

Sorry parents, this show's for teens

LOS ANGELES

Degrassi Junior High is a hit. Produced in Canada by Kate Taylor and Linda Schuyler, two ex-junior high teachers, this 26-part dramatic series is *the* new show for teenagers.

Sexuality, drugs, drinking, peer pressure, and child abuse are some of the subjects covered but the stories are told with the irreverence and point-of-view of young people today.

The heart of *Degrassi Junior High* is a repertory company of 50 teens who work with the writers on the script to make sure, according to Kate Taylor, that "we haven't lost ourselves in the 60s or gone totally off track." The season begins with brainstorming sessions and everybody helps build the storyline, characters and scenes. When the script is basically OK, it is workshopped with the cast. Linda Schuyler is grateful for their input. "I can't tell you the number of times the kids saved us from being too didactic, too young or old, or just not entertaining enough."

Inside Room 4035 of the Redondo Beach Sheraton, three members of the *Degrassi Junior High* rep company, in town to do publicity for their debut on PBS, are yelling and laughing at the TV. The door is opened by Neil Hope, AKA Derek "Wheels" Wheeler, a handsome fourteen-year-old with a welcoming smile.

"Let's do the interview on the bed," says fifteen-year-old Pat Mastroianni, sounding much like his smart-alec character, Joey Jeremiah.

"Come on, Pat, stop joking around," reprimands Stacie Mystysyn, 16, eldest of the three, not only in years. Stacie's character, Caitlin, is sensitive and introspective and Stacie is affected by her

concerns. In "Rumour Has It," Caitlin worries that she might be a lesbian when she starts having dreams about her female teacher.

"That part really took a lot out of me," Stacie admits, "but I think it's necessary to let the kids out there know that these kinds of dreams and a lot of other things they might find embarrassing, are normal."

Unlike Stacie, Joey's screen adventures roll off his back like water off a duck. He has three goals in life, "To be on *Hollywood Squares*, to be on *The Late Show* and to be in one of those teeny-bop magazines. No, seriously," he says, "I want to be an astronomer."

Neil Hope, with the experience of *Degrassi* under his belt, plans to direct films.

The three cast members are all different people but all are convinced that *Degrassi Junior High* is a totally original realistic show that will make teenagers laugh and think. In "It's Late" a young pregnant girl had to chose between abortion and birth. The episode explored all the options without being preachy. Given *Degrassi's* typically open-minded approach, it's not surprising that when you ask the cast members in Room 4035 what they think is the right age for sex, each one has a different answer.

"When you love the person and the person loves you," says Neil Hope.

"When you feel ready to take on such a responsibility," replies Stacie Mystysyn.

"For fun, man, just for fun," says



Pat Mastroianni as Joey Jeremiah.
A new teen idol?

Mastroianni with the kind of answer that usually gets his character, Joey, into some very bizarre situations. In "The Great Race" Joey sits in the bleachers at a swim meet, girls against boys, heckling one of the girls on the team.

"Hey, Melanie, you're so flat the walls are jealous."

Melanie's teammate turns on her heels, yanks Joey out of the stands and pops him in the pool. Life is not consequence-free on this teenage sit com.

Degrassi Junior High is not a family show, its focus is on school. Adults are background, teenagers foreground and the camera is kept at teenage eye-level so that the audience looks squarely and equally at the characters. CBC aired the first 13 episodes in the fall and is following now with 13 new episodes on Mondays. The *Degrassi* stories are being published in novel form and the producers have prepared an activity guide to go with the show. This is *Degrassi Junior High's* first season on PBS. If it does as well in the States as it is in Canada, you can look for Pat Mastroianni on the cover of your favorite teeny-bop magazine.