers are so racist, blaming me for all the shit". So, while Jonah behaves extremely badly, Jonah's English teacher, Ms. Wheatley - who must deal with Jonah's disruptive antics - is not exactly above criticism herself, referring negatively to the racial identity of Jonah and his friends: "Oh look, it's the Islander boys, late again. Why's it always you lot?" Tellingly, Ms. Wheatley's class is studying *The Outsiders*.

Summer Heights High is, in turn, concerned with drawing comparisons between "outsider" groups that face persecution and discrimination due to their skin colour, hair colour, economic background, sexuality and a multitude of other differences. Senior drama teacher Mr. G, who has delusions of grandeur about his popularity and talent, is a thoroughly unlikeable character who nonetheless elicits sympathy late in the series due to his frustration at the lack of government funding for the arts and his reluctant solidarity with Toby, a young student with Down's Syndrome who happens to idolise Mr. G, for their similar outsider status at school. Mr. G admits that he faced bullying at school for being effeminate and now vehemently defends his passion for drama: "People say that drama is a bludge subject, that it's a poofo subject, that there's no jobs in it," he says. "They're wrong, drama changes lives."

Ja'mie, on the other hand, is a different kind of outsider. She is an outsider in the sense that she has come to Summer Heights High from an exclusive all-girls grammar school for one term as part of the "It's All About Education" campaign, a state-sponsored program to bridge the divide between government and private schools. She has been dropped into this cultural melting-pot with an attitude of self-importance and tactless prejudice. According to Lilley, "she doesn't go to a multicultural school, so it's a shock for her. She thinks she's hot, she's white, she's young and she's extremely attractive - and consequently doesn't think much of the Asian girls".

Her ignorance of a socially-integrated school environment extends to disabled children when she comments: "Aw, you've got disabled people! That's so cute! We have one burns victim at our school, but no mentally retarded people". She also blatantly sees her new classmates as disadvantaged and stupid: "Studies show that students from private schools are much more likely to get into uni and make a whole lot of money", she addresses the school at an assembly. "While wife-beaters and rapists are almost all public-school educated. No offence, but it's true".

Ja'mie immediately becomes the queen bee of the most popular all-girl clique at Summer Heights High, introducing a whole new kettle of fish to Lilley's exploration of social bullying, self-esteem, racism and discrimination, this time concerning girls. As the Jade Goody/Shilpa Shetty scandal on *Celebrity Big Brother* proved to the world, the problem of bullying between girls is all too real. Ja'mie tries to persuade her new



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friends to "run away" from Bec, an Asian girl who bears the brunt of Ja'mie's racism, talks behind the girls' backs and makes fun of their background. Ja'mie's eventual return to her exclusive private school and empty promises to call her "povvo skank" friends in turn makes clear the fact that the "It's All About Education" campaign has not worked.



However, Lilley offers no easy answers to the problems he exposes and keeps picking at like a scab that's had its plaster ripped right off. He implies that shelter from the social politics and problems he explores is not as easy as Ja'mie might make it seem. He contends that, out of all his characters, it is Ja'mie who will have the toughest time when she is forced to leave high-school behind and go into the "real world". And the reality, as Lilley shows us, is not all fun and games, even though we can have a damn good laugh at it.

Summer Heights High is shown on **BBC Three**, Tuesdays, at 10.30pm. Find out more at www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/summerheightshigh/.

Are you a fan of Australian comedy? Buy the *Kath and Kim Season One and Two Box Set* online now. You'll save money to put towards another cult comedy from Down Under, *Big Girls Blouse*.

Author: Bree Hoskin

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