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'The Secret Life of the American Teenager': But what's their motivation?

Teen pregnancy takes center stage in the ABC Family teen drama, but the deeper back story is elusive.

IN THE first few scenes of the 1994 pilot episode of "My So-Called Life," the short-lived series against which all subsequent teen shows will forever be judged, Angela Chase (Claire Danes) stares down her future as a sexual being. Her father sees her in a towel and can't come to terms with her coming of age. In school, she regards her crush, Jordan Catalano (Jared Leto), mutely. "School," she notes, "is a battlefield for your heart."

Brenda Hampton, the creator and executive producer of the new ABC Family teen drama "The Secret Life of the American Teenager" (Tuesdays, 8 p.m.), was the creative force behind "7th Heaven," among the most polite shows to have graced network television during the 1990s, but for this new project, she has taken a few more cues from "My So-Called Life," its saucier cousin.

Last month's series premiere had overt as well as subtle winks to it (extra points for the "second bell" reference). Like Angela, the protagonist here, Amy Juergens (Shailene Woodley), is shy, dresses demurely and struggles to negotiate her new identity as a young woman when all she's ever really known is how to be a child. Though she is tall and attractive, she's not particularly popular. She wears a look of perpetual wonder, bordering on shock. She plays the French horn.

And in a detail that suggests a far more complicated inner life than the first few episodes of this clumsy yet sometimes fascinating show have otherwise suggested, Amy is pregnant, thanks to a one-night stand at band camp. Thus far, this has been portrayed as something approximating an immaculate conception -- the sex was brief and unpleasant ("It wasn't fun, and definitely not like what you see in the movies," Amy tells, or warns, her two best friends), and Amy seems otherwise ignorant of affairs of the heart and body. She doesn't have a crush on Ricky (Daren Kagasoff), the cad with whom she had the one-night fling, nor on her new (and first) boyfriend, Ben (Kenny Baumann), the hopeless sap who has, in a few short weeks, made her the center of his world.

In fact, she doesn't seem to feel much at all, nor has she made any substantive efforts toward addressing her pregnancy apart from fretting. She has told her friends, Ben and her sister, but not her parents. Abortion is mentioned, on a couple of occasions, in largely grim tones. In the first episode, Amy's best friends suggested she have sex with Ben and dupe him into thinking he is the father, a ploy too knowing for a show this naive.

(Notes of reason are largely struck by tangential characters: Steven Schirripa, Bobby Bacala of "The Sopranos," is thoughtful and reasonable as Leo, Ben's father; and Ernie Hudson is pleasantly sour as Dr. Fields, Ricky's therapist. Additionally, as Amy's rebellious younger sister, Ashley, India Eisley is convincingly pouty, if narrowly so.)



NO-DEPTH CHARGE: The ABC Family series skims along the surface when high-schooler Amy Juergens (Shailene Woodley), center, learns she is expecting.

But given that "Secret Life" airs on ABC Family, its rather gratuitous premise is just that: window dressing. Most of the time, "Secret Life" is busy carrying on a debate about maintaining the traditional family structure, even in the face of preposterous circumstances. One of Ben's friends spouts teen-sex statistics like a walking PSA (online show-related content is being developed in conjunction with the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy).

There is a Christian couple struggling with temptation. And last week, it was revealed that Amy's father has been carrying on an affair with the mother of one of her schoolmates, Adrian, who is dating Ricky. This would have made for an excellent opportunity to explore Amy's motivations, but this show isn't interested in cause, only effect.

Regardless, Amy is far from the most troubled character here. Actually, it is Ben who has given the most cause for concern. All his character cues seem to come from Anthony Michael Hall in "Sixteen Candles," with even more neuroses. In the show's second episode, he told Amy he loved her. Last week, in the show's fifth episode, he got down on one knee and proposed marriage. This is, at any age, pathological behavior, displaying a desperate need to fill a profound void. (His mother is dead, though it has been little discussed.)

"Please, let me be your prince," he tells Amy; being a father to her child seems noble to Ben, or is perhaps the only reaction someone of his limited experience can fathom. Amy needs to be loved, and Ben needs to be needed. Lesser relationships, this show argues, have been built on more.