

WE ARE HENRY VIII, WE ARE...

By Karoline Leach

Have you seen that opening sequence in 'Last Action Hero', where Schwarzenegger is playing Hamlet in a send-up of Hollywood crassness?

"There's something rotten in the state of Denmark", the voice-over announces, "and Hamlet is taking out the trash!".

Cue Arnie, in a doublet and hose, "Claudius, you killed my father -- BIG mistake...", a fight with crossbows and machine guns then follows.

This is actually quite funny, in fact it's rather a clever satire on what really really bad screenwriting can do. I don't think I ever expected to see anything that actually replayed that satire as the real thing - and then I saw the new ITV drama - 'Henry VIII'

It even had the same 'bad guy' - Charles Dance, as 'Buckingham' arranging to meet his fellow conspirators 'outside London' (you know the place), which turned out to mean a little bit of wood, where he and Arnie - sorry I mean Ray Winstone - faced off with jujitsu before the bad guy ends up in the 'Tower', being tortured by the kind of guys who do torturing in really bad movies.

If it had been meant as a satire on all the awful anally-confined dumbed-down fourth-rate-celeb-driven tragedy of contemporary British telly then it would have been ace, perfect, because everything was there - Winstone's Cockney git depiction of Henry; the sorry mix of trying-to be Hollywood glamour and failing (poor talented Helena Bonham Carter, looking beautiful and bewildered and probably wondering how the hell she was going to get out of this without anyone recognising her), to the half-hearted attempt at 'period', which seemed to involve filming it in someone's windowless garage and pumping in lots of smoke; the pathetically simplistic plot with every meaningful point hammered home hard enough to get through to the most deeply lobotomised viewer, wondering why the people in THIS soap are wearing such funny clothes. "Wossa matter wiv you Woolsy, me Dad tole me to getta suhn, so sort it - orl raght?"

And the Bad Guys, who are Bad Guys and no nonsense about it: Baldie Norfolk, looking like a refugee from *Trainspotting* or a psycho ward; Thomas Cromwell, tricked out like Wormtongue from *Lord of the Rings*; lank hair, a deranged smile and a strange habit of hiding in corners and looking squinty and sinister; Buckingham as Goldfinger or any other crazed movie madman, lurking and staring and plotting to take over the world.

In this drama, Henry is the King of Albert Square, not England and Wales, and almost everything happens within about fifty feet of him, so he can yell and swear about it, and maybe take a swipe at his enemies before being pulled off by his mates. His political stand-off with Buckingham here ends in a fist fight; the Aske rebellion, which actually happened in Yorkshire and never got any

closer to the king than a few miles, here has its denouement in Henry's living room, with Robert Aske making a valiant last stand against the bookcase.

And what about that last stand? Sean Bean reprising the Death of Boromir from *The Fellowship of the Ring* – almost literally frame for frame. The same slowmo sequence, the same arrows; is this irony? Less obviously, but perhaps just as revealingly, other scenes, like Henry listening behind the door to Anne Boleyn's trial proceeding, were taken almost verbatim (really) from the 1969 movie *Anne of a Thousand Days*, even though they were nothing but travesties of historical truth in their first incarnation and got only worse for substituting the differently talented Ray Winstone for Richard Burton, who at least knew how to play something beside East End hard boys.

This 'Henry VIII' in all its silly arrogance doesn't know anything about the realities of Tudor politics, Tudor fashions, Tudor religion, and obviously doesn't much care.

Wolsey gets hustled off to the Tower by a couple of Corleone-style thugs, because no one cares to know about the curious pantomime of grave politeness and courtesy that really governed the way great people were arrested. Anne Boleyn goes to her execution to the howls of rent-a-mob, because it wasn't on the agenda for anyone to find out that she was actually - and for important political reasons - executed inside the Tower precincts, where there would only be official observers.

Does this matter? Does it matter that it's nothing but a conflation of warmed over cliches that were done much better before, and inappropriate adolescent comic-book characterisations? That the Tudor court was never like this? That nothing real could ever be like this? That Cromwell was an urbane and successful lawyer, Norfolk a small dapper, non-bald, non-bearded, non-psycho diplomat, Buckingham a dignified old Plantagenet murdered for reasons of dynastic convenience, and not Charles Dance giving his standard glassy-eyed bad man, this time in a Tudor hat?

Apparently it doesn't matter at all – in fact no one even seems to notice. And this is where any laughter starts to falter.

As satire 'Henry VIII' would have been near genius. But the awful thing is, the truly awful, awesome thing is – it was meant to be serious, and some people - apparently smart people - are actually taking it seriously. This is highly unnerving

How can we be failing to notice how gloriously effusively comically bad it all is? Are we so high on irony? Are we dumbed? Have too many bad soaps and terrible reality tv shows blunted us and killed our sense of the ridiculous, or are we just so starved right now of good drama that anything that even aspires to be heavyweight and serious is seized and smothered in adoration, even if it is frankly as stinky and absurd as a skunk in evening dress?

Even the BBC in 1969, with a budget of around three and six made a better attempt at conveying the richness and dynamism of the Tudor court. Back then they produced a Henry who might have walked shabbily cardboard galleries in costumes made out of cotton wool and spray paint, but he did so with subtlety and style. This was a Henry of incredible complexity, alternately charming, and self-pitying, whining, cultured, psychopathic, coldly terrifying and vulnerable; a Henry for grown-ups who were expected to know something about their own history and the universals of the real human condition, who could appreciate complex situations and a kind of drama that didn't need to be converted into soap language and simplistic emotional extremes in order to be intelligible. In contrast, our Henry's candle-flickering nether-world, was more like the Dark Ages - festering, absurd, simple-minded, childish. Is this maybe the key?

Is it awfully possible we have the 'Henry' we deserve, that we love him because he is the only one we are any longer equipped to understand? Not the Renaissance Henry who could speak four languages, wrote music conversed with great minds, because he might make us feel challenged, threatened, perhaps dimly aware of how flaccid we have become. No our Henry is a feel-good Henry; a podgy Essex-man, with the education and charisma of a potato, fed on reality telly, gormless and thick, thrashing about in his own miserable ignorance. This Henry reads the Sun, and is proud of it. If we think he is better, more 'real' maybe it's because our concept of reality has become so terrifyingly small.

The clunky dialogue, the fatuous, ignorant presentation of history, the absurd anachronistic accents. If this is, officially the best we can do, the best we can even imagine doing then maybe we are not just dumbing, we are dumbed. Dumbed beyond the sense of our own dumbness, dumbed beyond satire, beyond irony, beyond any caring or respect for past ages, their lives and manners, historical accuracy, dramatic subtlety, or anything but our own ignorance which we present to ourselves as a mark of our gritty new age modernity.

And maybe next time they show 'Last Action Hero', someone in the bowels of British telly will wonder why they never made that brilliant, totally relevant new version of Hamlet - and go ahead and do it, with Ross Kemp and Martine McCutcheon, and we'll tell ourselves what a great upsurge in British drama there is and so we'll go gentle and uncomplaining into that good night where the soul sleeps forever and we don't even know we are dead.

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