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TALK OF THE TOWN

Dept. of Finales

"Melrose Place," 1992-1999, R.I.P.

by Malcolm Gladwell

During the 1995-96 season of "Melrose Place"--unquestionably the finest in the seven-year run of the prime-time soap, which comes to an end this week--the winsome redhead known as Dr. Kimberly Shaw experienced a sudden breakthrough in her therapy with Dr. Peter Burns, whom, according to the convolutions of the Melrose narrative, she happened to be living with at the moment. Burns was also acting as her lawyer and guardian, in addition to being her lover and therapist, although those last two descriptions are not quite accurate, since Kimberly and Dr. Burns weren't sleeping together at the time of her therapy breakthrough and, what's more, Burns wasn't really a therapist. From all appearances, he was actually a surgeon, or--since he also treated the show's central figure (and his future lover), Amanda, when she had her cancer scare--an oncologist,

or, at the very least, a hunky guy with a stethoscope and a pager, which, in the Melrose universe, is all you really need to be to pass your medical boards.

In any case, in the first or second session between Kimberly and Dr. Peter Burns--her lawyer, suitor, guardian, non-therapist therapist, landlord, and roommate--Kimberly realized that the reason she had been exhibiting strong homicidal tendencies was that she had been suppressing the childhood memory of having killed a very evil man who bore a distinct resemblance to a ferret. In a daring plot twist, Michael and Sydney--Kimberly's ex-lover and her romantic rival, respectively--got hold of a sketch she had made of her ferret-faced tormentor and hired an actor to impersonate him in an effort to make Kimberly think that she was still as crazy as ever. And that's exactly what happened, until Kimberly, toward the end of one episode,

confronted the actor playing the ferret man and peeled off his prosthetic makeup, vanquishing her personal demon once and for all.

If you talk to aficionados of "Melrose Place," they will tell you that the ferret-man moment, more than any other, captured what was truly important about the series: here was an actor playing a doctor, in therapy with another actor playing a doctor who was himself impersonating a therapist, confronting an actor playing an actor playing her own personal demon, and when she unmasked him she found . . . that he was just another actor! Or something like that. The wonderful thing about "Melrose Place" was that just when you thought that the show was about to make some self-consciously postmodern commentary on, say, the relationship between art and life, it had the courage to take the easy way out and go for the laugh.

"Melrose Place" was often, mistakenly, lumped with its sister show on Fox, "Beverly Hills, 90210," which, like "Melrose," was an Aaron Spelling Production. At one point, Fox even ran the two shows back to back on Wednesday nights. But they were worlds apart. "90210" was the most conventional kind of television. It played to the universal desire of adolescents to be grownups, and it presented the world inside West Beverly High as one driven by the same social and ethical and political issues as the real world. "90210" was all about teens behaving like adults. "Melrose" was the opposite. It started with a group of adults--doctors, advertising executives, fashion designers--and dared to have them behave as foolishly and as naively as adolescents. Most of them lived in the same apartment building, where they fought and drank and wore really tight outfits and slept together in every conceivable permutation. They were all dumb, and the higher they rose in the outside world the dumber they got when they came home to Melrose Place.

In the mid-nineteen-nineties, when a generation of Americans reached adulthood and suddenly realized that they didn't want to be there, the

inverted world of Melrose was a wonderfully soothing place. Here, after all, was a show that ostensibly depicted sophisticated grownup society, and every viewer was smarter than the people on the screen. Could anyone believe, for example, that when Kimberly came back from her breakthrough session with Peter Burns and went home to make dinner for Peter Burns, and Peter Burns sidled up to kiss her as she was slicing carrots, bra-less, he never stopped to think that here was his client and patient and tenant and analysand--a woman who had just tried to kill all kinds of people--and she was in his kitchen holding a knife? Peter! You moron! Watch the knife!

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