

# Episode 4: Young Americans, Coca Cola and Gothic Horror

I am easily fatigued by the concept of prestige TV. At best, I will start watching something – like Game of Thrones or True Detective – and then give up after a season. I couldn't tell you why. Half the time I am enjoying myself, possibly because I am exactly the type of person prestige TV was made for. But I'll just quit. It might be because I am a natural contrarian, in that the more people ask me to watch some piece of high-quality television the less likely I am to watch it. It could be because I think we should stop trying stretch things that could be 120-minute cinematic masterpieces into 7-season television shows. (As a side note, bring back the 120-minute film. If I have to spend another three hours watching something that clearly needs an editor I'll scream – I'm looking at you The Batman.) But actually, I think it's mostly because I was a teenager throughout the 00s and my brain has been broken by teen dramas with jangly indie soundtracks and high colour saturation.

I'm telling you this because I'm about to walk you through something lightly unhinged, and I need you to stick with me. I'm sure everyone remembers Dawson's Creek – the teen drama that ran from 1998 to 2003. Very emotional, lots of teens trying to bone each other, lots of crying and inspirational speeches. All the good stuff. What you may not be familiar with is the 8-episode between-

season spin off series, Young Americans. I'm going to change that today.

I'm Alex, this is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition, and today I'm thinking about Young Americans... the TV show... not actual young Americans.

Ok, so to start this episode I want to emphasise that you cannot watch Young Americans in any officially sanctioned capacity anywhere online. It is not on any streaming service. There is not a nice DVD box set that you can buy. The files that are available are floating around obscure websites of varying functionality and legality, and – this part is key – they are files which have been recorded straight from someone's TV set in the year 2000, and then reformatted and passed around over and over again. There are remnants of ads for McDonalds and Pizza Hut littered through them – not quite fully snipped out and then resolutely never fixed. They are so crunchy and low-res that they are barely watchable. And yet they persist, like a bizarre digital time capsule. Google searches for the title will take you to half-dead reddit pages kicked off by people asking, 'Does anyone remember that one show...' followed by a vague description of some minor plot point, and answered by someone saying "Young Americans!" and providing a link back to a version of the file, labelled with alternating capital and lowercase

letters and sometimes tagged with an uploader's handle to confuse would-be digital piracy scolds.

Now, you might be thinking, "Wow, if it's survived this long, powered only by interest from the people, there must be some sort of inherent quality to it... like it's saying something really big about the world, or it's capturing something really meaningful, or it's written really well." And I'm here to say: Not really. It's a teen drama, from the year 2000. It's not good. It is exactly what it sounds like – a poor boy from the wrong side of the tracks escapes his abusive household by winning a scholarship to the local boarding school for very rich boys. Hijinks ensue as he works out how to fit in with his new social set, while also maintaining his ties to his home town. It's like a precursor to *The OC*, without Sandy Cohen's helpful intervention, but it's also the plot of every teen drama ever written. But obviously, there's more to it than that, or I wouldn't be here excitedly blithering at you.

I'm bringing *Young Americans* to your attention because, through a series of strange missteps, a teen show was produced that was so gothic in its approach, and so absolutely queer, that it could only ever last one season before being relegated to the shadowy realms of covert file sharing sites. So, follow me down the garden path a while, will you? Let's start with some context – *Young Americans* first aired on The WB Network. If you're like me in that you're not American and didn't have cable TV growing up, that might not mean anything to you straight away. If you're not familiar with The WB by name, you're

absolutely familiar with their work. The network launched in 1995, and by 1997 it had decided that its niche would be the illusive and extremely profitable teen market, which it was trying to court away from Fox (who were airing stuff like *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Party of Five* at the time). It launched *Dawson's Creek* in 1998 to huge success in the teen girl market, helping to bolster its other new shows including *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Felicity* and *Charmed*. Other shows that followed included *Gilmore Girls* and *Ryan Murphy's* first ever, *Popular*. When I say you're familiar with the WB's work, it's not just because these shows were obscenely large pop cultural moments that are still being picked apart today, but also because they share a particular aesthetic and style of storytelling. Beautiful teens emoting at each other, and perhaps dealing with some sort of moral quandary about growing up, in a strangely lush perpetual summer (unless it is plot-convenient for it to be winter). Given that it was always dealing in the emotional rollercoaster that is puberty, The WB became associated with melodrama by default and that pattern has continued with its successor network, The CW, which airs things like the notoriously melodramatic *Riverdale*. Now, everyone say "The epic highs and lows of high school football" with me, all together now.

So that probably gives you a bit of an idea of the ball park *Young Americans* is operating in – beautiful, emotional, pubescent. Now, despite dealing in some iconic series, The WB always struggled a little financially – it folded in 2006 and the bulk of its programming was absorbed into the newly formed CW



Network. But on their way down, The WB got to shake hands with the devil. The devil of course being The Coca-Cola Company. In the year 2000, advertisers were faced with a problem – they wanted eyeballs on their ads, but the more ads they put on TV, the more likely people were to change the channel. How to keep viewers engaged and thirsty for the refreshing taste of Coca-Cola? Enter The WB stage left – the network realised that a) producing stylish teen dramas was almost as expensive as raising stylish teens (someone has to keep these people in Abercrombie and Fitch sweatshirts), b) that pushing Dawson's Creek reruns between seasons was not all that lucrative, and c) they were essentially gunning for the same thing as the Coca-Cola Company: the sweet, sweet blood of the youth. I mean... the female age 12-24 marketing demographic. Definitely nothing blood based. They approached Coke through the company's marketing agency with a proposal – exclusive sponsorship rights for a show, including guaranteed ad slots, product placement and a mention in every ad the network ran for the program. Coke had just had big upper management shakeup and were keen to refocus their advertising on that delicious youth market. Their marketing department was up on the chopping block and this seemed like a way to punch through the TV noise and make sure kids kept actually looking at their products, even if they were flicking away in the ad breaks. Coke ponied up \$6 million for The WB to produce a script that had been gathering dust on their shelves for years, agreeing to fund an eight-episode run during the summer. With unholy alliance signed, Young Americans was born. Or should I say "Coca Cola Presents Young

Americans, only on The WB"?

Now, if the horrifying machinations of art and capitalism are scaring you just a touch, one key thing to note before we get any further is that Coca-Cola did not have script approval rights for the show. I need you to keep that in mind – no reason, just put it in the back of your head. Keep it safe for a' minute while we jump onto what the show actually was. I've given you the fun and funky "boy from the wrong side of the tracks" summary version, but I promise I wouldn't be bringing this to you in my mouth like a cat offering up a dead rat if I didn't actually have some meat for you. Young Americans centres on Will Krudski, a poor but gifted teenager who wins a scholarship to Rawley Academy, the posh boarding school on the outskirts of his small New England hometown. He's excited to attend the academy because it means he can escape his abusive father. It does become apparent that he's cheated on his entrance exam but they resolve that almost immediately, and then his big issue becomes whether or not he'll fit in with his rich cohort. He's guided by Finn, the English teacher/ rowing coach (that classic combination) – a square jawed male model doing his best "Robin Williams in Dead Poets Society" impression. Honestly, even though Will is the main character, he's the least interesting thing about the show.

The good shit is in the sub plots. Will's roommate is Scout Calhoun, the wealthy son of a senator who, as it turns out, is actually a nice guy. On Scout's first day, he meets Will's friend Bella, played by an early career Kate Bosworth, while she's working in her dad's gas station and

falls head over heels in love – because who doesn't love a girl who is beautiful, responsible and can fix a car? They go on a sun-drenched summer date on the lake, making huge declarations of teenage love to each other, and confessing their deepest darkest secrets – specifically that Bella's dad isn't her real dad and that she's the result of an affair her mother had before abandoning the family. The date ends with them giggling her dad's auto-shop, where they're interrupted and Scout optimistically introduces himself to Bella's dad, Charlie. Charlie waits until Bella leaves the room to warn Scout not to come around anymore.

Not to be set back by a mere stern fatherly warning, Scout shows up the next day to convince Charlie that his intentions are pure, only to have it revealed that the reason Charlie is so against their union is not because he thinks Scout is a rich prick, but because Scout's father is also Bella's father. They're siblings! It's incest baby! When I was getting it together to write this episode I did, of course, remember that there was an incest plot line (how could I not?). I did not remember how early it was introduced. This all happens in the first episode, and they spend the rest of the season staring longingly at each other and being like "Boy howdy do I wish you weren't my sibling so we could bone down." And everyone is VERY cool with it – like, Scout and Bella tell Will and then periodically Will checks in with Scout to be like "hey... you seem like you're gazing longingly at Bella? Still thinking about boning your sister?" and they have a nice, emotionally supportive conversation about how hard it must be to be in love with your sibling. Which is... wild. It's network TV in the year 2000.

It's like a main plot point. At no point do Bella's other love interests or friends say anything that would indicate that it's pretty icky to still be lusting after each other when they're almost definitely related.

The second sub-plot (and my favourite) involves the Dean's son Hamilton, played by an early career Ian Somerhalder, who would later go on to star in *The Vampire Diaries* (did I mention the cast of this show is ridiculous?). Hamilton sees the new kid, Jake riding into the school on a motorcycle and immediately decides that they're going to be best buds forever. Jake is a rebel constantly swapping schools to try and get his actress mother's attention. But Jake has a secret – she's actually Jacqueline (played by Kate Moenig, who would later go on to break 1000 hearts as Shane in *The L Word*), and she's enrolled undercover at a boy's school to see if she can get her mother to pay attention to her. Jake and Hamilton get along great, but as they're having some flirty back and forth about girls, Jake forgets himself and kisses Hamilton before realising he's about to be gay bashed and runs away. Except he's not about to be gay bashed, despite all of Hamilton's posturing. Instead, Hamilton says out loud to himself "I think I might be gay". And then is largely kind of cool with that. He keeps threatening to hit Jake and then shying away at the last minute.

Eventually, a girl threatens to come between them, which is wild because Jake/ Jacqueline is kind of actively playing both sides at this point, but the girl in question gives up at the debutante ball (because there's always gotta be



some sort of ball), saying "You're both clearly just in love with each other." Hamilton throws caution to the wind, shoves Jake into a bathroom and kisses him, before pulling away and being like "We're gay!" At which point Jacqueline says "No we aren't" and reveals herself to be a girl. And rather than launching himself into immediate relief at his suddenly rescued heterosexuality, Hamilton storms off angry at the betrayal. Obviously, he comes around later but he does spend the rest of the series being very indiscrete and completely fine that the rest of the school thinks he's gay because he's got a fun queer little secret. Again, this is network television in the year 2000. Sneezing funny in a suburban high school was enough to get you gay bashed at this point. And yet here were the tanned beautiful teens of Coca-Cola's dreams getting real gender screwy in a posh boarding school. To very little judgement from their peers, I might add – aside from the English villain, played by a not at all type cast Charlie Hunnam. Everyone else just has a betting pool going to confirm if they're dating, and when it looks like they might break up, Will is like "aww I was rooting for them". As a side note, this sub plot is why I sought out this series in the first place.

When I was like 21 our lecturer showed us *The L Word*. I cannot for the life of me remember why. Something, something gender, something, something sexuality, something, something American film. I dunno. The class did not stay in my head, the extremely graphic sex scene depicting Kate Moenig as Shane did. I went home and watched the whole series, and then immediately sought out every other thing she was in. Which it turned out wasn't

a huge amount. And so, I was sucked into the realms of 11-year-old low-res digital files. Send your straight child to university, she leaves gay with a coveted hard drive of Kate Moenig's entire career. A conservative's worst nightmare.

Anyway, I digress. The thing that is kind of wild to me, and the reason I think about *Young Americans* so often, is that I read this high-saturation, well-lit Coke commercial masquerading as a TV program as inherently gothic. I know when you think about gothic literature the things that come to mind are like dark castles, haunting entities, and a slow descent into madness. And those things are true, but there are elements of the gothic that aren't all spooky darkness – like the unreality of the world and its strange claustrophobia, or the intrusion of the sins of the past on the present. And *Young Americans* has those things in spades. Will and Bella are essentially trapped in New Rawley by their circumstances – both are too poor to ever leave. While the rich kids come and go with enticing stories from the outside, there is a weirdly haunting sense that those who are from the town can never leave. The would-be Dead Poet's Society-style English teacher, it is revealed, is actually from New Rawley, and despite his college education and apparent writing career, he's remains trapped in his hometown. Even at the end when kids are lurching toward a summer of fun in St. Barts, Hamilton laments that Jake will be away in New York. "Get the bus! My mum will be away!" she says, but he never commits to joining her, despite them being resolutely in love. The locals must stay in their perpetual summer by the lake, where the sun is always in just

the right spot to make everyone glow.

As with any isolated boarding house with a long and prestigious history, there are secrets that bubble to the surface. Almost immediately, in the case of the incestuous relationship between Bella and Will. The audience is clued into the nature of their relationship, watching everyone else observe the long, yearning stares across the town square and encouraging them to act on their feelings. The sins of Scout's father have come back to taint his youth and warp him into a shell of man... or teen boy, I guess... incapable of pursuing relationships with other girls who show interest in him. In true gothic fashion, he has to become a sullen shadow to his sister's blossoming relationship with another childhood friend. He nags, and occasionally actively disrupts their dalliances, positioning himself as an actual suitor in front of the new boyfriend. Gothic dramas love a bit of incest as a way of showing the decrepit morality of the rich, and the ways the past can continue to burden the future.

What about the queer Shakespearean relationship? Look, if I'm reading it through the lens of the year 2000, that level of debauchery could just be the taint of sin and secrecy, which is gothic enough in and of itself. But I'm tired man. I just think it's very funny that Coke paid \$6 million to sponsor a show where they didn't have any influence over the actual content, beyond putting their products in frame and what they got was something that felt Coke branded but had all the gentle filth and debauchery of a gothic romance novel. Coca-Cola: Now with extra incest and gender-based fuckery. But I mean really, they got their money's

worth. I'm still subjecting myself to the branding 22 years later, because queers love to see themselves. If it's there, we'll find it and by God, if it's explicit we'll worship it forever, quality be damned. There's something gothic in the perpetual sharing and re-sharing of decades old digital files, ripped from the clutches of a Coca Cola sponsorship and forever squirreled away in dark corners of the internet, waiting for someone to re-discover them.

Welp, that was my Young Americans episode. This was inspired by a Tweet from Daniel Lavery, where he said that if the show had been picked up for a second season, he would have transitioned at 13. It prompted a rewatch and a series of increasingly unhinged texts to friends saying things like "Everyone gets real cool with incest real fast" and "I'm dying, Kate Moenig is so hot. So hot." Anyway, if anyone else had some sort of sexual identity crisis brought on by an accidental encounter with Kate Moenig on The WB Network, talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub. Just don't ask me where you can watch Young Americans. Peace!





**This episode premiered on 11th May 2022.**

**Episode written by Alex Johnson and produced by Wes Fahey.**

**Theme tune by Wes Fahey. (Soundcloud: [lee snipes](#))**

**Visit us:**

**Web: [www.popcultureboner.com](http://www.popcultureboner.com)**

**Twitter: [@popcultureboner](#)**

**Instagram: [@popcultureboner](#)**