Sexual angst

by Steve A. Vineberg in the August 28, 2002 issue

Unstinting in its language and unembarrassed about explicit discussions of sex, Darren Star's *Sex and the City*, now in its fifth season on HBO, is also television's most dazzling example of high comedy. The revue-sketch glimpses of the four female protagonists' sex lives--especially that of public relations executive Samantha (Kim Cattrall), who boasts a long list of lovers--may suggest a stylish, up-to-the-minute version of burlesque. But high comedy (also known as comedy of manners) has always been as frank about sex as low comedy. In other respects, too, *Sex and the City* demonstrates how this genre operates for a modern audience. Its focus is on verbal wit. Its characters belong to an aristocracy-which, in a democratic age and place, takes the form of a closed group, bonded by a shared vision of the world and governed by rules of conduct, access to which is a tricky proposition. And though the style of the comedy is glittering and brittle, beneath it is a seriousness of content, an exploration of how people deal with major emotional issues.

Before the turn of the last century, the comedy of manners found its perfect form in Oscar Wilde's deliriously inconsequential *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Twentieth-century audiences found it in the plays of Noël Coward or, for Americans, Philip Barry. George Cukor's movie versions of *Barry's Holiday* (1938) and *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), starring those quintessential Hollywood bluebloods Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant, are the high comedies most Americans are likely to remember. Both are exquisitely stylized works; both are also very moving and profound. They are concerned with conformity and nonconformity, compromise and authenticity. *Holiday* is the story of a working-class man who, having entered the moneyed classes by way of his brains and hard work, finds that he has to barter his adventurous spirit to remain there. *The Philadelphia Story* is about an heiress who, through imposing unassailably high standards on the people she loves, has frozen them out and locked away her own humanity.

Sex and the City, in which by convention the characters' romantic escapades give rise to a sort of cultural philosophizing in a weekly column written by Carrie (Sarah

Jessica Parker), consistently attains the depth to which the comedy of manners aspires. Good high comedy doesn't just substitute tears for laughter; it conceals tears beneath the façade of laughter (Noël Coward's specialty) or offers a sophisticated blend of the two (Philip Barry's).

In the remarkable third season of *Sex and the City*, Carrie, believing she had finally gotten over her infatuation with a rich playboy referred to only as Mr. Big (Chris Noth), who wound up married to someone else, began a romance with Aidan (John Corbett), a rugged but gentle-souled furniture maker and in almost every way Big's opposite number. But then Big stumbled back into her life, his short marriage teetering, and Carrie quickly found herself cheating on Aidan. As she struggled with her conflicted feelings about the two men, and with the shame of her betrayal of Aidan and of her own moral tenets, the series became increasingly affecting. Accordingly, the performances deepened: Parker and Noth's interaction supplied some of the best-acted scenes on recent television.

That third season has been the highlight of the program's brief history. The writers have yet to find a way to sustain such deep drama without violating the show's effervescent style. But the series continues to provide memorable moments of reckoning for the characters. Miranda (Cynthia Nixon) lost her mother early in season four. Then she discovered she was pregnant and opted to raise the child alone; her exclusion from the lifestyle of her friends has provided the most touching scenes so far in the show's fifth go-round. (The season opener contained a haunting shot of her confused, lonely face pressed against a window as her cab whisked her and her infant son away after a hurried lunch with the other women.) Charlotte (Kristin Davis), whose marriage to a wealthy surgeon (Kyle MacLachlan) collapsed after a few months, is finding it hard to reactivate her cherished dream of a life of domestic happiness. And Miranda, who astonished herself by falling in love with a man with a roving eye, has found her sexual confidence undermined by their breakup. Never have the four women been so profoundly at odds with the Manhattan high life that from the outset has defined their characters. In that unease lies the potential for the drama that, at its finest, high comedy can generate.