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As the Campus Turns

By PAULA WASLEY

Can Brad, Alexis, Valerie, and Chad — college students with little acting experience and a meager production budget — concoct a convincing daytime drama? (Cue organ music. Long, tortured reaction shot.)

Dorm-room drama and sorority scandal are such natural soap-opera fodder that it's not surprising that student-produced versions of the sudsy genre have been popping up at colleges and universities for more than 20 years. Shows are generally produced on a shoestring and are broadcast sporadically on closed-circuit campus networks, local cable-access channels, or via the Internet.

A spoof of the Fox drama *The O.C.*, **Boston College's** *The B.C.* follows Woody Atryan, a Boston University transplant who, thanks to the interventions of a kindly Jesuit priest, gets a second chance at BC after being expelled from BU for stealing a car. But can the street-tough Woody hack it in his new Abercrombie & Fitch-ified environs?

It took the show's creators, Joseph Sabia and Sherwood Tondorf, eight months to put together the second episode (now online at <http://www.the-bc.com>), but they hope to produce three more before they graduate in June. Rife with terrible puns and pop-culture gags (priests groove to the hip-hop artist Usher and debate the virtues of the video game Halo versus Super Mario Brothers 2), the soap has gotten some in a lather for its jabs at the larger, more urban BU.

At **Boston University**, Matthew Cohen, a senior in the film department, is unimpressed. After all, he says, BU has been producing eight episodes a year of its own soap, *Bay State*, for nearly 15 years without resorting to rival-bashing. But in the quest for a novel story line, the writers have resorted to most everything else, including a cocaine-peddling hit man, a pregnant extortionist, and numerous permutations of the ever-popular love triangle — "all the things you'd expect from a soap," says Mr. Cohen. This year's plot hinges on a student-run cult at the fictitious Beacon Hill College. The show, which is screened twice a year in campus auditoriums, is approaching its 100th episode.

Harvard University lays claim to the oldest college soap. Like some of its characters, *Ivory Tower* has experienced several reincarnations since first appearing on campus television in 1984.

Bearing the tagline "Sex, Lies and Privilege," the current version is an online affair. Fans can download episodes and read cast bios online (<http://www.ivorytowersoap.com>).

The Web site even suggests a drinking game to accompany viewing — two shots for every time a character is revealed as someone's long-lost sibling, and three for sightings of Larry Summers and other Harvard celebrities. According to *Ivory Tower's* executive director, Isaac Ravishankara, the site received 100,000 hits last year, and has unexpectedly large followings in Texas, Colorado, and South Korea.

Characters on the **University of North Carolina** at Chapel Hill's *General College* have been lying, cheating, and mysteriously disappearing since 1986, when then-sophomore Adam Reist created his own show on local cable television after being turned down for college radio. Mr. Reist, who is now a stage manager and director on the CBS daytime drama *Guiding Light*, says, "I owe my career to student TV." As, perhaps, do some other UNC graduates. For the role of the two-timing campus heartthrob, Mr. Reist cast Billy Crudup, who went on to appear in such films as *Almost Famous* and *Big Fish*. Dan Cortese, a host of *MTV Sports*, also got his start on *General College*.

Unpredictable student schedules, exams, extracurricular activities, semesters abroad, and even worse, graduation, are the constant bane of the soap's producers. And the characters don't fare so well, either. "Very few people on the show graduate," says Jacqueline Elliott, a former producer and *General College* actress. "For the most part they end up dying. One guy went to the Peace Corps," says Ms. Elliott, who made her own dramatic exit when she was strangled by a romantic rival.

Scheduling conflicts are not an issue at **Texas Christian University**, where radio, TV, and film majors put together a soap opera as part of the curriculum. Led by Richard J. Allen, an Emmy-winning writer who has worked for *As the World Turns*, *Days of Our Lives*, and *General Hospital*, 100 students collaborate to produce a new drama each year. In the fall, students write scripts and prepare storyboards — Mr. Allen describes this year's show as "a cross between *Felicity* and *The Sopranos*" — to be executed by the spring semester's directing, producing, and acting classes. Audience-research classes run focus-group viewings, while a media-law class draws up contracts for everyone involved. Creative vision for the program comes from the students, but faculty members, as the show's producers, make the executive decisions.

A good thing too. One year students took the initiative in hiring strippers as extras for a nightclub scene. "We had to pull the reins on that one," says Mr. Allen.

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