



NURSE, THE SCREENS! **The Word**

TV BY BARRY McILHENY

Welcome to Home Time, where all your sitcom stereotypes are turned inside out

THE BEST STUFF CREEPS UP UNANNOUNCED. So it is with BBC2's *Home Time*, advertised only by a sneak preview clip emailed out to subscribers of this very magazine. Bar that, silence. No advance press, no industry scuttlebutt, nothing. All of which makes its arrival at 10pm on Friday nights all the more enjoyable, a grown-up sitcom that makes you think and laugh out loud at the same time.

The basic premise is so compelling in this era of the boomerang offspring that it's extraordinary it hasn't been done before. Gaynor (co-writer and co-producer Emma Fryer) was 17 back in 1997 when she forsook her home town of Coventry in the first week of New Labour coming to power. Now, every bit as lost and disillusioned as the party she would have voted for if only she'd been a few days older, she comes back home to live with her parents. As she announces in a brilliant opening sequence to the first episode of this current run of six, she is now 29 years old.

The rich comic potential in the notion of overgrown children going back home to live with Mum and Dad is mined to the full by Fryer and co-writer Neil Edmond. Mum, for example, has suddenly gone all Irish, a latterday Mrs Doyle in the making, just back from Asda with "the Canderel and a four-pinter". Roy the Dad, played by Philip Jackson – an actor with a face so hangdog he makes Stephen Rea look like a clown – sits at home in his sweater, worrying in classic fatherly fashion about the house keys situation and trying to come to terms with his little girl now being back in the house as a fully grown woman. His well-meaning attempt to calm Gaynor's nerves as she goes for a job interview still makes me chuckle one week on. "Sod 'em, Gay," he offers, "everybody's got a bumhole."

But what should hopefully guarantee *Home Time* at least another series is its refusal to make life simple, to tie up all the loose ends, to fall back on the golden rules of sitcom. Instead it leaves whole areas unanswered and messy, most notably what exactly the lead character has been doing these last 12 years, and it's willing to go way beyond the conventional boundaries and address modern life outside this post-nuclear family and the four walls they so awkwardly inhabit.

In its nuanced exploration of friendship and family life, *Home Time* takes the traditional sitcom stereotypes and turns them inside out. Once upon

a time, the four lead females would have been the pretty one, the funny one, the mousey one, and the one that's trying to diet. Here, instead, we have the spaced-out clubber, the babysitting hippy, the businesswoman serving up the after-dinner grammes of charlie, and Gaynor herself, a considerably more complex character than the basic comedic set-up may suggest. Similarly, where dad and daughter would once have argued over that bloody racket she keeps listening to in her room, here Gaynor and Roy sit in the car together, both singing along quietly to *Champagne Supernova*, seeming to say more to each other in this one oddly moving moment than they have ever done before.

"Where were you when we were getting high?" they both intone, the years melting away, as a solitary tear rolls down Fryer's face. In another key shift from the norm, the ghost of Britpop is everywhere here, Pulp and Supergrass blaring out at regular intervals, while this is surely the first sitcom in history to play out to the toe-tapping sounds of Radiohead's *No Surprises*. If *Home*

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Time recalls anything in this inversion of the normal rules and regulations, it's the first series of *Gavin And Stacey*, with its tattooed heavyweight leading lady, mad gay uncle and unfamiliar Welsh small-town setting.

Coventry, a city not known for its dramatic potential, is here presented as a microcosm of modern British urban life. "We've even got an IKEA now," one character marvels, "and the garage sells sushi!" The local Peugeot factory is a symbol of both the old and the new, being the last place where Dad worked some 15 years ago and now the home of the inevitable bollocks-talking bigshot, a man who stares out over the skyline and visualises a city entirely covered in cladding. This is a town where a top night out ends with the beautiful people "in a VIP section roped off at the Quick-Stop Balti".

Ultimately *Home Time* confirms what John Lloyd says on page 26 of this issue about great TV through the ages. It's a show that assumes you've got the intelligence to spot the easy answers and predictable plotlines, so it's impossible to second-guess where it might go from here. It hits that golden comic spot where aspiration meets reality, as pointed up by a lead character who comes back home to live with her parents just shy of her 30th birthday "with her tail between her legs and not even a starter home to show for it". I think you might love it. ■