

AMC Takes Leap with Transgender Storyline

Written by

Tuesday, 28 November 2006 07:59

From rock star hunk to a woman reborn, a transgender character takes on Pine Valley

{mosimage}Since the soap debuted in 1970, All My Children has broken a lot of ground with a number of controversial and issue-oriented storylines. In 1973, Erica Kane was married to young medical resident Jeff Martin. She feared that her pregnancy would bring an untimely end to her newly found modeling career. As the Roe v. Wade decision was handed down by the Supreme Court, Erica Kane underwent television's first legal abortion. When Jeff found out about Erica's duplicity, he filed for divorce. Fast forward to 2006. Erica and Jeff learned that the baby was not aborted after all. Instead, the evil doctor Greg Madden stole the fetus and implanted it in his own barren wife and Josh was born a Madden, but surprise, surprise -- his biological parents were really Erica and Jeff.

In 1974, the character of Margo Flax (played by Eileen Letchworth) underwent cosmetic surgery. As Letchworth's real-life face lift healed, the audience of AMC was right there with her, witnessing every stitch removal and swollen cheek.

No stranger to tackling topical and socially oriented issues, AMC has covered everything from teen prostitution, mental retardation, sudden infant death syndrome, domestic violence, workplace sexual harassment, and cocaine and prescription drug addiction to drunk driving, pregnancy over 40, freedom of the press, HIV and AIDS. In 1978, it was the first soap to leave U.S. soil, taping on location in the romantic island of St. Croix. 1980 brought medical awareness to sufferers of diabetic retinopathy as Nina Cortlandt traveled to the Wilmer Ophthalmologic Institute in Baltimore, Maryland for successful surgery to correct her condition. Thousands of Americans who likewise suffered from this affliction learned of the treatment thanks to AMC and themselves underwent successful surgeries.

AMC tackled love triangles (Tad Martin with mother Marian and daughter Liza Colby) and introduced the first admitted gay character, Dr. Lynn Carson back in 1983. They took a lesbian storyline several steps further in 2002 when Erica's daughter, Bianca, admitted to her mother that she was gay. In 2003, Bianca shared daytime's first same sex kiss with her girlfriend, Lena.

{mosimage}On Thursday, November 30, 2006, AMC will again make inroads when it introduces a transgender character in the form of rock star, Zarf (to be played by actor Jeffrey Carlson). Zarf, who we met several months ago when Babe and Josh cajoled him into being the spokesperson for a new Fusion product line, is about to undergo the transition from a man to a woman. On Thursday's episode, he first bonds with Bianca, then shares a kiss with her. She is naturally put off by this flamboyant British rocker's lip lock and declares her lesbian orientation. Her words kick start something in him about why it made such sense for him to kiss a lesbian.

AMC's EP, Julie Hanan Carruthers was quoted as saying that AMC is always looking for something new and that its audience is always interested in anything to do with sexuality. "After

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36 years, you start rehashing," she told the AP Wire. "It's inevitable. We didn't want to fall back on the baby-switch story again."

Soapdom says "Amen to that!" But a transgender story? Is that a tad too racy for daytime? Could AMC be taking too much of a leap this time? The show doesn't think so. They made sure to cover all the bases, calling in experts from GLAAD -- as well as several people who did in fact complete the transgender transformation -- as consultants. This team of experts guided the writers on all appropriateness, even when it's okay to call a transgender a "she." Interestingly, that happens before the actual surgery. The spokesperson for GLAAD said he felt the show was handling the story material responsibly, noting that it was his belief that the show's producers were going to tell the story with dignity. He feels it's groundbreaking for daytime to tackle such a story and place a spotlight on what transgenders feel and go through.

All My Children has been trying a number of things this year to capture new audiences and hold the interest of the current fans. From casting a new group of younger characters to a number of montage-under-hip-music sequences in recent weeks, and the controversial hand-held camera technique that debuted with the opening of Kendall's Club "ConFusion" several months ago, the show is definitely willing to take risks and shake up the make up of typical daytime tv. Not all have been met with a positive response from the fans, however. Will the transgender story also fall on deaf ears?

Not of actor Jeffrey Carlson can help it. For him, portraying Zarf, a character that will be, in essence, representing the entire transgender community, the task is a bit daunting. However, he wants to do justice to the character and to the story. "I worry about missing something, but I guess that would be the same with any character," Carlson told the AP. "I want the 'All My Children' audience to go along. It's not for shock value. It's just another person whose story is being told in Pine Valley." Although Zarf is a British rocker, Carlson is an American acting with a British accent.

What remains to be seen is if the audience will go along. We think that is going to depend on how the show handles the character, his/her relationships and the playing out of the storyline. As to whether AMC will actually stick with the character through Zarf's -- who will become known as Zora -- surgery is another question. Even Carruthers is not certain. "One suspects the reaction of the soap's audience to the story will have a lot to do with it," she said. Stay tuned.