

TELEVISION EUNY HONG KORAL

Skilful ode to youthful excess

Hold your nose through the gimmicks, and 'The '70s' is a redolent coming-of-age story

The '70s, the much-anticipated miniseries, could easily have been a disaster. The story is not framed by any single historical event or personage, instead anthropomorphising the decade itself into the main character, replete with its own objectives and "transformational character arc", to use the industry lingo. (NBC. Shown in two parts, on Sunday, April 30 at 9pm ET, and Monday, May 1 at 9pm ET.)

The programme is so shamelessly concept-driven that one cannot help suspecting that the rollicking soundtrack, which includes songs by Jefferson Starship and Cat Stevens, was assembled before the story was written.

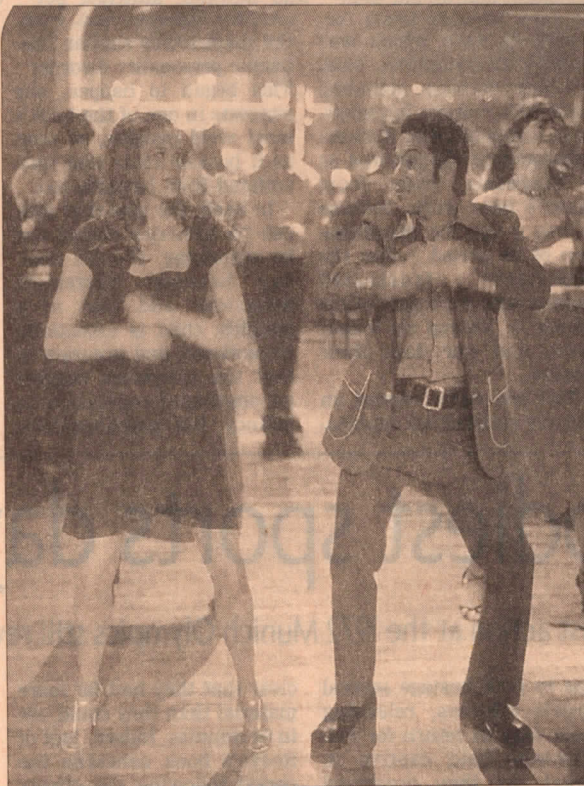
Nonetheless, the project is a skilfully executed ode to youthful excess, along the lines of Herrick's *To Virgins: To Make Much of Time*.

As with its predecessor, last year's highly rated *The '60s*, the script for *The '70s* shows heavy influences from textbook screenwriting formulae.

In the words of *Screenwriting 101*, an online manual on the About.com web site: "[A character should possess traits that] will create the maximum amount of conflict given the circumstances. Conflict should be as near to life-threatening as possible."

True to form, *The '70s* begins with the four principal characters as students at Kent State University, where they witness the 1970 shooting of student protesters by the US National Guard.

At every turn the story comes dangerously close to the *Forrest Gump* trap, in which the characters happen upon every socially significant event of the day. But if you can hold your nose through the gimmicky hoopla, *The '70s* is a redolent coming-of-age story that avoids the clichéd Vietnam debates that weigh down other period pieces of this era. The spirit of this programme runs counter to the much-touted belief that



Vinessa Shaw and Timothy Di Pri in a scene from 'The '70s' Chris Haston

only war can make men of boys.

Byron, an arrogant and effete law student, joins the Nixon Administration's Dirty Tricks Squadron. Byron's friend Dexter, meanwhile, attempts to dabble with the Black Panthers, the NAACP, and the Black Muslims, which proves a dangerous cocktail.

The audience already knows the outcome of these events; if not for the compellingly drawn characters and soulful atmosphere, this would have been no more than a limp history review.

In *The '70s*, the eclectic presentation of events is strangely stirring, partly because many of the issues raised in this film remain unresolved today. One does not have the satisfaction of dismissing that epoch's backward ways.

One spirited scene depicts a National Organisation for Women rally led by the formerly energetic Gloria Steinem (played by Peggy Lipton). The scene is interspersed with real news footage about the Equal Rights Amendment.

is often far more onerous than the glass ceiling.

The miniseries boldly touches on the failure of the various Black Empowerment movements to sustain a strong central leadership. Though fingers were pointed in all directions, the reasons for this dissolution remain a mystery, and this production wisely steers clear of pandering to conspiracy theories.

I tend to be sceptical about this memory-lane genre. Owing to the regrettable legacy of *Back to the Future*, such films often yield un-funny attempts at ironic hindsight.

I kept expecting some character to say: "Studio 54 will live forever," or, "A wonderful man named Jim Jones wants to take me to Guyana." But the script avoids such pitfalls deftly by placing its characters on the margins, rather than in the centre, of the maelstrom.

The characters have full agency over their destinies, rather than being hapless victims of headline news. The audience knows which paths will yield certain tragedy, but the characters don't. The strange result is that the viewer feels smugness and pathos at the same time.

"Screenwriting 101" notwithstanding, sometimes it is satisfying for the audience to be one step ahead of the story, rather than the other way around.

A Thought for Easter

"For all the happiness mankind can gain is not in pleasure but rest from pain"
John Dryden (1631-1700)

Day after day, night after night you have helped us to provide rest from pain.

May the happiness gained be yours as well this Easter and always.

Sister Superior

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