

Black Adder II: "Bells"

UK TV sitcom: 1985 : dir. : BBC : ? x ? min
prod: : scr: Richard Curtis & Ben Elton : dir.ph.:

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Rowan Atkinson; Miranda Richardson; Stephen Fry; Rik Mayall

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In successive seasons this sitcom followed the fortunes of the Blackadder dynasty at different epochs of British history, the second (and best) series set at the court of Elizabeth I (Miranda Richardson). Blackadder himself (Atkinson) is a callous, world-weary courtier with a dungheap of a personal servant, Baldrick, and a witless aristocratic sidekick. In this episode a young woman comes to seek service with him disguised as a boy, rather than turn to prostitution to prevent her aged parent being turned onto the streets. Blackadder finds himself uncomfortably drawn to this page boy, "Bob", seeks medical help and finally consults an old mystic woman for a cure. Nothing will mitigate his lust for the lad, but his masculinity is salvaged when "Bob" finally comes out to him as female. Ecstatic, he makes wedding plans at once, only to have his bride snatched away at the altar by a hellraising sea captain and ladykiller (Rik Mayall).

This might as easily have been written for Frankie Howerd's bawdy "Up Pompeii" series, except that in the intervening decade it had ceased to be kosher to make lewd fun out of men screwing boys. In the seventies "Monty Python" contained frequent risqué allusions to pederasty without anyone raising a disapproving voice, but by 1985 it had become a topic decidedly off-limits to humour. And that is essentially all that need be said for this item. It's predictable, inoffensive stuff, with a thigh-slapping pantomime-style "principal boy" as the object of Blackadder's fancy, but it is some sort of acknowledgement of the sexual ambivalence in Tudor culture, where all female roles were performed on the stage by young boys, and all of Shakespeare's female characters written with that contradiction well in mind.

Rowan Atkinson was probably at his estimable best in the occasional Amnesty International fundraising concerts "The Secret Policeman's Ball" (alongside Billy Connolly, John Cleese, Peter Cook etc). His popular "Mr Bean" character was a long stoop below that to the gurning, face-pulling humour of Norman Wisdom, but "Black Adder" (the final series was set during World War I) struck a happy balance between tart wit and leadenly obvious Carry On humour. Miranda Richardson does a nice turn as a skittish, schoolgirlish Elizabeth I, while Stephen Fry was largely wasted as her privacy counsellor Lord Melchitt.

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