



'Red Hook High': The Anti-'Gossip Girl'

New Drama Showcases Experience of Real Teens With Real Problems

By **SHEILA MARIKAR**

Sept. 19, 2008 —

Watch a few episodes of "Gossip Girl" or "Laguna Beach: The Real OC," and you'd think high school was all about sex at your parents' summer home, going to galas and getting wasted while looking like an Abercrombie and Fitch model, not the "Before" kid in a Clearasil ad.

"Red Hook High" may be the antidote to all that. Instead of stick-thin blondes toting \$3,500 Hermes bags, there are black boys toting bags of drugs. Instead of postcard-perfect mansions and cityscapes, there are cramped apartments and construction zones.

Part drama, part documentary, "Red Hook High," a new pilot that premiered at the New York Television Festival (NYTVF) this week, shows a high school experience few network and cable series touch on, one that unfolds in a gritty Brooklyn community among teens with the odds stacked against them. Forget prom queens and valedictorians. "Red Hook High's" stars include a budding drug dealer, an emerging gay crusader and a possibly pregnant teen.

"It's the opposite of 'Gossip Girl,'" said director Trac Minh Vu. "It's not a glossy Hollywood fashion show. There are probably people who actually live lives like what is portrayed on 'Gossip Girl' and 'The OC.' But they're fantasy shows. They're about showcasing high fashion and the small population of people who can live like that."

"But my own high school experience is not at all reflected in the current crop of teen dramas," he continued. "Part of this is trying to show that the teen experience is far wider than what's portrayed on TV, especially for kids of color."



In Red Hook High, "Lenae (played by Tabitha Cadet) and Star (played by Tiffany Innocent) attempt to decipher the directions on pregnancy tests and giggle, 'Is it like a thermometer?'"

Vu came to the United State from Vietnam at age 2. By day, he's a video producer for an investment bank. Nights and weekends, he works on independent projects: Last year, his teen drama about the Upper East Side's wannabe Ivy Leaguers, "Dear Harvard," picked up three major awards from the NYTVF, which showcases independent pilots (those not backed by an established studio).

This year, Vu channeled his experience as a nonwhite student in an Oregon Catholic school, his time working as a teaching artist at South Brooklyn Community High School and his affinity for classic coming-of-age dramas like "My So Called Life," "Dawson's Creek" and "Felicity," into a pilot portraying teen life on the other side of the East River.

Beyond a basic story outline, Vu left the dialogue and development of "Red Hook High" up to his actors, students from Brooklyn high schools with an interest in performing arts. They rehearsed over the course of seven weeks and shot the pilot in four days, on a sub-\$20,000 budget financed out of Vu's pocket, pennies compared to the average \$3 million budget networks allot for pilot production. For many of the stars, their story lines mirrored their real-life drama.

"They told us to write down what kind of characters we wanted to be. I said, I just want to be gay because it's just going to be like, stupid if I'm trying to be straight," said Michael Maldonado, who's openly gay and plays a teen coming to terms with his homosexuality.



Michael Maldonado, left, plays Justin, a teen coming to terms with his homosexuality.

And while the stars of "Red Hook High" consider themselves fans of shows like "Gossip Girl" ("It's really eye-catching," said David Etienne, who plays a Haitian immigrant and burgeoning drug pusher), they say it doesn't compute with their own adolescent experience.

"But this has so many real things in it," Maldonado said. "Teenage pregnancy, gay life -- you don't see that on TV all the time."

"Red Hook High" screened to two packed audiences at the New York Television Festival, both of which responded with all but a riot. Vu hopes that translates to the pilot getting picked up by a network, broadcast or cable, for further development, and said if "Red Hook High" turns into a series, he'll do everything in his power to retain the original, raw cast. There'll be no hair and makeup, no Gucci and Prada, no million-dollar sets and swanky on-location shoots. Red Hook's not going Hollywood.

"I don't see my high school experience in 'Gossip Girl' or '90210' or anything out there right now," he said. "I think there's a huge opportunity for the direction I'm going in. These are untold stories that I've lived through that I'd like to bring to life."

Copyright © 2008 ABC News Internet Ventures