

The weekend on television



Benji Wilson

Stolen reminded us of the country we really live in

The worry was that *Stolen* (BBC One, Sunday), a feature-length single drama about child trafficking, might be just a little too preachy to stomach.

The alarm bells jangled from the first frame, which was a white-on-black strap reading: "Once upon a time, each and every day in fact, children are being trafficked and put to work, unpaid, unprotected, unseen." If the first law of television is "show, don't tell" this was like being lectured by a po-faced Pecksniff, or Bono.

In the event, Justin Chadwick's film, starring Damian Lewis as a detective in the Human Trafficking Unit, stayed just on the right side of overbearing. I could have done without the loungecore soundtrack more familiar from ads for fleet cars. But in most other aspects *Stolen* was taut, potent and beautifully filmed.

Stolen followed three children from their arrival in this country. One of them, Rosemary, 11, was brought in by a trafficker, and sold as a house servant. The other two bodies for sale were Kim Pak, a Vietnamese boy, 15, sent to work on a suburban cannabis factory; and Georgie, a 14-year-old Ukrainian who came into the country full of wonder – and left it in a coffin.

Given that the link between them was a cop, Lewis's Anthony Carter, the film was curiously uncoplike. It paid scant heed to the nuts and bolts of the investigation. It didn't follow the characters you expected and it took barely a passing interest in Carter's background and motivations. The focus was squarely on the children, which seems to have been the writer's point – usually they go unnoticed.

As for Damian Lewis, the aggregate of interviews may suggest he is an old-school smarm-bucket, but whatever you think of him, the screen doesn't lie: time and again he really is very good indeed. Here he used those warm twinkly eyes and that benevolent half-smile as a veil, barely concealing a man who was exceedingly angry. The film explained why – child trafficking is a \$12 billion industry that's going on all around us. What appalled Carter about that was not the \$12 billion, but that putting children into slavery can be termed "industry" at all, as if people were products.

But if Lewis was good, and Chadwick's direction excellent, they were both knocked into a cocked hat by the young actors, all of them unknowns. It's just a



Spellbinding: Huy Pham as a Vietnamese boy sold into slavery in Britain in *Stolen*

hunch, but could it be that child actors are getting better with age (mine, not theirs)? Are stage schools the only schools in the country where results are improving? Regardless, Gloria Oyewumi, Huy Pham and Inokentij Vitkevics were simply spellbinding. In particular the steady realisation on Vitkevics's face that the Britain he'd first thought was a land of milk and honey was actually Gomorrah, and unbearable. There could be no more piercing reminder of the gap between the country we are, and the country we'd like to think we are.

"Torture, pain and more pain," might be some people's description of the Top 10 each week but it is also, according to *Secrets of the Pop Song* on BBC Two (Saturday), what makes a great ballad. Ballads are by far the most popular type of song – *Candle in the Wind* is the biggest-selling single of all time and *Yesterday* has been covered more than any other – from which we may surmise that human beings like pain more than anything else. I suppose that explains the success of Roxette.

Secrets of the Pop Song set out to deconstruct ballads (anthems and breakthrough singles are to come) by building one from scratch. Robbie Williams's songwriter Guy Chambers sat down at the piano with none other

than Rufus Wainwright to show us how it's done.

Their collaboration was wonderful to behold, proving once again that the best thing television can do with art is show it being made, rather than talking about it. This being essentially a music documentary, however, the spectre of *This is Spinal Tap* was never far away. That spoof film really has obliterated an entire generation of musicians' chances of ever being taken seriously on camera. Last night, for example, in a documentary that was looking in earnest at one of the vertebrae of modern culture, there were still some momentous giggles as men who have sold more records than most of us have red blood cells made ninnies of themselves.

For example, neither Guy nor Rufus could come up with a word that rhymed with "battles". Watching them flounder was delicious fun. Similarly, Guy's face when Rufus, a man with a voice like sweetest sorrow, announced that he was thinking about rapping on his next record, was a song cycle in itself. "I think that would be... dangerous," said Guy. Then again, Guy did suggest that they call their soaring ballad *World War Three*, on the grounds that you should always aim for a title no one's used before.