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DVD Review: Our Hero: The Complete Series

The airwaves have been chocked with teen dramas probably since advertisers realized there was big money to be made appealing to the 15 –25 year age group. They started off with films in the mid to late seventies and then moved on the television screens in the early eighties and haven't let us alone since.

I'm sure most of us have heard of at least Beverly Hills 90210, Degrassi Junior High, (and its latest incarnation, the kids of kids of Degrassi or as they like to call it Degrassi: Next Generation) and My So Called Life which featured Claire Danes. Of those three the original Degrassi series was the least slick and most believable, and Claire Danes was her usual luminescent self in salvaging what could have been teen melodrama, and 90210 was – well the less said about that one the better.

But after the fall of 90210 and before the resurrection of Degrassi there appeared a half hour show that may have snuck under your radar, even if you lived in its country of origin. Our Hero was produced in Canada by a small independent production company along with the ubiquitous assistance of the Mother corporation, better known as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (C.B.C.).

Our Hero was broadcast for three seasons starting in 2000 and followed seventeen year old Kale Stiglie (Cara Pifko) as she came to grips with life, the universe, and everything. It sounds like your typical teen-angst drama, an oh-so-embarrassing moments type show, but it was saved by a number of details so many of these shows seem to overlook: originality, great scripts, a firm grip on reality, and an understanding of what is and isn't funny and what is and isn't emotion.

The great script and originality pretty much fall into the same camp in Our Hero as it revolves around Kale's attempts to find her way in the world and her recording of it in that precursor to blogs known as a 'zine. 'Zines were and maybe still are a means of recording your life in the form of a newspaper. They were very deliberately made along the lines of a cut and paste ransom note to emphasize their true homemade nature. They were heavily reliant on paste, scissors, originality, and photocopying.

Each episode in Our Hero is thus given an issue name, with Kale proudly announcing it at the beginning. We are then treated to a live action version of the 'zine that she has printed up and distributed to the school and mailed off to all points of the earth that she may have addresses for.

Episodes have titles such as "The Shallow Issue", "The Gutsy Issue" or "If The Shoe Fits Issue" each in reference to what Kale is going to be struggling with in the upcoming thirty minutes. But, while Kale may learn what courage is really about, how you can't truly understand someone else's life that easily, and being shallow cuts a lot of ways, there are no pat answers or benefactors to help her along the way.

The hero of Our Hero doesn't rescue anyone or solve problems in a single bound, she stumbles around in the dark like the rest of us did as teenagers, making ridiculous mistakes, sticking both feet in her mouth, and often regretting she was ever born. Her 'zine, "Our Hero," from which the show derives its title, was her way of taking control of the fact she is imperfect by reveling in her flaws and telling the world about them before it can rub her face in them.

Instead of the standard protagonist voice over during "issues" of Our Hero the creators have opted to go with stop action animations of the 'zine issue interjected into the live action of the show which allows Kale the chance to offer commentary and bare her darkest secrets. The irony of course is within the context of the show, the 'zine is public knowledge so she's not telling us anything her world won't be finding out about anyway.

Something Our Hero has in common with the original Degrassi series is the fact that none of the cast is going to be confused with starlets or super models. They're all attractive, but in a real way. Kale isn't an anorexic and her friends don't look like they've stepped out of the pages of glossy magazines or the plastic surgeon's office.

Our Hero was one of those shows critics used the words "fresh," "smart," and "innovative" to describe. In contrast to what most often depicts life as a teenager, it does indeed stand head and shoulders above anything else that's been on the air before and since. It doesn't have the self-consciousness of the original Degrassi street, the superficiality of 90210, or the new found slickness of Degrassi: Next Generation.

The only limitations of Our Hero are the ones built into any television show trying to reach a resolution within a half hour framework. Circumstances are just a little too pat and wind up a little too contrived to be completely real, but as that's television there's not much the creator's could have done to rectify the situation.

If you liked the show when it was televised, or if you're looking for something your teenagers can watch that is intelligent and funny as an alternative to the usual dreck on television, then the DVD collection of the complete series of Our Hero in a four disc set is for you.

The humour and energy that's gone into the packaging is reflective of what was put into the series to start with by the creative team, and has some pleasant surprises lurking in unexpected corners (read the warning about copying and public performances carefully) It also comes complete with gag reels, outtakes, and cast commentary on selected episodes.

Our Hero: The Complete Series is thirteen hours of some of the better television shot recently. It's fun, intelligent, compassionate, and will make you wonder why there isn't more of its quality being produced. The only problem is it will make it difficult to go back to watching what's currently on the air.

At present the only way to buy the box set is to order it through the Heroic Film Company's own web site. They will ship it anywhere around the world so you could be living anywhere and still get all the issues of your favourite 'zine.

Article Author: Richard Marcus

Richard Marcus is the author of the recently published *What Will Happen In Eragon IV?* and has had his work published in print and online all over the world. The not so long-haired Canadian iconoclast writes reviews and opines on the world as he sees ...