

Soap opera portrayal of gay people can lead to homophobic attacks

Ntombi Mbadlanyana

IT IS estimated that around 4.9 million South Africans watch the soapie *Generations* every day.

This is a huge number; more than the populations of Botswana and Namibia combined.

So what responsibility, if any, comes with attracting an audience of this size and should soap opera producers be obliged to present a responsible, fair, non-discriminatory version of society?

I think they should, which is why I recently complained to the Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa (BCCSA) after I was offended at the portrayal of a gay character on *Generations*.

All soap operas have similar

themes, characters and story lines: there is always a villain, a town gossip, a rich family, a poor family, never-ending love triangles, murder, sex and scandal. But what has also always been familiar about soap operas is their perpetuation of negative stereotypes in a very unrealistic television world.

Yet in recent years soaps have begun to incorporate marginalised groups and more realistic storylines, possibly in an effort to boost decreasing ratings.

When *Generations* first introduced a gay character viewers made their opinions known and a controversial kiss between two gay male characters caused an outcry among traditionalists and community leaders. Admirably, at that time the show

did not back down. Gays and lesbians are a part of the wonderful diversity of South African society and they are also viewers of shows like *Generations*.

However, soap operas also reinforce stereotypes of gay people just as they reinforce negative gender stereotypes about heterosexual women and men. Homosexual men are too often portrayed as effeminate, soft, gentle, and not masculine; subservient in relation to other men.

I was recently outraged watching *Generations* when one of the lead characters referred to a gay male character as "my girl". At first I thought I had heard incorrectly.

Initially I laughed because I was processing what I had heard, but the laughter soon turned to anger. This

was reinforcing a very negative stereotype about gay men – it was far from a progressive soapie's attempt to raise awareness.

Soap operas are powerful and their messages are taken seriously by many of their viewers. When we know that gays and lesbians are daily targets of violence, bullying and rape in South Africa, this type of portrayal is incredibly dangerous and irresponsible.

Some friends thought I was over-reacting but I compared it to the earlier black American battle to halt negative television stereotypes of African Americans. Through the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP), black Americans once fought big production companies

Soapies like 'Generations' attract millions of viewers every day

such as Warner and MGM over the perpetuation of similar damaging stereotypes. Eventually the NAACP achieved success in ending pervasive and dangerous negative portrayals of black people.

Because South Africa is a diverse country with many cultures, ethnicities, languages, religions and ways of living it is inevitable that some

stereotypes will be created and reinforced. This is why we have the Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa (BCCSA), which is meant to arbitrate when there are cases of public commentary that may be deemed unfair or when language or vocabulary can amount to hate speech.

I complained to the BCCSA following the episode and was told that although there was no contravention of BCCSA's code, SABC remains "committed to upholding and re-enforcing good values."

A code may not have been broken and corporate broadcast interests may well feel they are promoting good values, but this viewer is forever insulted. We need to change such harmful portrayal of gay char-

acters in sitcoms, soap operas and all mainstream media if we want South Africa to stop making international headlines because of horrific, violent homophobic attacks.

I challenge the writers and producers of *Generations* and other television shows to create characters and storylines that can help our country overcome violence, hate and discord. I challenge other progressive viewers to take up a pen and complain when, like me, you are offended. It is only when we confront harmful stereotypes that our leaders actually stop perpetuating them.

● *Mbadlanyana is the Gender Links South African Local Government Co-ordinator. This article is part of the Gender Links Opinion and Commentary Service.*

SA AFTER APARTHEID

We can't break cursed circle of colour

Bryan Rostron

THE ONE thing you'd think we would have learned from our fraught past is not to hector people about who they are; or who we think they should be. Even so, stubbornly, many still do.

Apartheid set out rigid racial definitions. Based on how we looked, the government even prescribed what character and abilities we were supposed to manifest from birth. When the old regime crumbled, so did those crude official categories. Not surprisingly, for some, that has created an identity crisis. This can take various forms, but mostly we don't seem to be able to break out of our cursed cycle. Today, there are strident voices who wish to push us back into the ghetto of colour.

At the other end of the scale, members of one Umkhonto we Sizwe unit that I know have all chosen to redefine themselves in radically different ways since 1994. Apartheid forced them into mutually exclusive groups: "Coloured", "Zulu" and so on. In opposition, they developed a unified approach, rejecting any ethnic exclusivity or chauvinism. Since then, and the imposition of the hated ideology, that unity has fragmented: one rebel became a notable ANC apparatchik while another is so disillusioned that he has renounced a lifetime's association with the ANC. A third converted to Islam. A fourth, unable to find work, turned to drugs and armed robbery. The leader of that MK unit, a gentle soul, was offered a senior rank in the defence force, but turned it down. He told me he didn't want anyone, ever again, to tell him who he was or what to do. He has virtually vanished from sight, leading an extremely modest life and is, by all accounts, very happy.

These veterans, though they couldn't have known it when operating underground, have all settled on dissimilar "identities". That is what they fought for: to be free to choose for themselves.

Such freedom, however, can be scary. As a result, quite a few South Africans appear unable to abandon the certainties of the past and even now cling to colour for their sense of self and worth. One white ANC member, after canvassing in a fancy

Cape Town suburb, told me that many doors had been slammed in his face, with some evidently highly-educated householders snarling: "You're a waste of a white skin!" These people still appear to inhabit some mythical homeland called Whiteness. Perhaps they are the same people who settle in complexes with names like Tuscan Villas. It's possible they don't really want to live in Africa at all; just in a sunny suburb with cheap domestic labour. As a kind of internal exile, they pretend to have emigrated to the South of France or Italy.

While the unique South African sense of "whiteness" has been forged over the centuries by fear, today the mirror image – of black pigment-dictated identity – often seems generated by anger. This has an ironic consequence. Just as the dogma of white supremacy gave proponents the illusion that they could decree who was "a waste of a white skin", a harsh new black chauvinism increasingly seeks to adjudicate who is black; or, indeed, black enough. Whites may be dismissed as "settlers" or "madam", but this is mild compared to the venom hurled by some black public figures against other blacks. Here is a selection of insults openly deployed, frequently by members of the ANC against political rivals, sometimes within their own party: "coconut", "house nigger", "askari" – and even the K word that dares not speak its name, unless directed by one black person against another.

The anger may be understandable, but like all chauvinisms it can be extremely dangerous. Enforcing identity by colour-coding, flattens out other vital factors like language, culture and class. It encourages exclusion, leading almost inevitably to sinister notions like, "an oversupply of coloureds in the Western Cape", or a disparagement of South African Indians. This idea of a black essence is – mirroring apartheid – necessarily authoritarian. It denies the individual's right to find their own path. It can also lead to absurd claims; for example, that homosexuality is a colonial import. The logic of this is that being identified as a lesbian in a township can, effectively, be a death sentence.

The final, fatal conclusion both of



HOLDING ON: Strident voices are trying to push South Africa back into the ghetto of colour, the writer says.

Picture: MICHAEL WALKER

Who are we? Race & Identity

anger turning inward and of chauvinism is xenophobia. In the violent wave of attacks in May 2008, 62 Africans were killed, 21 of them South Africans mistaken for foreigners. The day after all foreign Africans fled from Imizamo Yethu in Hout Bay, I accompanied a Congolese refugee back to see if he could retrieve any possessions. His room had been trashed and everything of value stolen. The real tragedy, however, is that so soon

after the end of apartheid this black man was only safe in a South African township because he was accompanied by a white man.

Franz Fanon, the great writer on decolonisation, wrote in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961): "From nationalism we have passed to ultranationalism, to chauvinism, and finally to racism. These foreigners are called on to leave, their shops are burned, their street stalls wrecked." Fanon was referring to ethnic violence in shack settlements in the Ivory Coast, but that also outlines the incubus of xenophobia fermenting in South African townships today. Such a degenerating chain reaction is an almost inevitable con-

sequence when colour or ethnicity is imposed as the bedrock of identity.

We don't find our identity in isolation. It's usually shaped by answering the question: where do I belong? South Africa has chiefly answered this by erecting racial boundaries. A healthier start would be to expand our ideas of community and citizenship. Some years ago, as part of the African Genome Project, I had my DNA tested. The results were an eye-opener. My grandparents arrived here at the end of the 19th century as what today would be called "economic refugees", but beyond that the family history petered out. Yet, the DNA results showed that the "haplogroup" from my father's side – hav-

ing left Africa possibly up to 125 000 years ago – were from south and central Asia, Iran and the Caucasus, possibly with ties to the Romyany people who had their origins in India.

More astonishing was that from the project's global web database, my nearest DNA match to a living person was in Cabinda, Angola. "Given the history of the slave trade routes and European settlements along the coasts of Africa in recent times," said the chief scientist of the Genome initiative, "it is quite likely that while an individual identifies as a Cabinda individual, he may carry a 'y' chromosome that would have been passed down to him from a forefather in recent times that could

have been European or Asian." This is altogether more complex, infinitely more intriguing, than any racial ideology could imagine.

In June, 41 years ago, I sailed away from Cape Town by cargo boat, fed up with being granted lordly privileges for merely being white – and having resolved, against a looming deadline, not to do military service for a regime which judged my pigment to be a fitting martial qualification.

As Table Mountain sunk below the horizon, I remember thinking: I'll probably never see South Africa again. After repeated army call-up papers went unanswered, I lost my citizenship. Officially, I was no longer a South African. Frankly, I wasn't worried. It seemed then that apartheid would outlast my lifetime and I wanted to travel and discover for myself who I was. Yet, the longer that I stayed away, and the more countries I visited, the more South African I felt.

On April 27, 1994, I got my citizenship back. Early that morning I collected my new passport at the High Commission in London and walked around the block to join the queue waiting to vote in that first democratic election. It felt like having a limb re-attached. Four years later, after an absence of 28 years, I returned with my wife to live in Cape Town. It felt like coming home.

Of course, colour is still a factor. It is noticeable that those who benefited hugely from being a member of our historical pigmentocracy are now usually the most insistent in demanding that we must ignore colour completely. Pretending to be colour-blind is surely a covert tactic to maintain the perks and spoils gained from our cruel past. The fact of being white gave me a great many privileges. So, unlike former president Thabo Mbeki's famous "I am an African" speech, I don't want to stake any grand claims. Given our toxic mix of fear, denial and unresolved anger, maybe we should start with something more modest. Today, if anyone asks what I am, I'm happy to reply, "A South African."

● *Rostron is a freelance journalist and author. This article is part of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation/Cape Times series on race and identity.*

Looking a gift horse in the mouth

EVERY polithief is now a philanthropist. Building a toilet here and there for the poor makes clean all of their rewards of corruption. That is money laundering on a grand scale. It gives polithieves an air of legitimacy and respectability.

Al Capone, the Chicago gangster, tried it too. As the long arm of justice encircled him in the 1930s, Capone made philanthropic gestures by running a soup kitchen.

Philanthropy performs an essential role in society; it supports science, health, education and the arts, closing a gap that inevitably opens up between what the private and the public sectors can do.

The hijacking of philanthropy by polithieves will have the same effect a parasite has on its host. Sucked dry, the host soon withers and dies. The parasite moves on. The same will happen to the noble act of giving and caring, a sacred value that has always been at the core of humanity. Philanthropy will soon lose credibility. Slowly, we will start looking the gift horse in the mouth, checking its teeth for clues on what public funds it has been feeding on.

Philanthropy by the polithieves is a means by which the corrupt try to make clean their vile deeds. It will turn all of us into cynics. It will make some of us wonder, at best,

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and look down upon, at worst, any person who hands out cash in support of a cause, however noble.

Cynicism will, in turn, suck dry the core of our humanity; our ability to say thank you – and mean it – to those who, in our hour of need, extend a helping hand. As Mexican writer Octavio Paz once said: "The word gratitude has equivalents in every language and in each tongue the range of meanings is abundant. In the Romance languages this breadth spans the spiritual and the physical, from the divine grace conceded to men to save them from error and death, to the bodily grace of the dancing girl."

"Grace is gratuitous; it is a gift. The person who receives it, the favoured one, is grateful for it; if he is not base, he expresses gratitude," Paz said in his lecture when he received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1990.

If we allow polithieves free reign, we will soon become a society devoid of honour and morality.

"Seldom in recent times, it seems, has a social system offered scope so

openly and so brazenly to people willing to support anything at any time, as long as it brings them some advantage; their craving for power and personal gain; to born lackeys, ready for any humiliation and willing at all times to sacrifice their neighbours' and their own honour for a chance to ingratiate themselves with those in power," wrote Vaclav Havel, the Czech playwright and politician, of Czechoslovakia in the 1970s.

He said that "so many public and influential positions were occupied ... by notorious opportunists, charlatans and men of dubious record; in short, by typical collaborators, men, that is, with a special gift for persuading themselves at every turn that their dirty work is a way of rescuing something, or, at least, of preventing still worse men from stepping into their shoes."

"So far, it is the worst in us which is being systematically activated and enlarged – egotism, hypocrisy, indifference, cowardice, fear, resignation and the desire to escape every personal responsibility, regardless of the general consequences."

The theft of humanity's values is cultivating the worst in us. With opportunists and charlatans in public office, one can no longer tell polithieves from politicians.

Lawyers must experience the real world

IF YOU want a desk job, don't become an attorney. That's the message from a high court judge who says lawyers must be willing to do essential fieldwork when it's in the interests of a client.

Judge Neo Rampai of Bloemfontein has just found that a client was treated negligently by an attorney who sat at her desk and wrote letters rather than getting out to obtain the documentation she thought was needed.

His ruling has enormous financial implications as the firm involved is now liable for the amount that would otherwise have been paid by the Road Accident Fund to Yoliswa Mlenzana, widow of Zamile Mlenzana, who died in an accident in Mpumalanga in June 2004. The widow met Stella Smith of Goodrick and Franklin in Bloemfontein two months later and asked that a claim be made on her behalf with the fund.

Her lawyers did not meet the deadline, however, and the claim lapsed. Now the widow wants the attorneys to pay her compensation instead, saying they failed her. Goodrick, on the other hand, disputed these allegations, saying Mlenzana was negligent because she didn't produce the information needed to launch her claim.

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Rampai had to answer key questions in his judgment: was it likely that the claim against the fund would have been successful? Who was negligent, Mlenzana or Smith? If he found the firm was negligent the amount due to Mlenzana would have to be decided in a separate hearing.

From the evidence of crash witnesses Rampai concluded the widow was likely to have been successful had her claim been lodged in time. Going through the firm's files he found that in fact Smith had enough information to launch an initial claim in time to avoid prescription, and that anything outstanding could have been added later.

The attorney had "lamentably misconceived" the law by thinking that this was not possible. "As knowledgeable practitioners often do" Smith could have made a rough calculation of Mlenzana's claim "for the time being" since a "simple mathematical exercise" would have been enough to prevent the claim from being extinguished.

When Mlenzana gave her

address as "37739 Freedom Square, Bloemfontein", alarm bells should have rung: Smith should have realised her client lived in a shack settlement where the postal system was notoriously poor or non-existent. But instead of trying to establish a more reliable form of communication, Smith went ahead as though her client lived in a formal area, writing her 14 letters.

When eventually the two had a second consultation, the problem of the serious breakdown of communication was not addressed. Instead Smith continued to ask her client to provide documents and information which she could have obtained for herself. Because of "poor knowledge, skill and care", Smith made demands of Mlenzana "that would probably have discouraged and frustrated even a very prudent and co-operative client".

To obtain the information she needed, Smith told the court, she expected her client to travel to towns far away from Bloemfontein to get the documents. "And the poor client did," noted the judge. "I was amazed," he said, and asked why a poor woman would appoint a lawyer if she still had to travel to faraway places to investigate and gather information?

Merely writing letters wasn't

good enough, Rampai held. The lawyer failed to exercise the necessary skill, knowledge or diligence expected of an average attorney. Because of this "disturbing lack of skill, knowledge, diligence and care" she failed to appreciate the value of the information given to her by her client almost three years before the claim expired.

"I have to say, and it is not pleasant saying it, that the plain truth about this whole problem was not of Smith's own making," Rampai said. As a newly-admitted attorney, "a virtual novice in the legal profession", she was given the huge responsibility of handling all the firm's claims against the fund as well as its conveyancing department.

"She was put in the deep end and left all by herself to navigate the stormy waters of the deep ocean." An ordinarily competent attorney would have known that mail to a shack settlement was likely to go astray, the judge said. "There comes a time when a diligent attorney has to leave the comfort zone of his or her air-conditioned office and venture out to do some fieldwork to safeguard the interests of a client."

It's a nice thought – the attorney-sleuth. Stand by for an increase in the genre.

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