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DVDs: "The Royle Family" -- A Classic Britcom

Posted January 16, 2008 | 04:23 PM (EST)

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It's the simplest idea imaginable: a blue collar family in England flops down on the couch and watches the telly. Quite literally, that's it for *The Royle Family - The Complete First Season* (\$24.98; BBC Video). But that simple idea is executed so brilliantly that this wonderfully acted, hilariously funny sitcom takes its place proudly alongside classics like *Fawlty Towers*, *Blackadder*, *Absolutely Fabulous*, *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and the original UK version of *The Office*.

I'm not exaggerating: for half an hour, the Royles just sit there and watch the TV. It doesn't take long to sort out the cast. Jim Royle (Ricky Tomlinson) is a crotch-scratching, farting, man of the house with a million opinions and none higher than his opinion of himself. He rails against the high cost of living, though if he has any job it escapes notice. His wife Barbara (Sue Johnston) takes a job at the local bakery and is forever lighting up and crushing out cigarettes into an overflowing ashtray. She also has a gift for turning one word lines like "Oh" into multi-syllabic symphonies of concern, admiration, curiosity and whatever other emotion she can squeeze out of it. Their daughter Denise (co-creator Caroline Aherne) becomes more and more sluggish as the season wears on because she's "overwhelmed" with the prospect of marrying the stolid, unflappable Dave Best (co-creator Craig Cash). And underfoot of them all is teenager Antony (Ralf Little) who is abused as a lazy arse even though he is always the one who has to make the tea, empty the garbage, run down to the corner for ciggies, answer the phone and so on.

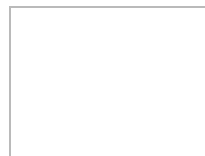
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Like *The Honeymooners*, *The Royle Family* revels in repetition and grows richer on repeated viewing. Whenever anyone enters the house, Barbara asks what they had for tea and then parses the answer. ("Liver and onions? Ooooh.") The first season is so pitch-perfect and strikes such a delicate balance

between revealing the lives of these people and letting absolutely nothing happen that you fear it should never have been repeated. (When was the last time you watched a US sitcom and thought it

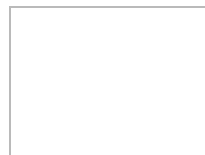
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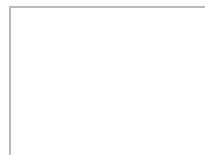
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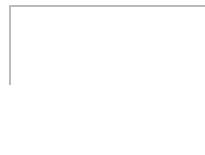
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was so perfect you hoped they wouldn't make any more episodes?) What's remarkable is how the show manages to both skewer the narrow lives and banal existence of hard-drinking, hard-smoking families without ever condescending to them. A sly smile or a roll of the eyes is enough to take the sting out of the harshest comment and god knows any moment of genuine warmth will soon be undercut by a belly laugh.

The Royle Family - The Complete Second Season (\$24.98; BBC Video) wisely expands on the formula. The show was so focused on that couch in the first season that when a scene takes place in the kitchen or at the dining room table or even the upstairs bathroom, it feels like an action sequence in a summer blockbuster. This time the storyline revolves around Denise being pregnant, a situation which turns the raspy voiced gal from sluggish to virtually immobile. But whatever they're discussing, it usually happens in the TV room and about the most anyone can ever bear to ask is that the TV be turned down or muted. God knows they would never think of turning it off. And if you're watching *The Royle Family*, you wouldn't either. An absolute gem. My only problem? They've yet to release Season Three here. Bloody hell.

Also out: *Extras: The Complete Series* (\$49.98; HBO), Ricky Gervais's fine followup to *The Office* that was of course not as good but still far better than one might have feared; the long, long overdue DVD debut of Spike Lee's landmark *She's Gotta Have It* (\$19.98; MGM); the stilted and silly *An Affair To Remember* (\$19.98; Fox), which pales in comparison to the 1939 *Love Affair* version (what was awkward plot-wise in '39 became just laughable by '57) but is offered in a very nice 50th anniversary edition that will make Nora Ephron very happy; *When Harry Met Sally Collector's Edition* (\$19.98; MGM), which I couldn't embrace in 1989 because it was so clearly in the shadow of Woody Allen but now that Woody Allen doesn't make Woody Allen movies anymore, this seems like a relief - at least it's Woody done pretty well; *Syndromes and a Century* (\$27.99; Strand), a placid drama by the festival favorite Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul; two terrific B movies - *It Came From Beneath The Sea* and *Earth Vs. The Flying Saucers* (\$24.96 each; Columbia) -- but the draw here isn't the unnecessary color-tinted option, it's the great prints and fun extras like Tim Burton chatting with special effects legend Ray Harryhausen; actor/director Cornel Wilde's *The Naked Prey* (\$39.95; Criterion), a spin on the most dangerous game presented with Criterion's usual care; Julia Louis-Dreyfus' curse-be-damned sitcom hit *The New Adventures of Old Christine* (\$29.98; Warner Bros.); two charmingly battered mystery solvers, *The Rockford Files Season Five* (\$39.98; Universal) and antique dealer *Lovejoy Complete Second Season* (\$49.98; BBC Video); *The Ten* (\$26.98; City Lights), an unexpected comedic flipside to *The Decalogue*; the love-themed *Be My Valentine, Charlie Brown* (\$19.98; Warner Bros.) which contains three Peanuts TV specials in all; Susan Sarandon slumming it in the "gym coach from hell" comedy *Mr. Woodcock* (\$28.98; New Line); the klutzy comedy *Good Luck Chuck* (\$29.95; Lions Gate), which would count as slumming for anyone but Dane Cook; Sidney Poitier's landmark *In The Heat Of The Night* (\$19.98; MGM), which includes commentary by everyone except Poitier; the kiddie combat show *Medabots - Complete First Season* (\$34.99; Shout); and *I Am An Animal* (\$24.98; HBO), an unblinking look at PETA head Ingrid Newkirk.

So what's your favorite Britcom?

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peep show is hilarious. it's the funniest britcom i've seen since the office (the english one). i think you can get the first season on netflix.

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Michael, I'm thrilled that you devoted so much attention to The Royle Family. I've just finished watching the second series DVD not realizing that you had a column on the whole thing. The series is excellent and it rings incredibly true. The Christmas episode is both surprisingly touching and accurate, down to the minute details of the living room decorations and what Christmas is like in front of the telly in a British northern working class family home, presumably a terraced rental.

Don't forget about 'Knowing Me, Knowing You With Alan Partridge,' the faux late night talk show. Again, accurate observations of a talk show with a host whose ego is off the map, and a different Abba theme tune for each guest. There are some genuine belly laughs, and the great thing is there is only one series, played straight, which was perfect. The Alan Partridge character, played by Steve Coogan, went on to a further series after he was demoted from TV for accidentally killing his last guest. Classic stuff.

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Not a britcom, but I'm madly obsessed with French and Saunders. Michael, have you seen The Life and Times of Vivienne Vyle?

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Blimey, you've named all my fave britcoms! Thanks for writing about the Royles. Bloody good, innit? Caroline Aherne's writing and creation of this family is sublime. Light us anuvva ciggie Cherl.

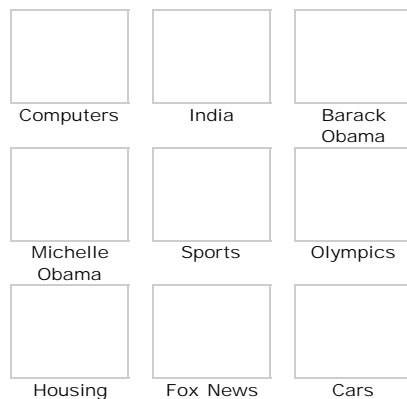
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The Office, Fawlty Towers, Coupling, As Time Goes By, Monarch of the Glen, To the Manor Born, Jeeves and Wooster, Monty Python's Flying Circus, Blackadder, Vicar of Dibley. Probably more, but these come to mind first. I will definitely check out the Royle Family after reading this review. BTW, despite the odd commercials for "Clatterford" (Jam and Jerusalem in UK), calling it an "hysterical sitcom", it is nothing of the sort. It has a few laughs and some eccentric characters, but it's a very nice,

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adult show about and for women in a small village. That is "adult" as in thoughtful, well-written, etc, not smutty! It tackles life changes such as widowhood, loss of job, putting parents in nursing homes, but it's upbeat and I really enjoy the way the women help each other and grow through difficult times. If you don't expect a sitcom, but a gentle ride with some laughs and occasional outlandish characters, Clatterford is nice indeed. Season One on DVD.

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"Coupling" is absolutely brilliant -- it's basically like "Friends", but with dialogue and content that you'd never get away with on American television. Which is why I was surprised when NBC tried to repeat the success of "The Office" by creating an American version, cutting the 40 minute scripts to 30 minutes, and not at all surprised that it failed miserably and was cancelled after 3 episodes or so. Look for this at your video store or put this in your Netflix queue.

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One of my favorite Britcoms was "Yes, Minister"/"Yes, Prime Minister." Anyone interested in politics has got to watch this series. Minister of Administrative Affairs Jim Hacker (Paul Eddington) wants to do the right thing but is thwarted most of the time by Sir Humphrey Applebey (Nigel Hawthorne), who is committed to the bureaucracy of the Civil Service. Things don't seem to change much when Jim becomes Prime Minister, though there are a few episodes where Humphrey does get his comeuppance.

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