

It all comes down to this: Jousting between education and drama in the production of a television series



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Tsha Tsha, Episode 14, Draft 3 for signoff:

Scene 25

Quietly, Nolonco's son opens the door to his father's hospital room - he looks in. From behind, he sees the silhouette of DJ leaning over his father's bed. He runs in and leaps on DJ from behind, pulls him down to the floor.

Two TAXI GOONS run in behind him, they lash out at DJ with their boots. DJ curls up in a small foetal ball, protecting his head with his hands, while the two Taxi Goons give him a kicking.

DJ (cont'd): No...wait. Ow! Shit! You don't understand.

Nolonco's Son reaches down, hauls the battered DJ to his feet. He throws him back into the arms of a Taxi Goon who pins him there fast in a necklock.



Tsha Tsha, Comments on Ep 14:

Scene 25. Please remove the word 'shit'....

... Please let us know your comments on this and the other suggested changes.



Tsha Tsha, Re: Episode 14

Notes following comments...

*Scene 25. We took out shit - but we think you are prissy little f ***s.*



It all comes down to this...

- What can we say about this discourse?
- Part tongue in cheek, part frustration, part robust discourse...
- Implies a moral position to do with the relation between authenticity and conservatism... But in its underpinnings, has to do with the complex relations at the interface of drama and education, theory and practice, research and reception
- One of many engagements in the process of making an educational drama series... a small moment in a sea of discussions, arguments, concessions
- What makes entertainment? What makes drama? What makes education?



Sex, violence, strong language

- Underlying debate had to do with the reception environment – sex, violence and strong language had been highlighted as impeding viewing in some viewing contexts - particularly when young children, parents and older people were watching
- What does authenticity add and subtract from an educational drama? What should be seen and what should be implied? What is our genre?
- Script development is a fraught process bracketed by tight deadlines and the need to make decisions quickly. Do we defer to strict rules and guidelines (eg. No strong language, no explicit sex, no violence) or do we allow for engagements?

What is Tsha Tsha?



- 24-minute, 52-part television drama series broadcast on SABC1
- Set in a small rural South African town, and focused on young people living in a world affected by the realities of HIV/AIDS and other challenges
- Explores the passage to adulthood, developing self-efficacy and humanity at individual and community level



Conceptualising engagement

- Entertainment education, when applied to a television drama series, is an open palette
- If we agree that we may argue and concede, what are the implications?
- Irritation, anger, hostility, mistrust, frustration, passion, raised voices, doggedness, strong language, tears, resignation... and whisky moments
- Engagements follow several stages:
 - initial script briefings, setting the scene for each series,
 - presentation of story beats and themes
 - integration of 'expert/team review', focus group responses
 - commentary on scripts, selected focus group review
 - final scripts



Context of engagement

- Engagements over strong language are relatively trivial, but other engagements have to do with more direct and complex aspects of the e-e interface...
- Where does the power lie?
- Tsha Tsha is a co-production which – over and above the overarching authority that lies ultimately with the broadcaster and funders – is a partnership where responsibility is shared equally between two entities, CADRE and Curious Pictures, where emphases are separated between drama and education.
- Tsha Tsha scripts are an amalgum of ideas filtered through engagements that often include compromises at the level of individual contributors. Such compromises do not necessarily suggest that there is a collective compromise at the level of the production – engagements are an accepted part of what it takes to ensure production quality.



Context of engagement

- Consensus or concession is time consuming
- Any form of engagement requires some framework, some rules, some guidelines
- At the broadest level – a commitment to making an engaging authentic e-e drama series
- Sex, violence or strong language are moderated by whether the representation is gratuitous... but what is gratuitous?
- Other concepts may be moderated by the notion of ‘added value’: What *value* does a theme, scene or dialogue add or subtract from the drama series?



Theoretical framework

- The theoretical framework and series brief determines what may or may not occur in the drama. Much of this engagement has to do with what themes are relevant to the project (eg. HIV/AIDS, alcoholism, parent-child relations), and which may be less relevant (eg. Violence)
- The theoretical framework informs how educational content is carried – for example the concept of lessons, not messages
- Other educational trajectories prescribed by the theoretical framework include validating small town life, validating complex paths to resolution and complexities of problem solving, ensuring resolution, and concepts of co-operation and collaboration.
- Similarly, activities such as dance need to be referenced.



Slippage

Slippage has to do with compromises that are the product of structural constraints and of physical/intellectual/emotional constraints



Structural constraints

- Scriptwriters are retained at the beginning of each series, and briefing is complex
- Scriptwriters sometimes do not follow briefs, and in many instances struggle to understand early on the principles and context of the series
- Intended lessons are often not explicitly enough written into and/or understood within episode and series briefs, with the consequence that scripts are written around dramatic rather than educational criteria
- Deadlines limit the opportunity for supplementary research in support of informing 'sticking points'
- Some points of consensus are painfully fought but may 'slip off the page' in being translated into final scripts
- Intentions at the level of script are still subject to open interpretation by directors, actors and production constraints (dropping scenes)



Physical/emotional/intellectual constraints

- Deadline pressures force review processes and decision-making into spaces compromised by long working hours and consequent exhaustion
- Engagements require a 'drop everything else' approach
- Producers, researchers, reviewers and scriptwriters are all deeply invested in the parts they create and the investments they have made
- Allowing decision-making to defer to engagement requires creative and energetic argument. This often requires time for reflection...
- Argumentative discourse around script development is often aggressive and robust, and requires the capacity to contain emotions
- Sticking points require drastic action... including being locked in a room with a minibar until resolution is reached
- Compromise includes conceding and horse-trading
- Engagements impact on personal relationships



Lessons learned

- The interface between education and entertainment is impossible to define because it is as varied as the creative processes and contexts within which it is inserted
- There are no textbooks or guidelines on methodology that adequately address the notion of an equal power relation between scriptwriters and producers of entertainment education products
- Allowing for argumentative discourses within the production process contribute to rigour in development, but at a price that requires it's boundaries carefully considered and established beforehand
- At some point there is a need to defer to theory, to foundational principles and rules that are functional to ensuring that not every bone of contention requires debate
- There is a need to review and address practices – for example, ensuring that episodes are written to foregrounded educational concepts
- There is a need to review modus operandi, to reflect on the complexity of production, and to re-energise interpersonal relationships