

INHUMAN BEHAVIOUR



BBC3's latest genre hit, BEING HUMAN, features a vampire, a werewolf and a ghost sharing a flat in Bristol in the Southwest of England. TRIPWIRE found out more from its writer/creator Toby Whithouse (below centre)...

WORDS: STEVE COLGAN

'I've got this friend. He says the human condition, the human nature, 'being human' - is to be cold and alone. Like someone lost in the woods. It's safe to say he's a 'glass-is-half-empty' kind of guy. And I see nature differently. I see the ancient machinery of the world. Elegant and ferocious, neither good nor bad, it's full of beautiful things, unspeakable things. The trick is to keep them hidden - until the right moment.'

That's Mitchell - a vampire - describing his best friend George who just happens to be a werewolf. And just in case you're one of the very few people who's never seen BBC3's hugely popular new genre series *Being Human*, I should say that George and Mitchell share a house in Bristol with Annie. Who's a ghost. Welcome to the strangest flat-share since *The Young Ones*.

Being Human began life as one of six pilot shows broadcast during February 2008. *Phoo Action* - based on Mat Wakeham and Jamie Hewlett's *Get the Freebies* strip in *The Face* - was picked up for the full six episodes. However, an online petition by *Being Human* lovers demanding more gathered over 3000 signatures in just a couple of weeks. Consequently, the BBC changed its decision and *Being Human* was commissioned instead. Following

some cast changes and few tweaks to the overall concept - what series creator Toby Whithouse refers to as a 'reboot' - the show was launched in 2009 to huge acclaim. A second series is now in production.

I spoke to Toby recently after a Q and A session for writers at London's Soho Theatre. What follows is a mix of my questions and those asked during the session itself by Kate Rowland of the BBC Writers Room and the audience.

TW: Touchpaper approached me asking



thing I knew about Episode Six was the part when Herrick (the vampire leader) walks into the room and George comes out of the shadows. And at the end of Episode Two, I knew Tully (another werewolf) would say to George 'One day you will use this' and that's what was used in that scene in Episode Six.

How did it feel when you heard about the petition?

TW: All hell broke loose - we really didn't expect that response. What got the BBC though was that this was the audience they'd been trying to engage with ... and there they were online. On the message boards there were people saying this was obviously an orchestrated campaign by the producers - but it wasn't! If you saw the producers you'd understand ... The BBC had kept the show 'in development' but then along came the petition and six weeks after the pilot was shown the series was commissioned. Amazing.

Vampires and werewolves seem to be everywhere nowadays. What makes yours different?

TW: We asked ourselves 'If vampires and werewolves were real, what life would they lead?' We reckoned they'd have ancillary jobs, live on the fringes of society. Giving



Herrick an utterly mundane job as a policeman gave him anonymity. It allows tension between the two worlds - Ours and theirs. And if you have a race of immortals it would be natural for them to then think 'I'm sick of this'.

You work with big themes.

TW: That's what I love. High concept. I was a huge comic book fan. I secretly craved to write Doctor Who. The supernatural element allows you to write about the humanity the characters are striving towards.

Did you do much supernatural research?

TW: I did all my research when I was a kid. The vampires changed between the pilot and the series. So did the casting. What prompted that?

TW: Because it wasn't commissioned straight off, we had to recast due to the actors' commitments. Adrian Lester and Andrea Riseborough were both brilliant, but recasting their roles caused a re-think. It changed the dynamic of the characters. But it was a positive change, particularly as the pilot vampires were a bit too Anne Rice for my liking. It was a good opportunity.

Were you involved in the casting?

TW: I was sent DVD compilations of actors. When you are casting there is a sense of relief when the person is right. The actor Greg Chillin read for Mitchell at first, and then he came back and read for Owen and he was that character. Perfect.

As a former actor yourself do you ever feel

tempted to write yourself a role?

TW: I would hope my writing would attract a better actor than myself! Pragmatism overtakes vanity when you see what other actors do. The character of Herrick didn't go through much of a journey from Episodes One through to Six on paper but Jason's (Jason Watkins) performance brought nuances to the character that made it better.

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Having been an actor means that I am both sympathetic and unsympathetic with other actors. I always give them a character name as it looks better on your CV, and I always try to give them a gag. But if they say something like 'This line doesn't work for me' then I'll say 'Really? It's in the script.' You like to keep control over your work.

TW: Total autonomy if I can! When I was sent a copy of the Hotel Babylon episode I wrote, it was very different to my script. Mild Thing was my first attempt to get more control over my work. I wouldn't lose gags because of the wrong stress etc. I actually did 18 months of stand-up as I had total control over my output that way. Being on BBC3 is good because the level of intervention is far less than on BBC1 or BBC2. A good example is in the episode where Annie whispers a secret about death to Owen - if that had been BBC1 or BBC2 I would have had to explain it.

How do you keep control when using other writers?

TW: I shall rule over them like an angry god!

Did you choose the other writers?

TW: I knew their work well and knew they





would bring the right tone to the episodes. How did that relationship work?

TW: For example, one of the stories – Episode Four – had Mitchell befriend a local kid. It was one of the first stories taken from the ‘bible’. All I knew was we’d have that scene with the kid and mother in the hospital and then the scene when Mitchell goes into the room with Herrick and says ‘I’m in’. That was all that was handed to the writer. We spend a couple of days with the writers and discuss the shows and then storyline with them individually, give notes on treatment then notes on the scripts.

Who would you say are your influences?

TW: Alan Moore, Joe Ahearne (Ultraviolet – the TV series), PJ Hammond, Aaron Sorkin (The Wire)...

What determines the number of episodes?

TW: Money. We simply don’t have the revenue from advertisers and sponsors like they have in the States, which enables them to make long runs. However, Series Two will have eight episodes. That’s bad enough. Twenty two would terrify me.

Was budget the reason why there is little CGI in the series?.

TW: Yes. We ruled out CGI and everything was done with prosthetics and animatronics. In a way it actually makes it more tangible as it actually exists. The light falls on it all in a ‘real’ way.

Like the difference between the ‘real’ Jabba the Hutt and the CGI version?

TW: Exactly. We were also accused of being ‘a bit obvious’ as we based the vampires in a funeral parlour. But that’s the genius of it!

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rylined the new series and put forward the ideas for character arcs and villains. These can be rejected or expanded.

You’ve had a varied writing career. What was it like writing for Doctor Who (Toby wrote the series 2 episode School Reunion) and how did you go about the task of re-introducing Sarah Jane Smith?

TW: The whole show was reinvented and Sarah Jane had to move along too. My work on No Angels was part of the reason they asked me to do it. I had written the ‘feisty woman’ stuff before and Sarah Jane was such an iconic 70s character – a young, fresh, sexy journalist who was ahead of her time. So she was easy to write for. Doctor Who and Torchwood were both easy to get into as the characters had been so well-written by Russell T Davies. It was K-9 that was hard. Totally anachronistic and a pain in the arse! I did try leaving him out but they noticed ...

K9 was the straight man to Tom Baker’s Doctor. Is the comedy element of Being Human important?

TW: I have to write scripts with gags. When you write a drama with 20 gags everyone says – ‘Isn’t he funny?’ but if you write an hour long comedy with 20 gags, no-one

Cliche was all we could afford!

Is that also why the series is set in Bristol, rather than London?

TW: The show is made by BBC Wales so we only had a certain distance we could film within. Cardiff had become a bit overcrowded so it made sense to go to Bristol. How many episodes of series 2 will you write?

TW: Four well or six not very well. We will ‘cast’ writers based on the genre of the episodes. If one is comic and the next is scary, it gives the series a natural flow. I have sto-

