

Upstart Crow Series 2

Presented by **BBC Two**. First broadcast September 11 - December 25, 2017. Written by Ben Elton. Directed by Richard Boden. Produced by Myfanwy Moore and Gareth Edwards. Music by Grant Olding. With David Mitchell (Will Shakespeare), Liza Tarbuck (Anne Hathaway), Gemma Whelan (Kate), Rob Rouse (Bottom), Mark Heap (Robert Greene), Harry Enfield (John Shakespeare), Paula Wilcox (Mary Arden), Tim Downie (Kit Marlowe), Helen Monks (Susanna), Steve Speirs (Richard Burbage), Dominic Coleman (Henry Condell), Spencer Jones (William Kempe), Jocelyn Jee Esien (Lucy), and others.

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I wonder how much time over the course of his career William Shakespeare spent on the commute between London and Stratford-upon-Avon.

For all of the critical conjecture about Shakespeare's pre-1592 "lost years," we rarely hear discussion of the lost hours and weeks—even months—of his professional existence that Shakespeare must have spent embroiled in the three- or four-day journey between work and his family home. How might those trips have shaped him? Was he, like so many of us, frustrated by unexpected delays caused by "unusually wet leaves" on the track? Might he, too, have suffered the slings and arrows of outrageous coach replacement services?

Such scenarios are the subject of one of the best running gags in Ben Elton's irreverent Shakespeare sitcom, *Upstart Crow*, the second series of which aired last Autumn on BBC Two. To get a sense of the show's comedic flavor one need look no further than the scenes in which Will (David Mitchell, in full *Soapbox* flow) greets his wife (the inimitable Liza Tarbuck) by ranting and raving about the deficiencies of sixteenth-century public transport: "Had to stand the whole way," spits the masterful observer of transcendent human complexities, with the righteous indignation of the delayed commuter. "Two days with my face in the armpit of a man who appeared to be actually sweating urine."

These kinds of jokes exemplify the special charm of *Upstart Crow*. The strengths of the show lie not merely in broad toilet humor or the comical juxtaposition of modern attitudes and early modern imagery, but in the way that these sitcom staples serve to humanize the world's greatest playwright. This is Shakespeare as we so rarely see him depicted in popular culture: Shakespeare the family man; Shakespeare the working man; Shakespeare, one of us.

The first series of *Upstart Crow* was produced in 2016 as part of the BBC's program of events and entertainments commemorating the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death. The plot revolves around Will's early struggles in the London showbiz scene, circa 1592-3. This tongue-in-cheek take on Shakespeare's life has been lauded as an enjoyable return to form for Elton, and his most successful television venture since *Blackadder* (Raeside, Rampton, Delingpole). High praise indeed, but not altogether surprising given the similarities between the two shows: following its precursor, *Upstart Crow* is well-researched whilst also playing fast and loose with historical fact; it utilizes anachronisms for comic purpose; it rewards viewers with comedy that is at turns deeply intelligent and profoundly silly. Comical observations based on academic debates about Shakespeare's sexuality, education, and attitudes towards women are complemented by questionable gags and crude jokes which come thick and fast. "Bolingbrokes" and "futtocking"

become rather satisfying profanities. Characters talk in asides, which “by strict convention cannot be heard.” Harry Enfield plays John Shakespeare as part-Baldrick, part-Falstaff, offering filthy gags and working class wisdom from atop the chamberpot. “Women ain’t supposed to be sophisticated as us men”, he pronounces sagely, while voiding his bowels. His wife Mary (Paula Wilcox) sits close by, wearing a perpetually resigned expression.

Most importantly, though, *Upstart Crow* is, like *Blackadder*, an underdog story about a brilliant but flawed, and therefore relatable protagonist. Despite being only a jobbing writer at this point in his career, Will is presented as an ambitious social climber: by impressing audiences with his drama and poetry, he hopes to earn a place among the nobility, secure a family coat of arms, and ultimately bring honor and legitimacy to the house of Shakespeare. His aspirations however, are persistently thwarted by circumstances beyond his control. Travel problems are only the start of it: the disgruntled bard must also contend with egotistical actors, civic politics, and his best friend Kit Marlowe (Tim Downie, as the loud embodiment of horny, impulsive masculinity) forever trying to pinch his work and pass it off as his own. Even Will’s own genius tends to get in the way of artistic success: as his manservant, Bottom (Rob Rouse) points out, “you always come up with a brilliant one-liner and then ruin it by going on and on and on.”

Will’s stiffest opposition, though, comes from the gentry, led by fellow playwright and Master of the Revels, Robert Greene (played by Mark Heap as a gloriously exaggerated pantomime villain). Greene and his fellow conspirators resent the burgeoning popularity of this working class “upstart crow,” as well as his apparent desire to write plays that people want to see. “The theatre is no place for popular entertainment,” reasons one high-born scholar at a secret meeting. Repugnant snobbery and class conflict have obvious topical relevance, and Elton relishes the opportunity to satirize the twenty-first-century establishment. How does a powerful cabal of ill-mannered ex-public school boys plan to derail the aspirations of a humble merchant’s son from the sticks? “Abuse of privilege, gentlemen,” cackles Greene, “Abuse of privilege!”

Mitchell’s Will is not the first cinematic or televised incarnation of Shakespeare to be characterized as a witty underdog, but I can recall few such depictions that offer such a sympathetic take on the man as a husband and father. And here, perhaps, is where the real strength of the series lies. Mitchell’s balding, put-upon Will is a far cry from the brooding hunk embodied by Joseph Fiennes in *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), or even the plucky young hero of *Bill*, played by Mathew Baynton (2015). These versions both offer viewers a Shakespeare captivated by London and his theatrical aspirations, and whose family life in Stratford-upon-Avon is shunned or dismissed altogether. Fiennes’s Shakespeare surprises his lover Viola when she discovers he already has a wife in Stratford; Baynton’s Bill faces an angry Anne who refuses to uproot the family and follow him to “that bloody London.” In *Upstart Crow*, however, Will remains grounded in family life. Rather than falling irretrievably for all the trappings and promises of the capital, each episode sees him trek back to the family home, which is presented as a place of relative peace from the big city. Here, Shakespeare is humanized: his family act as a whetstone for his ideas, and curb his more egotistical impulses.

Will’s most vocal critic in the household is his sullen teenage daughter Susanna, here played by a scene-stealing Helen Monks. Susanna’s utter exasperation and palpable distaste whenever her father imposes his particular brand of genius upon the household are hilariously, painfully evocative of similar scenes in English classrooms up and down the country. “Have it your way. I don’t care. Stop being weird!” laments Susanna in episode 5, giving voice to the frustrations of many a GCSE student over the years. By the same token, however, the generational and artistic gap between

father and daughter makes the moments where the pair bridge their divide feel all the more satisfying. In episode 6, Will writes his script for *Romeo and Juliet*, claiming his inspiration for his female heroine from his own adolescent daughter. Moved to tears while reading the script, Susanna gives Will his best compliment to date—and in doing so, aptly describes the experience of many young readers of Shakespeare, approaching the plays for the first time:

SUSANNA: [...] if you really read it and give it a chance, and come back to it quite a few times, and slowly familiarize yourself with the language and the imagery, weirdly, you can start to sort of enjoy it.

WILL: Yes, I rather think that's the way it's gonna be with my stuff.

We have here, then, an entertaining diversion of a show that, for all of its conjecture, exaggeration, silliness, and jokes about codpieces, works to create a reassuringly human Shakespeare—a Shakespeare facing the same kinds of difficulties and concerns as his audience. Each episode ends with Will and Anne sitting by the fire, smoking pipes and reflecting on the day's events. These surprisingly touching scenes, in which Anne offers her husband advice that rings true to the twenty-first-century audience (if not necessarily to Will), encapsulate the endearing domesticity at the heart of the show, and perhaps at the heart of Shakespeare himself. There is a lot to like about this *Upstart Crow*. He might just catch on.

Works Cited

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