



IN VITERO VERITAS

Idea for 4 x 1/2hr Mini-series

(c) Paul M. Davies, February 1989.

This is in some ways a morality play for the future. It is triggered by consideration of the kinds of ethical and personal imperatives being forced on some people by accelerating advances in medical technology. It poses, by implication, the question of where science is really going and whether the facility offered by miraculous technical advances has gone beyond the ethical ability of people to keep up. It depicts a situation in which three particular people in fact, try to keep up- to cope with the new opportunities and dilemmas presented to them by recent advances in invitro fertilisation techniques. It is essentially about a future in which we may have to seriously consider the option of a truly 3-way or 4-way marriage- involving mixed parenting of a biologically shared child (i.e. where several adults share the child-minding, rearing, and legal responsibilities for an offspring whose very existence they all have an actual biological share in). In a strange way these new options bring the ideas implicit in the "sexual revolution" of the late 1960s full circle. In fact, for the first time they may make them morally and socially necessary.

The Law is still in some disarray on the whole matter and even varies from state to state. The differences between W.A. and Victoria would also be an issue in the series.

Apart from a few hospital scenes I envisage the drama as being sited primarily in a number of simple domestic or exterior locations in both Perth (Fremantle mainly) and Melbourne.

At a story level "In Vitro Veritas" is primarily about two Perth women, one of whom "migrates" to Melbourne to further her career as a minor, but promising actor.

By the time the series opens CARMEN has already been working in Melbourne for 10 years. While she hasn't exactly hit the big time she has nevertheless managed to claw a living of sorts from working with the smaller professional companies (TheatreWorks, Playbox, Anthill), the odd soapie role, the odd ad, voice overs, and, far too frequently, a cut of the box office at La Mama. Of course she doesn't own a house, can't afford to have kids and drives (or rather pushes mostly, a terminally ill VW).

However she is happy with her lot, enjoys her work and has slipped into a moderately stable and contented relationship with PETER, her partner for the last five years.

Halfway through rehearsals for a new play (which offers her something of a semi-major career breakthrough) she experiences unusual bleeding between periods. She lets the symptoms ride, confident of her yearly pap smears, and far too caught up in the opportunity of the play to be unduly concerned about it.

When the bleeding persists Peter encourages her to see a doctor: "No play's THAT important." A little reluctantly, and fairly offhandedly she does so. The pap smear is again negative and her doctor is not unduly concerned. All seems wellish as opening night approaches.

However, the bleeding doesn't go away. And finally Carmen does become a little more concerned. A second pap smear shows some "abnormal cells". Suddenly Carmen's world begins to crumble Twenty-four hours and two gynecologists later Carmen is first told she may have something "nasty" and finally to prepare herself for the fact that she may indeed have cervical cancer, stage 1B. She's booked in a for a catscan and biopsy in two days' time. By the following Tuesday she may well be undergoing surgery for a radical hysterectomy. It's as if she's been hit by a truck.

Never one to accept a fait accompli Carmen is determined to take her fate in her own hands and try and find out what is actually happening to, and proposed, for her body. She and Peter are immediately deluged by a flood of bewildering and often conflicting information. They become almost punch drunk with fear, concern and uncertainty. She postpones the operation by another week in order to satisfy herself that it is the only way.

Support and yet more information pours in from an ever expanding circle of friends and acquaintances who hear about it. She consults alternative, natural therapists, a sister-in-law who was a nurse, discovers an ad hoc cervical cancer support group and decides to switch both specialists and hospitals.

Through it all Carmen resists the idea of the hysterectomy. It is the ultimate trauma for her at 35 and with no children. A few friends are magnificent in their help and understanding, the support group is a godsend, but no amount of further knowledge about her situation can alter the fact that surgery is the only option. Her biopsy and catscan confirm it and 10 days after discovering that she had a problem Carmen undergoes an operation that removes her cervix, her womb, part of her vagina and one ovary. This would normally be the end of it but the surgeons on seeing the full extent of the spread of the tumour have revised the diagnosis upwards to Cervical Cancer Stage 2B. She has lymph node involvement that will require six weeks of post operative radiotherapy.

The remaining ovary is tucked safely out of the way under her armpit and thus will hopefully survive the otherwise lethal effect of the rays. Peter brings her home from the hospital to a life that seems shattered but not completely without hope. At least she has a 76% chance of surviving it all.

Eventually she returns to Perth to recuperate, visit her parents and meet up with old friends- especially TERRI, her oldest and dearest.

Terri has been caught up in some controversy of her own. The local building workers' union has "commissioned" Terri to do a mural for them on Perth's latest skyscraper, a commission which has been sort of legitimised by a government grant. Terri has recently become involved with the union through her mural work around Fremantle where she has long been noticed as a promising artist concerned with community issues.

The skyscraper project however is running into trouble. The building's major investor is unhappy with the idea of union inspired artwork adorning "his" property. In no uncertain terms he lets it be known that he would dearly love to ditch the project in favour of some more politically neutral work. However the

principal architects support Terri and the political climate also favours her. With the money men still threatening to "paint it all over when it's finished" Terri proceeds with her work, although under a cloud and somewhat fitfully.

Re-united with Terri, Carmen pours her heart and soul out about the trauma of the last few months. To cap it all Peter's father has just died in a freak boating accident and for a while both of them have felt like they've been caught up in some ghastly spiral of events that has left them emotionally drained and sort of shell-shocked. But it does sometimes happen to people like this: a fateful series of increasing bad luck.

Above all Carmen talks of her regret about not being able to have kids- it's like going through a mourning process for someone who's never even existed. But the pain is just as sharp. Terri gently reminds her that she never wanted kids when she had the chance. She could simply never afford them within the lifestyle of the struggling performer. Carmen acknowledges all that, but somehow the finality of what's happened, the fact that she no longer now even has a choice deeply upsets her.

Carmen returns to Melbourne and together with Peter seeks to reassemble their shattered life together. Peter has actually inherited a little money from his father and while, ironically, comfortably off for the first time, the inability to have children begins to prey on Carmen. (Peter already has a teenage son from an earlier marriage).

The tension of it all starts to split Carmen and Peter apart. He reiterates that he was always the one who was soft on the idea of having kids- it was Carmen who blocked the option in the interests of her work. While the medical crisis was still happening, their personal support for each other held things together. Now they seem to be drifting into an kind of emotional limbo.

In an attempt to salvage matters the idea of adoption crops up. In fact Peter's sister has just fallen pregnant for the fourth time. That particular family was already struggling, the rather wierd but feasible possibility of Terri and Peter taking on the fourth child as their own is seriously considered but never really quite followed through. In any case the fact that Peter is rapidly approaching 40 means that the option of adopting a new born baby is no longer there.

Eventually and very gradually the idea of an In Vitro pregnancy enters the equation. With her one ovary still functioning normally the biological potential for a child is firmly there for Carmen. However the process will involve a surrogate mother. The issues have been debated in the press, the whole thing seems fraught with moral and personal grey areas.

Carmel returns to Perth and talks to Terri. At first Terri is shocked by the suggestion. She flounders for a response. She has to think about it. Peter flies over and joins them. The 3 of them discuss it at great length. It seems like they're entering into an area of unchartered emotional and psychological complexity. For Peter too, it's a rather awesome decision. He already has a child, does he want more? And if so what will be the nature of his relationship with Terri- and Terri to him? Peter has, of course, known Terri almost as long as he's known Carmen. Their friendship has developed in tandem, mainly because of the annual, ritual

Xmas trek back to W.A. through which Carmen has maintained her contact with her family. Terri, also has made many trips to Melbourne. There has always been a spark between the three of them. Peter and Carmen have carried Terri through many a failed relationship. They've gone on holiday together. Without taking anything away from Peter and Carmen's relationship it would not be unfair to say that quite a bit of sexual interest already exists between the three of them.

In the end Terri and Peter come round to accepting the idea and Terri agrees to be the surrogate mother for Peter and Carmen's child. The in vitro process is successful and Terri duely gives birth to a healthy 7lb baby boy.

For the first time in what seems a long time life becomes very sweet. But in many ways the birth of the child is the beginning of a whole new story. The in vitro process has created a bond between Peter, Carmen and Terri that is completely unique. Terri naturally experiences all the pangs of a mother as, of course does Carmen. For a while this, in itself is a cause of some tension. But both can see the other's point of view and Peter by this stage is openly in love with both of them.

The only truly fair solution seems to be for all 4 of them to live together. And this they resolve to do, forming a genuinely new and rather strange but perfectly valid kind of menage-a-trois. In so doing they share equally the parenting, child minding, expense and legal responsibilities of their "little miracle." They don't necessarily see themselves as a new kind of family, unlike anything that's existed before, but that in effect is what they've become.

CHARACTERS

CARMEN is a second generation Australian of Spanish parents who managed to escape to this country in the wake of the 1936-38 civil war. She grew up in Perth, studying art at W.A.I.T. before coming to Melbourne to further her career as a moderately if intermittently successful actor. Her family still lives in Fremantle and she visits them on an annual basis- usually around Xmas. True to her Spanish blood Carmen is fiery, headstrong and independent- qualities which have obviously been of assistance in her acting career. She is genuinely popular amongst the Melbourne theatre community and is if anything a little suprised and certainly chuffed by the outpouring of generosity and concern that occurs in response to her illness.

TERRI is her best friend. They fell into one of those close, female, lifelong relationships while studying art together at college. Terri is also in her mid-thirties. For the last few years she has been working closely with various community groups and unions as resident muralist and general cultural activist. Terri has had a number of relationships with men of varying duration which have usually ended rather traumatically. These days she finds herself a lot more comfortable in the company of women, tending to stick pretty much to herself. She is equally skilled as a photographer and has had a number of small exhibitions in both Perth and Adelaide.

PETER is the black sheep son of a quasi-establishment Melbourne family. Trained as a linguist he has had a succession of jobs as a translator and has always had a particular interest in the preservation of dying languages, originally Celtic languages such as Cornish or Manx, but more recently aboriginal languages which has often taken him to the desert and particular to W.A. on which trips he has managed to maintain the connection with Terri. Seperate to this academic work and to the despair of his Brighton family he has also managed a string of small businesses of dubious permanence- including a restaurant, a deli, a bookshop, an electrical store and even a garage. Currently he is looking very seriously at ice-cream having recently returned from a research trip to Wales where he observed a 50 metre long queue outside Cadwallader's famous icecream shop near Port Madoc. Peter is a gentle but scattered bloke whose heart is in the right place but who seems congenitally incapable of settling down into the one line of work.

