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Too Much of a TV Dinner

Kath & Kimderella

THE TELEVISION SERIES IS CRITICALLY ADMIRE AND HAS LEGIONS OF FANS, SO WHY DOES KATH & KIM'S TRANSLATION TO THE BIG SCREEN FALL SO FLAT? WATCHING THE FILM, BRIAN MCFARLANE EXAMINES SOME OF THE PROBLEMS THAT LAY WASTE TO SO MANY PROMISING TV-TO-CINEMA ADAPTATIONS.

Has there ever been a seriously good film derived from a television series? I ask as one seeking information, not having done the serious research that would enable me to give a definitive answer to this question. When I run my eye over the list compiled for that utterly reliable organ of public information, Wikipedia, I am not at all inclined to pursue the issue by submitting myself to viewing the big-screen likes of The Beverly Hillbillies or On the Buses just to be sure of my ground.1

Adaptation of one kind or another is to me an endlessly provocative issue in filmmaking. There are plenty of examples of novels, plays, short stories, even poems being turned into interesting films; there are even some ‘based-on-a-true-story’ jobs that don’t discredit their sources, and instead use them as the basis for decent films. So what is it about TV series that seems so endemically to resist the process of adaptation to the big screen? Perhaps it is to do with running time: whereas a smartly written half-hour series can run satisfactorily on a single idea, dressed out with shrewdly calculated observations of its milieu and the lives fleetingly glimpsed in it, the feature film, by inevitably having to stretch to about ninety minutes (if you’re lucky) or two and a half hours (if you’re not), is forced to go in for much more cluttered plotting.

A key example of recent years is Sex and the City. A student of mine,
correcting me on some wise pronouncement I’d made about the changing roles and status of women in society, laid down a rebuking challenge with: ‘You should watch Sex and the City.’ Well, I took up this gauntlet and found the half-hour programs to be persistently sharp, perceptive and witty. Nothing in them could have prepared me for the awfulness of Michael Patrick King’s 145-minute film version (2008), with its overcrowded plot and undernourished screenplay, which simply relied on our willingness to spend a lot more time with the four protagonists without needing to find out anything new about them. Once bitten, twice shy, I certainly avoided the sequel (King again, 2010), in which the famous four took themselves away from their natural and formative habitat, Manhattan, to Abu Dhabi. The result, I am reliably informed, was dire, but I am no longer prepared to put it to the test of personal viewing.

There must be exceptions to this depressing rule: I seem to remember Sweeney! (David Wickes, 1977) managed the transfer with a rewarding share of tough action and tough insights, and Kevin Macdonald’s 2009 version of the riveting 2003 British series State of Play didn’t lose too much in having its investigation of the links between politics and press relocated from London to Washington. But we all know what exceptions can do to rules.

All this is by way of giving a pretty comprehensive thumbs down to Kath & Kimderella (2012), directed by Ted Emery, long-time director of the series. The very considerable fun of the series was mostly at the expense of everyday situations in which aspirations of various kinds are made the material of satire. Think of Kath and her courses (she has a diploma for her success in ‘Recycling’) or her power walking with second husband Kel; or daughter Kim, whose unassailable ego urges her again and again to posit herself as suburban princess-in-the-making and to assert herself against anything that might be construed as opposition (such as long-suffering husband Brett); or butcher Kel, who designates himself a ‘purveyor of fine meats’; or hopelessly overweight neighbour Sharon (Kim’s ‘second-best friend’), hopelessly aspiring to various romances and nursing a long-term crush on Shane Warne.

In general, one of these aspirants and his or her latest goal will impel the ‘plot’ of the episode. How often, for instance, are events set in motion by Kim’s entirely solipsistic view of the world? Even at Kath and Kel’s wedding, she begins her speech by stating that she first needs to say something about herself. And so many episodes observe her egoism at play against Kath’s eagerly outgoing nature, which can catapult them into enough fun and games for the ensuing half-hour. There may be something patronising in the treatment of these women and their ineffectual but engaging men-folk, but there is also affection for the characters and their lower-middle-class lives as lived in the fictional left:

Kim (Gina Riley) and Kath (Jane Turner) top row l-r: Kim with Brett (Peter Rowsthorn) and Eponine-Rae (Morghyne de Vries); Kel (Glenn Robbins); Alain (Richard E Grant) bottom row l-r: Kath and King Javier (Rob Sitch); Isabella (Jessica De Gouw); Turner and Riley as Prue and Trudy. All photos by John Tsiavis.

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suburb of Fountain Lakes. If there is a touch of patronage, or maybe just good-natured critique, in the treatment of this outpost of suburbia, it carries over too to the snooty Prue and Trude (not for nothing are they played by the same actresses who incarnate Kath and Kim), who aspire to be more than just posh-speaking shop assistants.

Simply put, the series was very funny indeed, with Jane Turner and Gina Riley, as Kath/Prue and Kim/Trude respectively, creating solidly realised characters in a credibly realised setting, and most reliably supported by Magda Szubanski (Sharon), Glenn Robbins (Kel) and Peter Rowsthorn (Brett). It’s a cliché to say that the US doesn’t do irony, but some UK series have indeed lost their edge after an Atlantic crossing (see Till Death Us Do Part, which became All in the Family, or The Office). Similarly, reports suggest that the US version of Kath & Kim took itself too seriously and that the mother–daughter relationship lacked the comic verve of its Australian source. One reviewer blasted it as ‘a contender for the worst remake ever’, claiming that the first two episodes ‘were jaw-dropping in their awfulness’.

The three-course episode: Starters

Trying to keep an open mind about the new film’s possibilities in the face of the bleak history of adapting series, one is lulled in the opening minutes into expecting some of the same sort of laughs. The film opens on a close-up of trainer-clad feet, which prove to belong to Kath as she goes about her power-walking ritual. As she nears her house, a red car pulls in. It has the number plate ‘PRINCEZZ’, and out steps an overweight Kim with her laundry, which she has come home to do. There are shots of Kath’s many certificates and diplomas, all lovingly framed on the kitchen wall; there’s a flashback to her first husband Gary Poole (Mick Molloy) and his desertion of Kath; neighbour Sharon, almost spherical but talking excitedly about her diet, comes in to use the loo, from which she emerges kilos lighter; as an opening remark, Kim has announced to the marriage counsellor she and Brett are seeing, ‘I want a divorce’, and to Kath’s dismay she moves back home; and, among all these perfectly acceptable comic capers, the credits have been unfolding with one that reads: ‘Introducing Barry Humphries’.

These touches relating to Molloy and Humphries seem to augur well for the film’s tone. In hindsight at least, it is with the plot-initiating move in which Kath wins an overseas trip to Papilloma, a small kingdom on the ‘heel of Italy’, that misgivings begin to creep in. Moving this lot out of their native Fountain Lakes may well require some serious adjustments if it’s not just to be a matter of innocents abroad. And for a while it looks as if it might work. Kath takes Kim for the trip because Kel doesn’t like flying, and Kim has no compunction about leaving little daughter Epponnee-Rae (Morghyne de Vries) behind with Brett, the husband she wants to divorce. The airport departure scene has plenty of good nasty fun, including the loading-up of Sharon, who is tagging along with Kath and Kim, and glimpses of Trude and Prue, who of course are heading off with a much more extravagant trip in mind.

The main course

Predictably, the accommodation that comes as part of the prize is extremely scungy. So, by means too unlikely to dwell on, Kath, Kim and pack-horse Sharon end up at the palace of
the King of Papilloma, having made their way there via some vertiginous overhead shots of winding cliff-top roads – and with a side excursion to pursue their mania for shopping. Once installed in the castle the film tends to be overtaken by plot, with just enough small jokes scattered throughout to remind us why we liked the series so much. But though the film is restrained enough to last only eighty-six minutes, it still feels like being given five kinds of mustard to go with your meat and veg.

Kath attracts the eye of King Javier (Rob Sitch in a grey mane), whose page tells him that she is ‘Just your type … rich and stupid’. The king is in a bad way financially, and the population of his small kingdom is being for his blood, so he makes up to Kath, taking more interest in her share portfolio than in her ‘green’ impulses. He hopes that she and her ‘sister’ will enjoy their stay, and good-natured Kath throws herself into things: she admires his shoes (‘Are they Rivers?’) and mistakes the torture chamber for a gym, the wheel spinning out of control. The prince, Julio (Erin Mullally), half-masked in Phantom of the Opera mode, seems to fall for Kim. The unexpected arrival of Kel, who’s had a tricky time on the flight, and Brett with Epponnee-Rae, complicates all these essentially idiotic moves. Sharon, nursing a passion for Alain (Richard E. Grant), the king’s sinister page, finally settles for a lesbian date. When I add that there are further confusions about who are the real heirs, who is legitimate and so on, and that there is a scheming princess-in-waiting with an eye to bigger things, it should be clear that this is a film wildly overloaded with plot – and plotting.

Crumbs

All this is not to say that there is no fun to be had from Kath & Kimderella, only that, like so many films adapted from TV series, it trades situation for event. There are some good jokes, like the running verbal gag in which the disdainful-looking Alain routinely addresses the King in rhyme: ‘As you desire, sire’, ‘If you require, sire’, ‘Look, sire, The fire. In the spire’, et al. And Trude and Prue are allowed several remarks that make clear their political affiliation. ‘Who would you go gay for?’ asks one, to which the other replies, ‘What about Julie Bishop?’ Or when they take Javier off at the end, they tell him, ‘We could use you in the Liberal Party.’

As well, there are echoes of the well-loved series, including the obligatory ‘Look at moi, Kim’, and Kath’s saying that ‘I’m as gropable as you are about the situation here’ as she seeks to reassure the downtrodden proletariat. Kath’s tendency to malapropism also produces ‘The crème de menthe of Papilloma society will be here tonight.’ The royal wedding (between Kim and Julio) is accompanied by headlines and merchandise which offer a satirical slant on recent monarchical celebrations, and – my personal favourite – the way the newspaper is delivered to the castle recalls Kath’s running battle with the newsagent back in Fountain Lakes.

Yes, there are jokes sprinkled over the narrative stodge and these assuredly help to make the film meal a little more palatable, but too often they tend to remind us of how much tastier those half-hour segments were.

There are jokes sprinkled over the narrative stodge and these assuredly help to make the film meal a little more palatable, but too often they tend to remind us of how much tastier those half-hour segments were. Characters, as do Szubanski, Robbins and Rowsthorn, for us to feel utterly bereft in the face of the inflation of situation into heavy plotting. They can’t help giving us some good moments when the original comic inspiration comes through, but even this can be counterproductive. That is, these serve to remind us of how much better off we were with half-hour helpings than with an extended meal that tends to feel bloated and bloating.

A word of caution to whoever feels the need for it: the film ends with Kath and Kim sitting in the garden at home and talking about the possibility of a sequel, ‘a bit like the Harry Potter franchise’, says Kath. ‘You have been warned.’

Brian McFarlane is Adjunct Professor at Swinburne University of Technology and Adjunct Associate Professor at Monash University. His latest book is his memoir, Real and Reel: his next will be Twenty British Films to Live With.

http://www.kathandkimderella.com

Endnotes
