

# Reality Really, Really Bites

## Kris Lefcoe and 'Public Domain'

BY MARRIT INGMAN

A meth-snorting schoolgirl talks her girlfriends into bed with drug dealers. Desperate to talk, an agoraphobic traps a deliveryman in his bungalow. A mom slugs wine to the Teardrop Explodes while her 11-year-old son practices arson. Sound like typical reality-show fare? We're not even to the really sleazy part: None of these "contestants" even realize they're being filmed. Back at the studio, two supercilious hosts tally up votes for the most pathetic specimen. This is the premise of *Public Domain*, a caustically funny first feature from writer-director Kris Lefcoe. Lefcoe chatted about the film from her headquarters in Toronto.

*Austin Chronicle:* What can you tell us about setting up the hidden-camera look?

**Kris Lefcoe:** The key was always making sure there was something obscuring the frame and never moving the camera. A lot of the time the actors didn't actually know where the cameras were. That was great for the actors. I did cheat a little bit toward the end and get closer in the more emotional moments. The art department also had to make sure there was stuff in the room that looked like there could be cameras hidden in it.

*AC:* Like a plant.

**KL:** [laughs] A lot of plants. It was getting to be like some kind of jungle documentary.

*AC: [One contestant] realizes he's a figure of contempt for the audience and says, "They're just happy they're not me." Do you think that's true of reality television?*

**KL:** I think so. I think that the shameful joy that people feel when they're watching reality TV has to do with making themselves feel better about their own lives. The more pathetic the contestants seem to be, the more it seems people want to watch.

*AC: Did you really have a problem getting the rights to [the Cure's] "Killing an Arab"? Or was that tongue-in-cheek?*

**KL:** It's the classic mistake everyone talks about in film school: "Never use something in your film that you don't have the rights to and make your storyline hinge on it." The fact that we didn't get the rights to the song almost worked for this film. The storyline is already about legal problems and not having the right to show things. If we don't hear the song, maybe it's even funnier. There are a lot of legal disclaimers in the movie, and I had a lot of fun writing those.

*AC: As the film goes on, the mechanism of production is more and more present. Things start to go wrong, and we see more of that.*

**KL:** That's what I'm really interested in with this film. It doesn't look anything like reality television. The show looks more like a chat show from the Sixties. I thought it would be interesting to transpose the ethics of reality television to this different context that doesn't look like these glitzy and overproduced images that you're being fed. It's almost more evil in a way to just stand back and act as though they're not manipulating [reality] at all.

*Public Domain* screens as part of the Emerging Visions program at the Dobie, March 20, 7:45pm.