

Excellent Pacific soap has a worthy message



Jane Clifton
TELEVIEW

AS A proposition, sitting down to watch a soap opera called *Love Patrol* is instantly self-dismissing. It sounds like the naifest kind of dating game-show, or worse – except that this weekly serial on Maori TV, Tuesday, is an extraordinary piece of work.

It's a Vanuatuan soap opera, in English, which is generally spoken in those islands, made with the help of overseas aid, to promote awareness of the dangers of HIV and Aids in the Melanesian republic.

And it's not half bad. Considering this is Vanuatu's first television production, it's outstanding, and it's such a different experience to be watching something that you know is aimed squarely at social engineering, as well as ratings, that it's worth putting all prejudice aside and watching at least one episode.

It follows the trials and tribulations of a range of characters, from the appealing to the appalling, whose lives are affected one way or another by Aids, crime, child abuse and poverty, but with a light touch.

This description makes it sound like a Ken Loach/brute social realism sort of chore to watch, but it's anything but.

The notional centre of action is the police station, where a

romance is budding between a trainee officer and her rather hapless but admirable supervisor. She does have a boyfriend, but he's a handsome rogue.

"I'm just going out for some kava," he beams wolfishly. "I'll be back by the time dinner's ready."

Then there is Elizabeth, who contracted HIV after her husband, a police detective, had an affair with a bar-room singer. She then gave birth to an infected son, and left her husband. He is in denial about the probability of his also having the terrible virus, but the couple are trying to reconcile – a bumpy road, because the sultry singer is still on the scene.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth is working as an Aids counsellor, and has secured the support of a church elder, who is married to one of those domineering matriarchs, who is terrorising her stropky daughter-in-law, who is married to her hapless, unemployed son, who is just bound to get up to his neck in trouble, including an ambient drug-running ring, apparently run by a shady European character, who has got a young woman to work as a mule by threatening the welfare of her baby, all of which is being investigated by Elizabeth's husband, and so on and so on.

The plotting, acting and dialogue compare favourably to early *Shortland Street*, and that's not a patronising comparison.

We lapped up the doings of Dr Ropata et al – many of us furtively, or while pretending to disdain it.

However unpolished, if a TV soap has a real heart and authenticity, it will be devoured. That's reportedly the case for *Love Patrol* around the Pacific.



Real heart: Lucy Seresere plays Elizabeth, an Aids counsellor.

Its genesis is a non-governmental aid organisation called Wan Smolbag Theatre, based in Vanuatu, which works around the Pacific fostering drama and storytelling, and has focused heavily on Aids education.

That it has achieved such amazing results from a country of fewer than 250,000 people, with no indigenous television heritage, is absolutely remarkable.

Alas, the economics of the Pacific do not, at least not foreseeably, permit this to be an ongoing production without foreign aid, but a third season is in production.

Officialdom has judged it a success, in having been watched by about 90 per cent of the population of Port Vila (even the re-runs), and in getting Aids information into common parlance.

The genius of using a serial rather than one-off programme is that viewers get engrossed in the characters, and see them almost as real and real-time figures, so the social messages wound into the



Social message: Actors in *Love Patrol* are, from left, Rashid Totau, Gordy Woke, Moshe Aaron and Steve Williams.

stories are easily assimilated. This must go triple for a country not accustomed to seeing itself portrayed in television drama.

Cunning – and very worthy. Even if we have a level of discomfort about entertainment being used as social engineering,

ONE TO WATCH

Warrie, 9.30pm, Prime. Possibly a dangerous experiment, or maybe you have to be Australian, but cricket bogan Shane Warne has been given his own Parkinson-esque talk show (he even interviews Michael Parkinson) to coincide with the Ashes. He does have a certain charm, and isn't too bad an interviewer, although with the calibre of the other guests on this show, it's not too high-risk: Russell Crowe, Sting, Chris Martin, Richie Benaud and Danii Minogue, for instance.

it's worth considering that *Shortland Street* has been doing this all its life. With its huge catchment of school-age viewers, it makes sure the irresponsible, judgmental and dishonest always get their come-uppance.

Given *Love Patrol's* success, we're lucky the Government hasn't hijacked the show to subliminally reprogramme us to support KiwiSaver, cut up our credit cards, refrain from the speculating in the housing market, support the cycleway, eat five-plus a day and adopt other good behaviours we resist.

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