



THE LAVENDER SCREEN

BY Rob Jackson, Pride Entertainment Features

DAYTIMES TRANS CHARACTER ... Breaking New Ground ... Drawing Controversy



Through its 37-year run AMC has established itself as a leader among daytime drama by educating through entertaining, garnering multiple awards from GLBT organizations along the way. During these past three decades, viewers have watched the

characters deal with many hotbed issues and subjects, including abortion, teen sexuality, HIV and AIDS, substance abuse, eating disorders, coming out of the closet, etc.

In 2000 television history was made when "All My Children" became the first daytime drama to incorporate a lesbian character, Bianca Montgomery (portrayed by Eden Riegel), in a contract role. Another historic moment occurred in 2003 when the show aired daytime television's first same-sex kiss between two women in a loving relationship.

In August of last year, AMC introduced to daytime audiences, the character of Zarf, an eccentric rock star with a special secret. Brought to life by Drama Desk award nominee, Jeffrey Carlson (Boy George's *Taboo*), Zarf returned to Pine Valley this past November beginning one of the most thought-provoking and controversial storylines on daytime TV. Over a short time period, this character has developed into one of the most compelling new characters on daytime.

Flamboyant, eccentric, compassionate, intuitive ... 'Zarf' is all these and more, which brings us back to his secret! ... "He" actually identifies as a "she."

Identifying as 'Zoe', she has integrated herself into the Pine Valley community and has become well acquainted with

many of the town's most well-known citizens and has been involved in several of their adventures. All along the way she has dealt with prejudice, fear, hate and misunderstanding from many of Pine Valley's citizens, even being arrested as a suspect in the Satin Slayer killings, before finally being cleared of suspicion. She has handled all of these issues with her inherent grace and compassion while coming to grips with her own gender identity.

The idea of a transgender character on daytime is quite controversial, though not non-existent. In 1996 (also on ABC TV), the cancelled soap *The City* presented the character Azure albeit in a sensationalized storyline.

"I was very concerned as were many of my fellow transgender activists," says Donna Riley of the Long Island-based LITE (Long Island Trans Experience). "We felt and feared it was a ratings tool and would be addressed in a stereotypical perspective ... [that of] a flamboyant gay male, cross-dressing. Many of [us] have spent hundreds of hours explaining, teaching, and speaking on the separation of sexual orientation vs. gender identity/expression."

ABC will not make the same mistake with this storyline that they had made in "The City" Instead they've opted to take a reality-based approach, as telling the stories of the trans-community can be a tricky situation and should be done delicately, and over time. Something the show is prepared to do apparently as the character is purportedly going to be around *well into the spring*.

In a special unscripted episode airing on March 9th the show will focus on and discuss many issues particular to the Trans experience. This episode will utilize the stories and situations of real-life Trans peoples, and will have these people telling their own stories. [Authors Note: Daily episodes of All My Children are broadcast on ABC-TV (1PM EST), and in daily repeats on SoapNet at 8PM, and 1AM]

"In continuing our realistic portrayal of Zoe's journey of transition, head writer Megan McTavish designed transgender support group scenes featuring transgender actors and actresses. The audience will be given the rare opportunity, along with Zoe, to experience the real unscripted stories and issues experienced by real transgender men and women playing themselves. We are very proud to showcase their compelling stories," says executive producer Julie Hanan Carruthers. Additionally,

Jennifer Boylan, a transgender author, professor and expert commentator on transgender issues, has been cast in the role of the support group leader.

"It didn't take me long to learn that AMC has done its homework." Professor Boylan happily states. "This should really be no surprise; plenty of controversial issues have been dealt with by daytime TV first. Sure: it may be melodrama; but I'd rather have an accurate portrayal in melodrama than a distortion in prime time"

"They've done great". Boylan continues "A lot of the credit has to go to Jeffrey Carlson, the actor playing the transgender character Zoe. Kudos also to GLADD New York's Andy Marra (who also appears on the show), for helping the writers of the show present Zoe's issues with some authenticity."

"I give a lot of credit to the daytime audience, but some people haven't been exposed to stories of the transgender community." stated the actor in a TVGuide.com interview. "As the knowledge goes over the airwaves, you hope that the world will embrace Zarf. I hope that I do my best to please the transgender community. Their stories are being told more often in movies like TransAmerica and Normal"

Many who have watched the character progress admit that having the character on daytime television has been a positive step to greater understanding of Trans issues. Though much still needs to be done to dispel the myths

associated with transgender people, they are still on the right track.

"It has been marginally better than I feared." admits Riley "It does continue to propagate the blurred line between sexual orientation and gender identity/gender expression. But it has people talking. Once people are talking it is easier to engage them in an intelligent conversation."

"I do like the concept of having the character and her transgender support group. Of course how will they handle it? Time will tell. I feel the new upcoming twist is a response to the negative feedback from the transgender community, so hopefully they will continue to listen to us, instead of getting most of the cues from a Gay & Lesbian organization that in my opinion, has a T in their homepage more out of political correctness."

All this being said and done this is truly groundbreaking television!

About the actor: Jeffrey Carlson's (Pictured top of story: photo by ABC TV/Lou Rocco) Broadway credits include *Taboo*, *Tartuffe* and *The Goat or Who Is Sylvia?* He was seen at the McCarter Theatre in the title role of Emily Mann's production of *Romeo and Juliet* and in their recent mounting of *Candida*; his other theatrical credits include *Bach at Leipzig*, *Lorenzaccio*, *The Miracle Worker*, *Thief River*, *Manuscript* and *Sodom and Gomorrah*.



ALL MY CHILDREN - Zoe (Jeffrey Carlson, center), a transgender woman who has recently come out to the denizens of Pine Valley, attends a support group to help get her through her transition. The episode will air Friday, March 9, 2007 on ABC Daytime's "All My Children", which airs Mon -Fri (1 - 2:00 p.m., ET) on the ABC Television Network. (Photo Credit: ABC/HEIDI GUTMAN) TOP ROW: BRIDGET, JENNIFER, ANDY, EDEN REGEL, BETTY; BOTTOM ROW: TOMMY, JEFFREY CARLSON, JUNE, DAVID