



TARA PREM: REPRESENTING THE UNSEEN

Black Christmas + intro by Tara Prem

Black Christmas

Director: Stephen Frears
©/Production Company: BBC Birmingham
Producer: Tara Prem
Production Assistant: David McFarlane
Script Editor: Peter Ansorge
[Written] By: Michael Abbensetts
Film Cameraman: John Williams
Film Editor: Andy Page
Designer: Sally Williams
Costume Designer: Ann Doling
Make-up Artist: Susie Bancroft
Sound Recording: Roger Long
Sound Mixer: David Baumber
Cast:
Carmen Munro (*Gertrude*)
Norman Beaton (*Bertie*)
Shope Shodeinde (*Renée*)
Janet Bartley (*Dolly*)
Stefan Kalipha (*Herman*)
Linda Goddard (*Lily*)
BBC2 tx. 20.12.1977
UK 1977
60 mins

Second City Firsts: Jack Flea's Birthday Celebration

Director: Mike Newell
Production Company: BBC
Producer: Tara Prem
Script Editor: Pedr James
Script: Ian McEwan
Designer: Malcolm Goulding
Cast:
Sara Kestelman (*Ruth*)
David Wilkinson (*David*)
Eileen McCallum (*Mrs Lee*)
Ivor Roberts (*Mr Lee*)
BBC2 tx 10.4.1976
UK 1976
30 mins

Second City Firsts: Glitter

Director: Tony Bicat
Production Company: BBC
Producer: Tara Prem
Script Editor: Peter Ansorge
[Written] By: Tony Bicat
Music: Nick Bicat
Cast:
Toyah Willcox (*Sue*)
Phil Daniels (*Barry*)
Dixie Dean (*Ray Gutburg*)
Noel Edmonds (*DJ*)
Doremy Vernon (*Sue's mother*)
Bilbo Braggins (*pop group*)
BBC2 tx 28.11.1976
UK 1976
30 mins

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A bittersweet drama on a familiar theme – the frictions forced to the surface during a Christmas family get-together – Michael Abbensetts' **Black Christmas** is an understated and affecting study of relationships, unexpressed pain and a tormented nostalgia for a distant home.

The drama begins with a picture of domestic happiness and racial harmony, as mother Gertrude is assisted by her white neighbour, Lily, in preparing a traditional West Indian black cake. But the idyllic Christmas that Gertrude wishes for with childlike anticipation seems a remote dream in what follows.

Gertrude's attempts to ensure the perfect Christmas are challenged by her troubled and uncooperative family: husband Bertie, a good-humoured but idle armchair philosopher, full of empty observations about life, peppered with half-understood vocabulary gleaned from his thesaurus, but blind and indifferent to the pain of those closest to him; daughter Renée, bitter and unhappy despite her educational and career success, and burdened with an unwanted pregnancy; brother Herman, a shameless womaniser with a penchant for 'white chicks', whose shallow charm barely disguises a cruel selfishness, and his bundle-of-nerves wife, Dolly, whose only solace lies in her Bible and her memories of the kinships she left behind in the West Indies.

Directed with subtle sensitivity by Stephen Frears, *Black Christmas* largely avoids overt racial messages – the only white character is Lily, who is clearly relaxed and comfortable with this black family, and who is a reluctant subject of Herman's predatory desires – but the feeling of living in an unwelcoming society is conveyed by the uniform diet of bland white 'family entertainment' offered by the ever-on television set.

Stronger is the sense that something important has been lost in leaving behind old ways: Dolly complains that 'West Indians don't care about any of us like we used to back home', while Bertie wonders, without much concern, whether 'the capitalists have taken the Christ out of Christmas'. To Gertrude, though, such wistful nostalgia is pointless – as she says, in the drama's most tragicomic line, 'England to me now is home – I grin and bear it.' In the end, it is Gertrude whose force of will somehow transcends the bickering and self-pity. Her insistence that the family abandon the television and unite for a 'sing-song' (her choice, with heavy irony, is 'Silent Night') seems finally to win for this ramshackle family a glimmer of hope for unity and happiness.

Mark Duguid, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

The primary objective of *Second City Firsts* was to commission regional writers rather than regional drama. The distinction is important because it meant that not all of the plays produced by English Regions Drama were obviously 'regional' in subject-matter. For example, Ian McEwan's **Jack Flea's Birthday Celebration**, shown in the sixth series of *Second City Firsts*, was a studio

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Black Christmas + intro by Tara Prem + **Second City Firsts: Jack Flea's Birthday Celebration** + **Second City Firsts: Glitter**

Sat 21 Oct 17:40

Play for Today: Vampires + **Play for Today:**

Thicker Than Water

Sat 4 Nov 17:20

Resurrected

Sat 11 Nov 18:10

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drama about a young man who is writing a novel called 'Jack Flea's Birthday Celebration', the content of which is remarkably similar to the subject of the play. Thematically the drama is typical of McEwan's first collection of short stories, *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) and McEwan, in fact, saw the play as 'really belonging in that volume.'

Jack Flea's Birthday Celebration is not particularly 'regional' in subject matter but the fact that the play was produced in Birmingham did have a distinct advantage, according to McEwan:

'At the end of a day's rehearsal the four actors – who all came from far away – could not go home. They had to hang about together in restaurants or in the hotel bar. No one could quite escape his or her part. By the end of ten days a very odd and gratifying level of controlled hysteria had been reached and this suited the claustrophobic nature of the play perfectly, as did the detached quality of Mike Newell's camera script.'

McEwan's remarks illustrate the advantage of having the actors, whenever possible, based in Birmingham for the course of a production in order to replicate the conditions of being, as David Rose described it, 'on a film location, you're remote, you're a team, you're sort of working to one end together.'

Lez Cooke, Forgotten Television Drama, forgottentelevisiondrama.wordpress.com,
27 January 2015

Glitter

Written by Tony Bicat and produced by Tara Prem, this provided one of the earliest roles for Toyah Willcox. 'I want to be so famous that I'm a household name all over the world,' says Willcox's Sue. She eventually finds her way on to *Top of the Pops*.