



AA ON PG

► Gill, a big fan, fears
Wodehouse has had his day

THE SUNDAY TIMES

He does some of his best work under cover

Spies of Warsaw, Mr Selfridge, Growing Up Poor, On the Verge of a Midlife Crisis and Borgen

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Tennant plays a French James Bond — I know, an insult to the laws of DNA, but he's very good at it

Victorian actor-manager, a luvvie twice his size, with double his volume. That would explain so much — why so often Tennant seems to be struggling to contain a talent that's running him, or trying to escape. His gestures become vast, he does open-mouthed panting-performing, and occasionally the inner thespian completely acts him off the screen or stage. He is a homunculus in the grip of a theatrical power greater than himself. You can see the panic in his eyes. He thought he was doing Benedick in *Much Ado*, but the inner luvvie decides to vamp Captain Hook.

This, of course, is perfect method transference for Doctor Who, who is already a Russian doll of past

Sometimes I watch David Tennant and think, this is a perfectly nice, perfectly ordinary chap possessed by an actor. He must have been just mooching about Paisley, then suddenly he was invaded by the undead spirit of some huge

Doctors, although what William Hartnell feels about having to live inside Matt Smith, we probably shouldn't dwell on. Tennant is best when he is doing parts his inner actor really isn't interested in, and just offers an occasional shrug or overegged yawn. A while back, in *Single Father*, he gave a nice performance in the title role, touching and believable; this week he's done it again, but in *Warsaw*. **Spies of Warsaw** is an unexpected production about an unlikely subject. It is a war story that cleverly doesn't involve us or the Americans, so we are spared the partisan sentiment. This one is about the French and the Poles, and is a reminder that, though Europe is collectively bound by the war, every country fought a very different war. Poland was squeezed on two fronts, by fascism and communism. The French were desperate for no rematch of the Great War. *Warsaw* in 1938 was a borscht of intrigue.

Tennant plays a French James Bond — I know the very idea of a French 007 is an oxymoron and an insult to the laws of DNA, but he's very good at it. The story is all intrigue and old-car chases, deals and double deals, running through woods, sex on trains and leather jackets before they were camp. It's all beautifully lit and atmospherically shot in Poland.

The real mystery is why this lavish and excellent production was shown on BBC4, the Poland of broadcasting. The clue may be that it was coproduced by BBC America, for the USA, with EU money. The love interest is the arresting Janet Montgomery, out of *Entourage*; and if all that weren't enough, there is the actor laddie all other period actors would wish to be intimately haunted by, Anton Lesser.

Entourage was spawning all over TV this week. Jeremy Piven, late of that cougar-frotting show, is now Gordon Selfridge. Quickly, list your favourite shows about shops: *Steptoe and Son* (technically a junkyard is a shop), *Are You Being Served?*, *Open All Hours*, *Black Books*, *Miranda*. Now, what have they all got in common? They are funny. Shops on television are funny. They are big boxes of props for gags and puns and pratfalls and fork handles. The BBC did try to sell us an unfunny shop before Christmas — I think it's now a Starbucks, or the Question of Sport studio. Incidentally, is *A Question of Sport* the only quiz on TV where the contestants take the result seriously? Poor, sad, kicked-in-the-head oafs.

Back to **Mr Selfridge**. It is spectacularly, whoopingly dire, both singularly and collectively a towering store of wrong. As the lift girls go: "Third floor for wrong shoes, wrong bags, wrong frocks and wrong scripts." Piven is possibly the most random piece of casting on television. For most of the first episode, he emoted (he doesn't do talking) that he was going to find the best people for the job, and I kept thinking, why didn't the casting director think of that? Piven should look away now. He was the worst actor in *Entourage*, and they set the drama bar at a level that was below most infant-school Nativity plays. He owns one look, a sort of goofy what-me? grin. Not terribly useful for an incisive entrepreneur who invented modern shopping and was a serial philanderer. Piven isn't streaming anything, not even the vague idea of why he's wearing this weird collar, or who those kids who keep calling him "Dad" are. Acting is about fooling the audience, not yourself.

The thin consolation for Piven is that the direction of the show is worse. They spent a lot of the considerable budget on a complicated camera rig that swooped about the store, with actors counted in like an artistic relay race to move the shot along. It was eye-achingly silly. As was everything else: the script, the awful, misogynistically flirty women. There's been a lot of muttering about the amount of free publicity the real department store is getting from this series. Well, if I were the Weston family, who now own Selfridges, I would be suing everyone on the credits for defamation. This is the sort of publicity catastrophe it takes a generation to come back from.

Growing Up Poor was a simple documentary that looked at the lives of three teenage girls trying to exist on benefits of £8 a day. They were all from the north, none of them had a functioning family and their stories were similarly depressing and hopeless. The camera watched with sympathy, but without judgment or intervention; the editing, the emphasis and the moral were all in who they chose to film. It was also occasionally inspiring. What I particularly liked was a touch of the old Grierson ethos. A documentary should show the nation itself, not to scorn or mock or be vicariously disgusted, but to understand, to empathise and to see that the things that are different about us are not as great as the things that connect us.

Then, at the other end of the social and emotional scale, we were offered **On the Verge of a Midlife**

Crisis, introduced by Sharon Horgan, an Irish actor-presenter-comedian-writer. Her career has shown promise in all departments. Indeed, she has made more professional promises than the queues for Wonga. Now she is fronting this show about female midlife crises, but she has only *nearly* got one herself, you understand, because obviously she's not old enough yet. Because, if she were middle-aged, she'd have to stop wearing the too-tight jeans and flicking the annoyingly too-long hair and doing that ironic-chick comedy stuff. And she probably wouldn't get any more Channel 4 gigs. It was an hour of self-obsessed, needy, self-deluded, sad women — no different from their male counterparts, then. Rarely do two documentaries counterpoint and illuminate each other like this and *Growing Up Poor*.

More people ask my opinion about **Borgen** than any other programme. Do I like it? Why do they like it? Does anyone else like it? And what is it about Scandinavians? Yes, I do like it, very much, actually, and one of the reasons people are taken with it is, I think, because it has subtitles, which contrarily makes it more engrossing. It is unlike anything made here or in America. It is superficially a Nordic West Wing, without the tiring sentiment and the messianic belief in being a predestined people.

Borgen is about the real politics of essentially decent folk. We like them not because they are paragons, but because they're like us — particularly the women. The female characters are strong, attractive, independent, flawed, both sexual and businesslike. But they're not exceptional: they're simply equal, which is surprising, and reminds us how stereotypical most English-language drama still is. When we do get women in lead roles, they're playing against the stereotype, and it's underlined, semaphored, self-congratulatory. Borgen's stories are just stories, but its characters are unique because they're honest and they're human.

Spies of Warsaw (BBC4, Wed)

Mr Selfridge (ITV1, Sun)

Growing Up Poor (BBC3, Wed)

On the Verge of a Midlife Crisis (C4, Wed)

Borgen (BBC4, Sat)

3 comments

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Nigel Toye

2 hours ago

I usually find AA Gill irritatingly snobby and dismissive, but the short but empathetic review of "Growing Up Poor" was thoughtful and to the point.

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J E Newman

7 hours ago

@Chris Thompson What part of the expression 'television critic' do you not understand?

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hannahbaby

5 hours ago

@Chris Thompson

You mean, you're BOASTING about liking Selfridge and BOASTING about wanting more?

Are you ill?

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