

television 2003

► Big-screen documentaries continued to flourish in the wake of *Bowling for Columbine* after its director, Michael Moore, memorably bad-mouthed America's "fictitious president" from the Oscars stage in March. But despite the headline-grabbing antics of Moore and his British counterpart Nick Broomfield (director of this year's *Aileen: life and death of a serial killer*), the real documentary treats of 2003 were the enchanting *Être et Avoir*, which provided a rare insight into the workings of a single-class rural French school; and *Spellbound*, an account of the US National Spelling Bee competition, which generated nail-biting entertainment as kids bravely spelled words I had never even heard of. Both go to the top of the class.

As for the big disappointments, Quentin Tarantino's eagerly waited *Kill Bill: volume one* turned out to be a lacklustre bore, just another masturbatory ramble through QT's well-thumbed video and comic-book collection. On this evidence, I have little enthusiasm for *Volume Two*, which follows next year. Ang Lee's multimillion-dollar *Hulk* was equally depressing, spending an hour pontificating about genetic engineering and childhood trauma before turning into an episode of *Scooby-Doo*, complete with sub-*Shrek* monster in purple Lycra pants. And am I really the only person to have seen through the hype surrounding *Pirates of the Caribbean*, an ill-disciplined, laugh-free debauch (based on a fairground ride, no less) from Gore Verbinski, a talentless hack whose previous crimes against cinema include desecrating the sublime Japanese shocker *Ringu* with a brainless US remake?

Luckily Hideo Nakata, the director of *Ringu*, got his own back with the spine-tingling *Dark Water*, an eerie, intelligent, ghost story for grown-ups which stimulated the adrenalin and intellect alike, and which provided my own personal highlight of 2003. Although Verbinski may have his hand on the wallets of Britain and America, Nakata gets my vote as the true future of cinema, both east and west.

Mark Kermode is the NS's new film critic



The ratings war

ANDREW BILLEN reports on the conquests and casualties behind the scenes and on our screens

The best, most ambitious drama of the year was *The Second Coming* on ITV1, in which Russell T Davies resurrected Christ. JC was returned to modern-day Manchester as a video-shop assistant. There were all sorts of signs and portents in it for the future of television and, for that matter, in an age when you can download anything, for video shops. But this was a year of deaths and resurrections all round, not least in Manchester where Granada, which will complete its takeover of ITV next year, announced its decision to close its Quay Street offices.

The long death of the old ITV, a federation of regional television stations in many cases loved by their communities, ended with the shareholders' crucifixion of the chairman of Carlton, Michael Green, in October. Carlton failed to make any notable contribution to the history of television and imposed its off-the-peg logo on regions up and down the country where once local identities ruled.

The survivor partner, Granada's Charles Allen, chief executive designate of the new ITV, believes he can save ITV £100m from the merger. That is an awful lot of firings. But with another £100m rescued from the station losing the auction for the rights to screen Premiership football, the good news is the scope the savings give for ITV

to pump its cash into better programmes. The bad news is that in a recent interview in *Broadcast* magazine, Allen confided that he would like to bring back *Cracker* and "look at *Upstairs, Downstairs* again". This does not exactly sound like blue-skies thinking.

It made me nostalgic for David Liddiment, ITV's former director of programmes, who made many mistakes during his tenure, from disinterring *Crossroads* to moving *News at Ten*, but truly believed in making ITV a modern, innovative and event-centred channel. It is hard to imagine *The Second Coming* making it to the screen without him.

Where a decade ago ITV had an audience share of nearly 40 per cent, it now settles for less than 25 per cent. Its daytime schedule is flabby and its flagship national bulletin is referred to by everyone as the "ITV News at When?".

Yet, if I were forced to make a wager, I would put my money on ITV coming up with the next big TV sensation, rather than the BBC. The channel pulled *Fortysomething* and *Single* from their prime-time slots when they performed badly in the ratings. But it also steeled itself to spend oodles on one-offs about Boudicca and Henry VIII. Never mind if they were any



Prime time: Christopher Eccleston in ITV1's *The Second Coming* (facing page); Helen Mirren in ITV1's *Prime Suspect 6: the last witness* (left); Channel 4's cutting *Wife Swap* (above)

good or not; the programmes tried to take our imaginations somewhere different.

If the ITV year started strongly with *The Second Coming*, it ended magnificently with the revival of *Prime Suspect*. Peter Berry's script had Helen Mirren's Detective Superintendent Jane Tennison (ageing ungracefully) heading for retirement and Bosnia, in search of evidence against a suspected war criminal who happened to be her optician. Only in the final scene, where the baddy held a knife to his child's throat when under arrest, did the film submit to police procedural cliché. Until then, everything about it was fresh – quite something for a show that started life in 1991. Tom Hooper proved an outstanding director, imposing a bleak, overlit hyper-realism on the search for a killer in a hospital, isolating Mirren in rows of empty chairs and playing on the eyewitness/optical visual metaphors. Dame Helen's performance was beyond praise. And more than nine million people watched.

The only BBC drama to match this quality was Stephen Poliakoff's *The Lost Prince* in January. The prince was Johnnie, clumsy, possibly autistic, certainly dyspraxic, an unmajestic embarrassment. But the star of the piece was Tom Hollander as George V, a small man leading (Poliakoff implied) a shrinking, small-minded, petty

country. This truly was a tour de force and the BBC spent the rest of the year failing to come up with anything half as impressive or intelligent.

I'll spare you my usual rant on behalf of American TV drama – or most of it. If, however, you want to see how a thriller can really fix you to your seat, get out a boxed set of the last 24; and if you want to hear sassy political dialogue, catch up with the latest series of *The West Wing*, ending soon on E4 but about to be rebroadcast on Channel 4. This series, in which Jed Bartlet is forced to stand down as president, should be treated with as much reverence as a unicorn on the way to extinction. Its creator, Aaron Sorkin, who wrote (or took the credit for) most episodes, has been fired and reports from America suggest that the next season has grown obvious and lacklustre without him.

The US drama series that meant most to me this year, however (an outstanding run of *The Sopranos* notwithstanding), was HBO's *Six Feet Under*. I had so far admired rather than loved this show about a family running a funeral home in Los Angeles, but the third series, shown on E4, hit its stride by concentrating not on death but on the romantic relationships of each of the leads. As a disquisition on love, on

being in love, thinking you're in love and trying to be in love, it was the most honest thing I think I have ever seen.

In October, I attended the Sheffield International Documentary Festival, where scores of film-makers complained angrily that the BBC, ITV and Channel 4 no longer wanted to show their work. There is undoubtedly a problem here: fly-on-the-wall TV has not only got out of hand but mutated into a species of game show. *Teen Big Brother* and the incredibly successful *Wife Swap* both, for instance, come under Peter Dale's remit. This is not to say that *Wife Swap* does not produce insights into the way we live or is not, on its own terms, great telly, but it seems to have become the template for factual television.

Something genuinely unusual and important, such as Angus Macqueen's *The Last Peasants*, which examines the asylum issue from the viewpoint of Romanian villagers, won prizes but had to fight for a transmission date. Still, congratulations to the BBC for holding its nerve when it came to transmitting its investigation into racist cops in Greater Manchester.

This was also the year of a war in which British television journalists lost (and in one terrible case took) their lives. The ►

► lead-up to the Iraq war was more intelligent than the coverage once the bombing had started. The BBC's debates and, unforgettably, the confrontation with the Prime Minister on ITV's *Tonight* show reflected a divided, unhappy country. Once war was under way, the visuals and the graphics predictably took over. By the time Baghdad fell, it was hard not to have been pulled in by the excitement.

Next year, the news bulletins face yet another resurrection. ITV's *News at Ten* will die a second time and be floated off to a permanent berth at 10.30pm. There will be a new set. I hope it recovers some of the confidence it showed during the war, when it was briefly promoted to 9pm. News 24 has a new look, too – one which, I hope, will make it a competitor in style as well as content for the slick, innovative, but sometimes overexcitable Sky News. However, we must beware the coming of the Hutton report and an overly cautious

BBC. Its news editors already speak ominously of living in a "post-Hutton" world.

Coming too is Ofcom, the new regulator, with its light-touch mandate over the new, single ITV and practically everything else. It will adjudicate complaints, but will it uphold standards? What TV needs, what it always needs, is an injection of creativity. That means it needs executives to look up from the balance sheets and the audience research figures. Without them, the only creative renaissance we will witness is the resurrection of *Doctor Who* for the BBC. Given that this will be scripted by Russell T Davies himself, it should be one hell of a second coming, but it won't be enough to stop intelligent folk, such as *New Statesman* readers, drifting away from their television sets and towards their bookshelves.

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theatre 2003

Luvvies, actually

MAUREEN LIPMAN on how Her Majesty got taken to the cleaners and other matters

Given that it's always a good year for men in theatre, 2003 has been a good year for women – in fringe theatre and cabaret. The best actors I have seen this year might be called rather veteran: Warren Mitchell, Tom Courtenay and Kenneth Branagh – if you can accuse Branagh of being veteran, and I think you can, as he's been successful almost since he cast off romper suits. He triumphed as a man spiralling into meltdown in David Mamet's *Edmond* at the National; Courtenay hit the irony button as Philip Larkin in *Pretending To Be Me* (Comedy Theatre) without delving too deeply into the poet's much-publicised shady side. And at the Apollo Theatre, Warren Mitchell is recreating, in the shambling furniture dealer of Arthur Miller's *The Price*, an almost extinct species, immaculately supported by Larry Lamb (and if ever an actor transcended the cognomen syndrome it is Larry Lamb). I have always thought Mitchell a great actor, hampered in this country by what would have made him a superstar in America – his comic persona and his ethnicity. In this production, first staged by Sean Holmes at the Tricycle Theatre, he taps into a vein of eccentricity, technical virtuosity and otherness to make a perfect fusion of actor and playwright.

The girls were best, though. Diana Quick and Madelaine Potter gave three-dimensional reality to Jean Rhys and Bertha Rochester in Polly Teale's inventive and haunting *After Mrs Rochester* at the Lyric Hammersmith, London. I saw it with my children on my birthday after a scary stay with my husband in hospital, and I remember how, in seconds, the production swept all the fear and worry out of my head. Theatre can do that so easily that it's rather irritating when it doesn't.

His Girl Friday at the National disappointed me, despite the great style of Zoë Wanamaker, because it is an inferior film

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