

Victor Lewis-Smith (well-known for extremely acerbic TV reviews) did this piece for London's Evening Standard on one of Granada Plus' runs of the episodes. – Steve

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VICTOR LEWIS-SMITH

I say, James, what a gem

Upstairs Downstairs: a television classic inexplicably banished to the wastes of satellite

MASTER Victor,” my old nursemaid used to say as she bounced me naked on her knee (I was 25 and she was naked), “there are three things you’ll need to know later in life. Firstly, cats are not clean, they’re covered in cat spit. Secondly, never be frightened of flying. Flying isn’t dangerous, it’s *crashing* that’s dangerous. And thirdly, don’t believe anyone who tells you that nostalgia isn’t what it used to be. *Algia* means pain, and that’s what I feel whenever I remember the bad old days. Believe me, back then it was all smog, polio, rickets, tuberculosis, and the workhouse. Any children who could still walk after they’d been thrashed and bugged by the local vicar went barefoot and hungry, wages were a farthing a year, and policemen used to give you a clip round the ear. Huge metal thing it was, like a wheel clamp, and he’d clip it on to your ear lobe for weeks at a time.” Poor woman. She rambled terribly at the end (and without even a pair of thick rambling socks on). We had to have her put down, you know.

Nostalgia may involve pain, but which of us isn’t up for a spot of televisual masochism from time to time? With the current entertainment output at an all-time low, I’m increasingly turning to archive programmes on satellite channels, and have spent much of the past few months at 165 Eaton Place, reobserving life **Upstairs Downstairs** on Granada Plus. Not having seen this chronicle of early 20th-century Belgravia since it was

first aired (1971-75), I’d imagined that it would all seem as quaintly romantic and passé as Alexander Faris’ memorable waltz-theme, but I was wrong because these 68 episodes fearlessly embrace such gritty topics as war, feminism, general strikes, homosexuality, adultery and death. In each episode, the epic scandals and successes that befall Lord Bellamy’s family are counter-balanced by lesser (but equally heartfelt) triumphs and disasters in the servants’ lives, with the two worlds linked by the tragi-comic figure of Rose – a humble skivvy who takes far more pride in the aristocratic system than do any of the toffs themselves.

We’re currently reliving the final series and this weekend’s episode was devoted to tying up the frayed strands of Major James Bellamy’s disastrous life. Damaged by thwarted love and his horrific experiences at Passchendaele, he’d apparently made good as a speculator in the US, and returned joyously to London early in October 1929, full of tales about the wonders of Wall Street. How different it all sounded from today, this story of a hopelessly-overvalued New York stock market with “Goldman Sachs at the centre of it all,” an absurd optimism gripping credulous investors, and inevitable financial collapse just round the corner. We were even told that “the chauffeurs are rich over in America,” and I suppose that they must always have been very well-paid. I mean, they’re always driving the most fabulous cars.

Relating this below stairs were the admirably unimpressed Hudson and Mrs Bridges, soberly advising their subordinates that “the stock exchange is not for the likes of us,” and staunchly emphasising the dignity of work. But Rose (tempted by the lure of easy money) was naïve enough to entrust her life’s savings to James and, when Wall Street crashed days later, both were financially ruined. The morality was clear (“Speculation is just another word for gambling” declared Hudson, with all the joyless relish of a fire-and-brimstone Presbyterian minister), but whereas Rose still had her job, James had lost money he didn’t have, and promptly decided that the only remaining course of action was to ventilate his own head the man’s way with his army revolver. How strange. What with him being a toff (and therefore unused to manual

labour of any kind), you'd think he'd simply have asked his chauffeur to take him for a drive, and then said "Drive off that cliff, Edward, I want to commit suicide."

As television continues its headlong rush into disintegration (broadcasting 300 channels in a single country is as foolhardy as opening 20 theatres in a small village), programmes like this remind us what the medium was capable of in an era when (for a low budget, even by 70s' standards) the best talent wasn't spread as thinly as Marmite across too many stations. "We could sell the family jewels," said Georgina at one point (in a plucky attempt to save James from ruin), and I found myself wondering why LWT has consigned this family jewel to the scullery of its own Granada Plus, instead of proudly displaying it on (at the very least) ITV 2. Not repeating classic television is as absurd as reading a book once and then throwing it away, and this spectacular series demonstrates eloquently how the small screen can win out artistically over cinema. As its script editor Alfred Shaughnessy once remarked, "television is electronic theatre, and not second-rate film."