Ashes to Ashes (DVD)


Director: Johnny Campbell, Bille Eltringham
Classification: M (Mature)
Duration: 516 minutes (including 8 episodes)
We rate it: Five stars.

Date of review: 22nd October, 2009

Several years ago, audiences in both the UK and Australia were introduced to the wondrous BBC drama Life on Mars. Taking its name from a David Bowie song, Life on Mars followed the intriguing exploits of a 2006 Manchester cop, Sam Tyler, (played by the wonderful John Simm) who was hit by a car and seemingly sent back in time to 1973. The show functioned as a compelling psychological thriller, following Tyler’s efforts to discover what had sent him back in time (was he in a coma, dying, dreaming, or in some kind of limbo-land or Purgatory?) and his attempts to escape 1973 and get back to his life in 2006. At the same time, the show was a loving and at times hilarious re-creation of the 1970s British cop-show milieu (think of The Sweeney crossed with The Professionals, but shot with today’s filmmaking technology), and it featured the wonderful Philip Glenister as the now-iconic DCI Gene Hunt, a politically-incorrect, hilariously foul-mouthed and utterly lovable character who infuriated Tyler as often as he helped him in his various quests.

Life on Mars was a critical and commercial hit, and it spawned a tremendously effective second series. The characters central to Life on Mars were both sympathetic and fascinating, the writing and direction of the episodes occasionally awe-inspiring, and the mystery at the heart of the entire show was brilliantly handled to the very end. It’s no surprise that the show’s creators were eager to revisit the world they had conjured, and that’s what they have done with Ashes to Ashes.

During the first few minutes of episode one (which recently screened on the ABC) we meet Police Psychologist Alex Drake (played by Keeley Hawes, whom many remember as Zoe in Spooks) speeding through the streets of contemporary London on the way to a hostage-negotiation. What follows, in the first few break-neck minutes of this new series, catapults Drake herself back in time,
though instead of landing in 1973, she wakes up in 1981. We discover that Drake had been researching the case files of Sam Tyler, from Life on Mars, before she suffered her own time-slip; because of her knowledge of Tyler’s case, Drake understands (or believes, at any rate) that her predicament, the world she has found herself in, is all in her mind. She’s in a coma, she believes, and her survival will depend on her ability to make sense of what’s going on around her. Drake immediately comes to see that the mystery she must solve involves the death of her parents, who were killed in a car-bombing when she was a little girl – in 1981. Some of the usual time-travel paradoxes are examined here (i.e. what would happen if you went back in time and met your younger self? If you change the past, will events in the future also be changed?) but most of all we follow the increasingly suspenseful investigation Drake is involved with (and yes, she’s accompanied by Gene Hunt et al, who have all gotten a few years older and moved to London). As time moves inexorably closer to the date on which her parents died, Drake is frequently visited by a chilling apparition of a very sinister clown, who seems to taunt her with some unspoken knowledge of the bombing; the figure appears at moments of great tension, underlining the gravity of Drake’s investigation, and emphasising the fact that time is ticking down. As the series nears its concluding episode, the suspense is expertly ratcheted up.

Keeley Hawes has done very well here, filling the much-admired John Simm’s shoes, and the writing team responsible for the original series has maintained the quality of its output. Saving its wonderful final surprise until the very, very end, Ashes to Ashes is an expertly constructed series that manages to extend the premise of Life on Mars into fascinating new territory. This, in my opinion, is contemporary BBC drama at its cutting-edge best.

Nick Prescott