

RUPERT THE BARE



or, Nobody Loves a Fairy When She's Fifty

The Scandalous Adventures of Lord Byron (Channel Four, July 27th / August 3rd).

We were all fooled by the advance publicity. We thought it was going to be another TV docudrama on Byron, like the old one by Frederic Raphael.

In fact its pedigree was quite different. Rupert Everett's remote ancestors in terms of British television were Jonathan Routh and Jeremy Beadle. It was an updated and disguised *Candid Camera*.

Or consider its formula: you go around poker-faced, interviewing solemn amateurs and experts, pretending to be solemn yourself, asking questions of grosser and grosser fatuity and doing things of grosser and grosser indecency, while keeping your camera on your innocent victims and recording their scepticism, their disbelief, and finally their humiliation, and then walk away, leaving it to the audience to rumble you and to deduce the gullibility of those you've fooled. In short, Everett's real model was Sacha Baron Cohen. The programme was Everett's version of *Da Ali G Show*, *Borat*, or *Bruno*. The only difference being that Cohen disappears behind an invented persona (a process involving some nerve, as when "Borat" sings the U.S. national anthem before the rodeo audience), whereas Everett and his colleagues obviously thought his own personality was sufficiently outrageous to sustain the joke. It wasn't.

In the event of anyone wanting to use the programme as a teaching aid (not impossible in our a-historical 2009), the following points about its first part should be noted:

Byron had no sex with anyone during his brief stay in Spain and Portugal: when offered it, by Donna Josepha Beltram, he turned it down. She did not go into a nunnery (she was already engaged) and there's no evidence that Byron fancied her sister. He did not "have affairs with married women" in Malta: he dallied with one married woman – but did not collect a lock of her hair. The idea of him going to bed with a fat, middle-aged mass-murderer like Ali Pacha is just weird: his sole taste in that direction was for youths junior to himself.

He spent four months in Athens *before* visiting Constantinople, then returned: according to the programme, he went straight from Albania to Turkey. He did not stay at the English embassy in Constantinople: he stayed at an inn, and he went to bed in that city with no-one of his own sex: all he and Hobhouse had were two female

prostitutes, “one having black teeth and the other being a perfect Gorgon”. His quarrel with Lord Elgin was scarcely “public”: his poem about Elgin, *The Curse of Minerva*, had a first printing of just eight copies. The lewd puppet show he saw was not in Athens but in Ioannina.

He did not go straight to John Murray with *Childe Harold*: he went straight to R.C.Dallas with *Hints from Horace*, and only revealed that he’d written *Childe Harold* when *Hints* found no favour. His conscious ambition was for Augustan respectability – contrary to what the programme said, there is no sex in *Childe Harold* as censored by Dallas and published by Murray (in our online edition, we’ve put it back!). So far from depicting his Albanian trip as an awakening, he depicts it (even in its uncensored version), as a descent into the infernal regions.

Angelina, the Venetian love referred to, was not the married daughter of his physician, but the unmarried daughter of a nobleman.

The second part took leave of reality completely, and to point out, for example, that Shelley and Mary Godwin were not married in 1816, or that Tita Falcieri was not Byron’s lover, was, it was by now clear, to miss the point. Everett and his chums were not interested in the historical Byron, but in seeing how far they could go with a factitious one, after the *Borat* model.

The truth about Byron’s travelling is so bizarre that it would make an excellent series: for instance, the reason why Ali Pacha gave him a military escort was because he thought he was George III’s nephew. But you couldn’t tell Rupert Everett that. It would be too subtle for his brand of joke, and would require too much setting-up.

Someone should have taught Everett the second rule of cabaret: don’t laugh at your own unfunny gags – it destroys whatever credibility you have left. Everett *giggled* at his own unfunny gags, which *would* have destroyed his credibility, except that neither he nor the programme had any left; and, unlike Sacha Baron Cohen, he had never been funny in the first place. The first rule of cabaret is so obvious as not to need stating: if a gag doesn’t work, don’t repeat it. Everett tried the one about sherbet and sodomy twice in two takes: it failed the first time, and by the second time we were so revolted that the temptation to turn off was almost irresistible (I didn’t, though I’ll confess I turned off my newly-purchased DVD of *Borat* half way through and took it round to the charity shop). The first recipient of the sherbet gag was “somewhat taken aback”; the second “visibly affronted” – on both occasions, Everett giggled, a naughty schoolboy being self-conscious. Stylish he wasn’t.

Had he been doing an impersonation of David Attenborough it might, just might, have worked: but he was being himself – and that didn’t work.

Peter Cochran