In a word . . . ; High school drama 'Boston Public' addresses a black and white-hot topic:[North Sports Final , C Edition]


Abstract (Article Summary)
[Kerry Lenhart] and [John J. Sakmar] say the episode, for which [David E. Kelley] consulted Harvard's [Randall Kennedy], isn't out to solve the problem. It's designed to foster "healthy, positive discussion," Sakmar says.

Full Text (777 words)
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A "love-hate" relationship exists between African-American actor Chi McBride and the "N-word," the vilest epithet for his race.

"I go through periods in my life where I use the word, and I go through periods in life where I swear the word off completely," says McBride, 40, who grew up on Chicago's West Side.

"But I always feel the exact same way about white people using the word. And that is that word has too much power." Now "that word" will be a major story line on McBride's sometimes-controversial Fox high school drama "Boston Public," created by David E. Kelley.

Scheduled for 7 p.m. next Monday on WFLD-Ch. 32, the episode looks at how some black youths freely use the word not only among themselves as a term of endearment, but also with some of their white friends -- and vice versa.

In Monday's episode, a black student and a white student at Winslow High School toss the word back and forth, which starts a fight with another, offended, black kid.

Addressing issue in class

Wanting to diffuse the situation, the teens' white teacher, Danny Hanson (Michael Rapaport), leads his class in a discussion of the word, including its use by rap artists and comics, and as the subject of a book by Harvard Law School professor Randall Kennedy.

Its very utterance, especially by whites, causes black teacher Marla Hendricks (Loretta Devine) to lobby principal Steven Harper (McBride) for Hanson's removal.

"That word has always stood for hatred coming out of a white mouth," she says in the episode. "No teacher in any school is good enough to erase that in a sensitivity class."

The epithet's potency caused "Boston Public's" writers, including Kelley, to want to write about it. "It's a sensitive topic, that goes without saying," says co-executive producer John J. Sakmar, who wrote the episode with Kelley, Kerry Lenhart and Sean Whitesell.

Says Lenhart: "That's something that needs to be addressed in the episode, that the word hasn't lost its power just because so many people have gotten used to hearing it very casually." (This isn't the first time the word has been examined by series television. Both Lifetime's "Any Day Now" and UPN's "Girlfriends" have dealt recently with the consequences of its use.)

Fostering discussion

Lenhart and Sakmar say the episode, for which Kelley consulted Harvard's Kennedy, isn't out to solve the problem. It's designed to foster "healthy, positive discussion," Sakmar says.

"I think that television and movies, at best, will strike people to have conversations, but I don't think television and movies are going to change things that much," says Rapaport, who has appeared in such racially charged movies as "Higher Learning," "Zebrahead" and "Bamboozled." Spike Lee, who directed "Bamboozled," has voiced his displeasure over fellow director Quentin Tarantino's constant use of the word in some of his films.
Mitsy Wilson, senior vice president-diversity development for the Fox Entertainment Group, says she "let out a major sigh" when she heard about the episode. As an African-American, she "was a little puzzled and concerned" at this topic coming up during Black History Month.

However, "given the opportunity to read the script and have some input with broadcast standards, and then to actually look at the entire episode in terms of what we were trying to do, I think it's a responsible piece of television," Wilson says.

Naturally, there are those who disagree. That isn't much of a surprise for "Boston Public," the target of a coalition of 15 family and child advocacy groups who have complained to the Federal Communications Commission that the series is too incendiary for the "family hour."

Cultural critic Darrell Mottley Newton of the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater cites a concept in cultural studies called "packing," where "certain notions are 'packed' within the use of a word. If one were to say 'sex,' certain images and notions are inescapable."

A blight on imagery

But "despite the reclassification and countercultural usage" of the word, Newton says, "its horror and blight upon our imagery, and more important, self-image as black folk, is still there."

Psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint of Harvard Medical School, a onetime consultant for NBC's "The Cosby Show," sees an even deeper meaning.

"How does that affect a black kid age 10 watching 'Boston Public' and listening to that discussion?" he asks. "The context of the word is so demeaning and has all of the connotations of a lowlife, inferior being."

The episode doesn't suggest solutions, but McBride has one:

"The only thing that's going to make some people happy is everybody stop using the word right now. OK, that lasted a couple of seconds. What next?"

[ILLUSTRATION]
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