

## O Brother, O Sister

Jeffrey Sconce

In my opinion, with so many problems facing the world today, having an interest in comedy is politically irresponsible, perhaps even a bit morally reprehensible. As Graydon Carter famously proclaimed in the wake of 9/11, there is no place for irony in the new century. Everyone enjoys a good laugh, certainly, but with a nation at war, the economy in shambles, and the polar bear recently added to the list of endangered species, we have entered an age when only television drama—serious, important, and earnest television drama—can adequately address the complexities of life in America today.

That's why I'm so appreciative of *Brothers and Sisters*, ABC's recent hit series about the Walker clan—a proud family of vintners headed by matriarch Sally Field. After the tragic cancellation of *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, the nation worried if there would ever be another series up to the challenge of giving voice to the rich, white, highly educated, and extremely loquacious of Southern California. Thankfully, a plucky band of writers and producers has looked deep in the well of universal American experience to give us *Brothers and Sisters*, which as you can tell from the title, is a family melodrama. But it dares to be so much more. Like so much great popular art, *Brothers and Sisters* is very clever at adapting the lowly conventions of melodrama—“soap opera”—to create an extremely subtle vehicle for uplifting the masses through political drama. You see, though based on a family vineyard, this show is no *Falcon Crest*. Here the writers have taken the innovative step of using the show's L.A. location to intertwine the lives of their ordinary characters with the exciting world of media production itself. Comedy writers just go for cheap laughs, what with all the farting and foul language and such, but the writers of *Brothers and Sisters* have been generous enough to share their insights gleaned from months—even a year or two—of living in Hollywood to reveal how life, media, and politics *really* work. For those who don't live near the media centers of L.A. and New York, this presents a tremendous opportunity, not only to learn, but to be a better, more progressive citizen.

One of the things that makes the show so daring is that each character has an “issue” of some kind that the writers can use to craft hard-hitting political commentary. For example, the youngest of the brothers is a veteran of the Iraq war. Not only that, but he sustained an injury that got him addicted to painkillers (so he has two “issues,” really). Watching the entire family struggle with his experiences really makes you understand how soldiers can remain victims even after they leave the battlefield. The show's commitment to realism is amazing in this regard. When Iraq/addict-brother finally went into rehab, the producers photographed him in the same facility *Extra* uses to showcase Britney Spears and Lindsay Lohan whenever they're having their troubles. Watching the Walkers sitting on the facility's beachfront patio, “rapping” about their problems as the Pacific breezes blow into Malibu, it really made you think about the tremendous sacrifices upper-middle class white families living near the entertainment industry have made for this war. The depth of the sacrifice made here in casting one of the brothers as a vet is even more striking when you consider that most people in Hollywood apparently

do not even support this war. As Sally Fields said when she won an Emmy for her portrayal of Mrs. Walker, “Let’s face it, if the mothers ruled the world, there would be no goddamn wars in the first place.” If only that were true—perhaps if more television mothers like Mrs. Walker ruled the world, maybe then world peace would finally be possible.

**[insert image of Sally Field]**

*Brothers and Sisters* also features a steamy romance between Rob Lowe and Ally McBeal. As is generally well known, Lowe and McBeal are both famous in real life for being so extremely liberal. McBeal has been instrumental in advancing the postfeminist right of women to be as skinny as they want to be, while Lowe is so politically engaged that he even once made an appearance in a video for the Democratic National Convention. But in *Brothers and Sisters*, the producers thought way outside the box and cast the two as Republicans! She’s a conservative talk show host turned media consultant and he’s a Republican senator who, until recently, was running for President. Their politics sometimes cause friction with the rest of the family (especially Sally Fields!), but in the end the Walkers and Rob Lowe most often find they all share more in common—like a love of bottled water and a commitment to fair gender-reproductive politics. And with McBeal working in the media and Lowe running for President, the show provided fascinating insight as to how politicians sometimes use the media to “spin” reality, and make us believe things that are not necessarily true. When you think about it, this is an incredibly generous gesture on the part of the writers, who could have simply enjoyed the benefits of knowing how to manipulate the masses through the razzle and dazzle of show business. But instead, they did the right thing and allowed us all to benefit from their wisdom and experience. I know I now certainly take everything a politician says with “a grain of salt,” and do my best to let others know that politics is really no different than advertising—both have a “product” to sell.

Finally, one of the brothers is gay, and America—if it pays attention—certainly has a lot it can learn from him. As it turns out, gay people are just like you and me (if you’re straight, that is). Rather than do the things you might think gay people do, this brother is an accomplished lawyer who just wants to find the “right person” and settle down. In fact, in the season finale this year, gay-brother had a commitment ceremony with his partner Scotty. The only problem was that Scotty’s parents lived in Arizona, so they were homophobes who wouldn’t come to the ceremony. But the brothers of *Brothers and Sisters* would not let that stand without a fight. So they went on a road trip—the gay brother, the vet brother, and a third brother who has a lot of problems in his marriage—to show Scotty’s parents that being gay is no big deal and to convince them to come back to L.A. for the ceremony. Sadly, though, Scotty’s parents couldn’t be convinced (although Scotty’s father did send along his cufflinks for Scotty to wear, so maybe there’s hope for Arizona yet). Even though that didn’t turn out so well, I think it provided a great emblem for the show as a whole—the three brothers crackin’ wise and taking their family’s message of progressive tolerance and universal humanism from Hollywood, across the barren Mojave, and into the Red States that are in such desperate need of enlightenment. Who knows, after *Brothers and Sisters* has been on the air a few more years, maybe

people like Scotty's parents will have a change of heart. Here's hoping they make it to gay-brother and Scotty's fifth anniversary.

**[insert gay-brother/Scotty image]**

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For more profound insights into this series, ABC has been kind enough to let us go "behind the scenes" with the writers themselves. It is yet another great example of the new convergence possibilities when television meets the Internet. Now we all get to be "insiders," as if we were part of the Walker family ourselves, or even more special, the WGA. <http://abc.go.com/primetime/brothersandsisters/index?pn=writersroom>

Bio: Jeffrey Sconce is an Associate Professor in the Department of Radio/Television/Film at Northwestern University and is a member of *Mediascape's* Editorial Board. His work focuses on media history and cultural theory. His upcoming book project looks at the history of psychosis and electronic media in the 19th and 20th centuries.