

Words about House Gang

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In every sense of the word *House Gang* is a sitcom in the American tradition: melodrama and simple characterisation, but without the blow-wave hair. This is not a criticism, it could simply be no other way for 30 minutes of light, comedy television. The only difference being that in *House Gang*, three of the characters are played by people with intellectual disabilities: Trev is the struggling athlete; Belinda is self-obsessed, love-struck and out of love; and Robert is the soft, sensitive type.



House Gang cast with AAI board members and staff

Like most other situation comedies each episode is plot driven and the humour comes from the dilemma each character faces as events unfold. Limited character portrayal is essential for this. Like good soap-opera, it is what creates the drama and the comedy is the crisis as it is dealt with within these limitations.

The important question is, does *House Gang* work? And the answer is yes. We are dealing with positive characterisation; intellectual disability is not the issue, it is not the driving force behind each episode. It is evident but in a subtle way. Disability envelopes the daily struggles every person faces living in a shared house-hold – interaction, conflict, consideration.

Trev, Robert and Belinda live together in a house owned by the two other members of the house, Chloe and her father, Mike. Chloe is a young, immature snob and Mike's your typical Aussie knock-about slob.

The issues that arise are not overly serious but we watch as they ripple through each character and the consequences they cause – jealousy, misunderstanding, ignorance, selfishness. And so what first appears to be banal, develops into something more complex and involving; this is the irony of banality.

House Gang is being shown on, and made with the assistance of, SBS television and it has to be said

that no other broadcaster – least of the commercial networks – would have aired such a program. In that sense it is a brave step SBS has made. The issues of disability are still something society as a whole struggles with and unless it is dealt with in documentary style, or sensationalised by so-called 'current affairs' programs, with the disabled portrayed as victims, then these issues are generally deemed as unsuitable for television.

However we are talking about complex questions when it comes to the politics of disability and on that note the producers of *House Gang* deserve some credit for not being ideological or didactic in their approach to intellectual disability and integrating it instead within the wider context of situation comedy and all that involves.

If I have a criticism of *House Gang* it is that the creators have been a little too careful in normalising the characters of Trev, Belinda and Robert to the point of stereotype, rather than developing the uniqueness of intellectual disability.

Although this is a quibble and instead perhaps we should look upon *House Gang* as the first step in involving people with disabilities more fully within popular culture, and in dealing with disability in a more sophisticated way. We might at some point further down the road be able to drop categorisation altogether and say instead, the uniqueness of individuality.