

Kathryn Flett



ON TELEVISION

I've got such a raging pash on Daphne

WHAT SHE WATCHED

DAPHNE BBC2

THE SEVEN SINS OF ENGLAND C4

BRITAIN'S RUDEST COMEDIAN: ROY CHUBBY BROWN C4

THE WORLD'S MOST OFFENSIVE JOKE C4

FROM THE FIRST drizzle-soused English exterior to the last gasp of the big fat portentous strings, I was weak with lust for both BBC2's *Daphne* and Geraldine Somerville's performance. As a biopic focusing on du Maurier's life post-*Rebecca* and up to the arrival of *My Cousin Rachel*, it not only made me want to re-read both books immediately but had me longing, with a pash, to wear Dior's New Look, smear some matte red Max Factor on my lips, grasp a martini glass and a cigarette and seek out an opportunity to make brittle small-talk with Noel round a piano while wearing a bright gay smile. Indeed, I wish there were more – more? any! – opportunities in life to come out with:

'I orrrrften get letters, you know, full of gush, from fans.'

Or:

'You looked lovelier every day. It just defeated me.'

And, extra-specialy:

'Ever since the Mademoiselle at finishing school, I've known I had "Venetian" tendencies.'

Amy Jenkins's script was, even if drawn from the source of du Maurier's own letters, pastiche-y in all the right ways, oozing the repressed sexuality and pretzel logic of upper-class post-war British mores – perfectly at ease within a production that looked just as good as it sounded.

Concentrating on an epic, glamorous transatlantic love triangle – the married du Maurier's unrequited love for her American publisher's wife, Ellen Doubleday (Elizabeth McGovern), and her consolation prize relationship with Ellen's friend Gertrude Lawrence (Janet McTeer) – it was only about halfway through that I realised I hadn't seen three such divine ladies *d'un certain* age at the epicentre of the action since, ooh... how about ever?

Though I still see McGovern as both smouldering temptress and awkward child-woman in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon A Time in America*, in which



Simply divine: Geraldine Somerville as Daphne du Maurier in the sumptuous drama, *Daphne*.

she was accessorised by the most memorable screen eyebrows since those of Brooke Shields, I read recently that she lives in Chiswick, west London, and does the school run. Shocking. These days the eyebrows are a pair of neatly groomed circumflexes, but even for those without the faintest Venetian orientation it was possible to see why Daphne was devastated when Ellen declared, sweetly, tenderly, immovably: 'I can't love you in that way.'

As Gertrude Lawrence (was there ever a sexier, less bovine Gertrude?), Janet McTeer was both haughty and naughty by turns, while Daphne and Gertie's relationship appeared to be equal parts Angela Brazil and Anais Nin. When the pair took off for Florida on a holiday, during which they lay about in a Modern hotel room wearing pastel silk wraps and painting each other's toes, I was all but ready to move to Venice. One fleeting scene of Daphne and Gertie lying in bed together, post-coitally, with perfect hair and lipstick and slender arms flung back against crisp white linen, just so, looked like it had been art-directed by Avedon. There were delightful visual jokes too – particularly the deliberately lo-tech Hitchcockian back-projection, as Daph and Gertie 'drove' through Florida.

I personally can't think of a better way to fritter away a Saturday night than with 90 minutes of literary love-in, replete with windswept beaches and manual typewriters, and this was just about as good and gorgeous as it gets. Meanwhile, I'm not sure there's an actress currently working who can milk a pregnant pause or emit a silent sigh of longing with more finesse than Geraldine Somerville.

If *Daphne* succeeded as a pastiche of an old-school Technicolor vision of England then this came as a sliver of light relief among the numerous uglier, dirtier versions on offer last week. Channel 4's *The Seven Sins of England*, for example, attempted to demonstrate that the British working classes have been an uncouth, bawdy rabble since time immemorial and that binge-drinking is probably our national sport. It did this in a highly contrived and potentially irritating way, by casting

is watching people behave appallingly.

The emotional pay-off – and by the time we'd worked our way through all the examples of bingeing, consumerism, hooliganism, slaggishness, rudeness, violence and bigotry on offer, we needed one – was seeing the binge-drinking hard bloke (whose pieces to camera were the equal of any wannabe 'Ender') breaking down in drunken tears as he admitted he had been beaten literally senseless by a gang – a CAT scan has revealed brain damage – after one spectacular binge. Not that this stopped him. It was all very clever-clogs but ultimately unedifying – assuredly not the kind of portrait of Blair's Britain that Tony will be wanting to file under L for Legacy.

To mainstream TV audiences Roy 'Chubby' Brown is almost invisible: *Britain's Rudest Comedian* (C4, during Tuesday night's offensiveness-fest) tried to show us why, but failed. It seem that at some point in the past Roy was deemed unsuitable by the Telly Powers and nothing has changed, despite the fact that there didn't seem to be the slightest difference between Brown's racist, sexist schtick and that of Bernard Manning, who a few years back even had a brief moment of fashionability. (Didn't Madonna and Guy go and see him, or is that merely surreal wishful thinking?)

Mild-mannered family man by day, foul-mouthed bigot by night, Brown (real name Royston Vasey – inspiration for the *League of Gentlemen's* hellish northern town, in an episode of which he played the Mayor) works hard, earns lots of money, sells 250,000 DVDs of his latest show every Christmas and is patently baffled by his 30-year exclusion from the G&T-golf-and-gags set. Denying he had the faintest interest in hanging with Tarby, he was nonetheless moved when the late Bob Monkhouse phoned to wish him better after he had been diagnosed with throat cancer. 'I didn't know he knew I existed.'

Throat cancer. Now there's a thing. Futile to wonder if Brown had ever drawn a parallel between spewing filth for a living and being visited by a cancer right where it would hurt him most – he couldn't even see the blurred boundaries between his allegedly funny (well, the audience laughed) Paki-bashing riffs onstage and his, er, not funny-at-all Paki-bashing riffs offstage – but it was food for karmic thought. Today Michael Barrymore probably stands more chance of prime-time rehab than Brown, if only because the former used to be funny.

The following night C4 (again) blessed us with *The World's Most Offensive Joke*. Except it didn't. But before it didn't it gave us lots of other very offensive jokes, which was good, not to mention old footage of Michael Parkinson hooting at a racist Bernard Manning-ism.

I love an offensive joke, but we all have our offensiveness cut-off point. For me it's probably – and certainly this week – paedophilia (or 'kiddie fiddling' as the voiceover had it, which was offensive in itself) but certainly not dead princesses. For many, however, Rory Bremner's sketch in which the late Diana spoke to Tony Blair before signing off with the line 'there's this Versace thing I've got to go to' was a bit much when broadcast a mere five years after her death – the implication being that he might have got less flak after seven. I thought it was hilarious.

The upshot was that the British seem to excel at telling offensive jokes, and 'I you do a joke on the day, you're genius', according to comedian Andre Vincent, who played live on 11 September and made a joke about Jenga, which didn't

You could see why Daph was devastated when Ellen tenderly declared: 'I can't love you in that way'

and the documentary footage of, say, lairy lads out on the lash or a bouncer working a nightclub door. Towards the end, as the "actors" collusion with the filmmakers meant they could cut effortlessly from reciting what were in effect commentaries on their own lives, albeit written long ago, to living out those lives in front of us, it became quite compelling – if your idea of compelling

HANDFUL OF DUST

BBC2's *The Museum* belongs very much to the past. Twee springs to mind, and fusty and quaint, and yet, in its way, it is lovely and as quintessentially British as its subject matter, the British Museum. Last week we met the conservators, who scrape old things with scalpels for the good of the nation but do not necessarily ooze televisual charm. Unless they are conservation babe Alex, who is the spit of Gina Bellman. Alex (below) was working on an ancient bronze, nicknamed Charlie and originally thought to be an Apollo, but which turned out to be a glorified candlestick ('he's been demoted from god to furniture'). When Charlie was prepped to return to his plinth, wheeled on a gurney, the scene was accompanied by the *Casualty* theme tune. Yes, *The Museum* is more predictable and less offensive than Radio 3 at bedtime, but if you like *A Year at Kew*, look back fondly on those 1980s docs on the Forces and remember queuing, Britishly, for an entire day to see Tutankhamun, you'll love it.



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