

TV Comedy Reaches New Heights

Summer Heights High, BBC Three, Friday 8 January, 10.00pm

Ever since *The Office* so successfully captured the genre, you might think it wise for a comedy writer to steer well clear of the mockumentary format in order to avoid unfavourable comparisons, but for the Logie Award winning writer and actor Chris Lilley (*We Can Be Heroes*) the risk has certainly paid off for the second time in his career with his latest baby, *Summer Heights High*.



Chris Lilley as the ego-maniac drama teacher Mr G

Based in a fictional Australian high school, *Summer Heights* depicts bullying, racism and homophobia along with all the other thrills and spills of a comprehensive education. With all three protagonists played by one man, Lilley brings to life the three outrageous personalities of Ja'mie, Jona h and Mr. G, each hilarious in their own unique way. The series already met critical acclaim when first premiered on Australia's ABC network in 2007, which does leave us pondering the question of why it has taken such a long time for it to be commissioned here in the UK on BBC Three.

“Lilley throws himself into the character with sheer ease...”

Now let's meet the three central characters. Firstly we have Ja'mie King - a character first introduced to audiences in Lilley's 2005 mockumentary series *We Can Be Heroes: Finding The Australian of the Year*, in which she is one of five nominees for the award. Ja'mie is a bitchy private schoolgirl who arrives as an exchange student set to make her mark on both Year 11 and the whole of *Summer Heights High*. Shallow, cruel and certain of her status as the most popular and good-looking girl in school, Ja'mie is a stereotypical adolescent girl, yet she is completely oblivious to her vanity, “My breasts would've been bigger but I had an eating disorder in year 8” and casual racism, “No offence, but all Asians are fugly”. Lilley throws himself into the character with sheer ease – almost too much ease if you ask me. Using

extremely well-observed tendencies of teenagers : “public schools are like so random!”, Lilley has clearly done his research – are there any words that are more overused by young people than “like” and “random”?

“ ...brilliantly crafted comedic entertainment ”

Then there's Jonah Takalua, a 13 year -old bully from Tonga. Having been expelled from his last two schools and now at his third in eighteen months, Jonah has attention deficit disorder. He is disruptive in class, educationally challenged and has anger issues. Jonah leads a breakdancing crew with his other Polynesian friends who are collectively known as 'The Islander Boys'. Despite his appalling behaviour and complete lack respect for any of his teachers, Jonah's reaction to his punishments, “Puck you sir!” and “Have you got your period or what miss?” as well as his belief that his punishments are in fact racist attacks against him, provide brilliantly crafted comedic entertainment.

Finally we have Greg Gregson, aka Mr G, an ego-maniac drama teacher "What you're getting with me is an industry level performer for the price of a teacher" . He is known for his unorthodox approach to teaching, “My teaching methods are fairly unique. I get pretty experimental” (said whilst thrusting his body over a bright pink exercise ball). Definitely the most impressive portrayal of the three, Mr G has that instantly recognisable David Brent self-delusion that he is loved and admired by all. He has written a number of musicals including "Tsunamarama", a musical about the 2004 Tsunami set to the music of Bananarama - why did no-one think of this before?! But his latest project, writing and producing a full scale “arena spectacular” about the recent tragic death of a year 11 girl from an ecstasy overdose , includes thoughtful and sensitive lyrics such as, “She's a slut and she knows it....” and “She's a party girl with a bad habit for drugs....”.

Without question Summer Heights High is the best import from down under in a long time. With Lilley not having to rely on overused Aussie clichés like “G'day” or “Good on you mate”, his enthusiasm for comedy stills shines through with global appeal. Although it is not for the easily offended , with no subject being too taboo for Lilley, the series has certainly brought a breath of new life to BBC Three and makes a pleasant change from the channel's usual Friday night drivel of 'Two Pints of Toilet Humour and a Canned Laughter Track'. From the vain, high maintenance caricature of Ja'mie and the outrageous, high octane behaviour of Jonah , to the high hopes of Mr G as the next director, producer and star of the show, Summer Heights High with its heavy mix of life's realities and absurdities is certainly high-ranking on my list of nominees for the 2010 comedy awards.

The best thing: So convincing are the characterisations that before long you find yourself unaware that all three are played by the same person.

The worst thing: The character of Ja'mie does get a little repetitive after a while.

The  **verdict:**

Reviewer:

