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Censors leave `3R' producers in a bind

Sofianni Subki

AWARD-winning television show 3R (Respect, Relax and Respond) is having problems with the Censorship Board. But then again, who hasn't? Even Senario, the hugely successful comedy stage show, had many of its episodes banned because it featured male actors impersonating women.

But unlike Senario, 3R isn't just a show you tune into for the laughs. It's a show for women, especially young women, that deals with a wide range of issues that affect them.

From issues on dating to fashion, parents to college, career to pregnancy, 3R serves as a platform where information crucial to a young woman is disseminated in an entertaining, easy-to-understand way.

Once equipped with the knowledge, she will be able to make important informed decisions. This is what 3R is all about - helping young women make the right choices based on the correct information.

Recently, one of its episodes on women and drugs was heavily censored, much to the dismay of co-producers Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir and Lina Tan.

They were especially upset that a segment which featured interviews with three recovering women addicts from Indonesia was chopped. The Censorship Board felt that it promoted drugs and would be a bad influence on young women.

"Clearly, it would have the opposite effect since it's blatantly anti-drugs," says Marina. "We felt that the interviews conveyed a powerful message, that even Ecstasy, which is generally not viewed as a hard drug, has dangerous side effects like paranoia.

"This wasn't a bunch of academics talking; they were real people whose lives were destroyed by drugs. Had it been aired, it would have made a positive impact on young people; it would have deterred them from experimenting with drugs, not vice-versa."

It wasn't the only episode to be touched by the Censorship Board. In the past, 3R producers ran into problems with an anti-smoking episode. Scenes that showed an earring-donning male actor and a Malay actress with a bindhi (a mark on the forehead of cultural significance) were also blurred for religious reasons.

An episode dealing with lesbianism was completely banned. Script-wise, too, 3R has been found guilty of misconduct on several occasions. Many of the lines in the episodes of Understanding Men, Sexual Harassment, Interracial Friendships and The Making of 3R were butchered.

The issues chosen for the shows are based on viewers' requests (the show gets loads of e-mails every day). It's not something the producers choose on a whim as they take into account what young people want.

In addition, great care is taken so that the show does not come across as being preachy. The show does not lecture but instead communicates with young people in their language.

This is why 3R's revised format has mass appeal; it starts with a short drama to illustrate the issue being discussed. The role-playing is done by the hosts - Kartini Kamalul Arifin, Low Ngai Yuen and Azah Yazmin Yusof. After the drama, the issue is further explored via interviews with experts, opinions from the public and information on where to get help.

"The show provides a space for controversial issues relevant to young women," says Marina. "There is a generation of young people who are hard to reach out to and here we are, responsible producers, trying to do

something positive. But with the way the Censorship Board operates, this space closes rather than widens."

In Indonesia, producers whose shows are in danger of being censored are called in to defend their work. In Singapore, regulations are reviewed every few years.

But in Malaysia, there is no dialogue at all. The Censorship Board is an independent body run by a group of people aged above 55. The average age of the 3R viewer is 25.

"As a result of the board's restrictions, we've become paranoid about what we want to portray," says Tan. "It's come to a point where we do a lot self-censorship and avoid doing anything that the board may find offensive but this is highly subjective. It's hard to guess religious interpretation and there's no way of pleasing anybody.

"Our country is working towards a knowledge-based economy and here we are trying to provide knowledge to our target audience. There's no way of pleasing everybody as in life, one must take a stand. That's why 3R is successful, we take a stand."