

A culture that's tragically focused on big boobs

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It ill-behooves a man who writes about television to refer to the medium as "the boob tube." Generally I don't. But it happens that, sometimes, television is all about boobs. It just is.

I draw your attention to **Without Breasts There Is No Paradise** (TLN, 6 p.m.), an international TV sensation that has finally arrived in Canada. Thank goodness it has. The show, part of the Latin telenovela genre, is astonishing viewing.

Not just because it lingers long on female breasts. You expect that. (The promo on TLN declares, "Be warned, your eyes may have trouble staying focused on the subtitles.") It's a show driven entirely by men's interest in women's boobs. It's astonishing because, although it might appear to be trash, it isn't. It's high-minded in its way, a lurid cautionary tale of Dickensian vintage with a message - it indicts the forces that compel the main character, a teenage girl named Catalina (Maria Adelaida Puerta), to sacrifice everything in order to get the money for a breast implant operation.

Without Breasts comes from Colombia and has already been seen in dozens of countries. It's a hit everywhere. Two years ago, when Ben Silverman was installed as head of NBC Entertainment, his first act was to purchase the rights to develop an English-language version of the show. It was in development for some time, but nothing came of it.

It's easy to see why. Unlike *Ugly Betty*, a Spanish-language telenovela which Silverman had previously turned into a hit for ABC, *Without Breasts* is provocative and a story clearly headed for tragedy from its first episode.

The show is also welcome here because it offers us a window into another culture. This is a glimpse of what many countries in the world watch voraciously. Sure, it's cartoonish, but it's no more implausible and melodramatic than most U.S. network TV.

The drama begins in a high school for girls in a town in Colombia. The girls are in their school uniforms of white shirts and tiny, plaid miniskirts. One girl is talking to the rest of the class. That's Catalina. Then she faints. Her friends promise to take her home to rest. To nobody's surprise, it's all been faked. The girls want the rest of the day off school. The group immediately goes to one girls' house and they take off their clothes. They put on their makeup and street gear. They emerge looking like that 1980s girl-band the Bangles.

Soon they are corralled by a slightly older woman, Jessica. It turns out that Jessica procures young women for drug dealers. The dealers hire young women for the weekend, take them to nightclubs and private parties, ply them with drink, have sex with them and pay them handsomely.

Jessica is waiting for the guy who chooses the women. He'll show up and choose from the posse who've just escaped from high school. His name is Titi, and no, I'm not making that up. "Watch out girls, Titi's here," Jessica says as this dude in a white suit glares from the back of a car. Titi casts his eyes over the posse and lingers on Catalina.

Jessica knows he's interested, but he rejects Catalina: "Tell her she's very pretty, but she needs boobs."

Thus begins Catalina's long and terrible journey. At first she protests to Jessica that men should know the others have fake breasts. And Jessica says, "They can be made out of wood, rock or rubber. They just want them big!"

So Catalina goes jogging to get her body in shape. And she imagines herself on some drug dealer's lap, sipping cocktails, on his private jet. But everything returns to the size of her breasts. She wants to leave school and work for the money to get implants. Her mother isn't amused. Her boyfriend, who seems a very sincere fellow but really just wants to have sex with her, says, "Catalina, you're a decent girl. You have an image and a reputation to protect."

"I could care less about my reputation," Catalina says and stomps off, using the emphatic swagger of her posterior to make her disdain quite clear. She's determined to have bigger breasts. As Jessica tells her, if she can find a drug dealer who likes her, and she pleases him, he'll pay to have the breast augmentation. That becomes her goal. What happens next is even more ludicrous and appalling. First, Catalina is caught in the conundrum of the culture - she can't find a man to give her money for the new breasts because her breasts, as they are, cannot please such a man. In fact, men are portrayed as universally despicable in this tale. Catalina's brother tells her bluntly, "Find someone to support you, and give you money for both of us!"

It would be easy to mock *Without Breasts*, but it hardly deserves it. The show is an international phenomenon because it illuminates a world and culture beyond our borders, but is applicable here. Based on a best-selling novel by Colombian journalist Gustavo Bolivar, who says he based it on a true story he came across while writing about child prostitution in Colombia, it's about boobs. But this is not boob-tube rubbish. *Check local listings.*****