Lost in Austen (ABC DVD, 2 discs, 226 minutes)

Lost in Austen premiered in Australia as a two-part series on ABC TV on 8 March this year. The DVD is presented as the series was screened in Britain, in four episodes, and with the addition of a ‘Making of’ documentary.

A wittily imagined blending of Pride and Prejudice and Life on Mars, the story magically transports modern London girl Amanda Price back in time and place to the fictional world of Longbourn and into the lives of the Bennet family. Stunned as she is, Amanda is nevertheless well-equipped to cope with this dramatic change of circumstance, as Pride and Prejudice is her favourite novel and her habitual escape from reality. As she reads, the words ‘just say themselves’ in her head, and ‘it’s like a window opening, like I’m actually there.’ And one night she actually is.

Amanda has had a dispiriting day dealing with rude customers at the bank where she works. Her divorced and barely coping mother (a lovely slatternly cameo from Pippa Haywood) is urging her to jettison her romantic ideas and marry her philandering boyfriend Michael (Daniel Percival), who then turns up, drunk, at her flat and makes a half-hearted proposal. Just as he collapses unconscious on her sofa, Amanda is disturbed by a noise in her bathroom. Flicking on the light, she is amazed to discover Elizabeth Bennet, wide-eyed with excitement, standing in the tub amid lines of drying laundry.

‘This is most extraordinary!’ her visitor exclaims breathlessly. ‘But I beg you, Miss Spencer, to entertain my explanation of it, for it will be truthful, if a little intractable to believe. There is a door, Miss Spencer, in the attic portion of my father’s house, which is a place unvisited except by servants and myself. … It is a door entirely without sense. One may not pass through it, try as one might, until this day. For you, Miss Spencer, have opened this door for me.’

We are only five minutes into the first episode, and the charm, authenticity of voice and humour (Elizabeth assumes that the name ‘tailored’ into the ‘underthings’ belongs to Amanda) reassures us that we are in good hands for the next four hours or so. It is clear that the writer, Guy Andrews, knows his Austen and has had a lot of fun dissecting and subverting Pride and Prejudice, but for all the froth and outlandish plot developments, he demonstrates a respect for the novel’s themes and a keen ear for Austen’s dialogue. Some characters may not be quite as she conceived them – Mr Bingley as an emotional wimp and Mr Wickham as a heroic saviour, for example – but they always sound perfectly faux-Austen, and everything looks as it should. (Jenny Uglow is listed as ‘Historical Adviser’.)

As Amanda, Jemima Rooper makes a warm, likeable and believable heroine. She’s not conventionally beautiful – indeed, with her large mouth, straight hair and floppy fringe, the Georgians would not even have considered her passably attractive – but she has an expressive and mobile face that director Dan Zeff likes to film in close-up, and she exudes sex appeal. She is what the French call jolie laide, and in her low-cut little tunic that displays both cleavage and lots of leg, she immediately captures the attention of Mr Bingley (Tom Mison), much to the consternation of Mrs Bennet (Alex Kingston) and the indifference of Mr Bennet (Hugh Bonneville). But it’s not long before she’s borrowed more conventional attire, and is trooping off to the

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Meryton assembly. Which, of course, is all wrong. Mr Bingley’s eyes should be on Jane (Morven Christie), and Elizabeth should be making that fateful first impression on Mr Darcy, and sensible Charlotte (Michelle Duncan), not Jane, should be marrying the odious, finger-sniffing Mr Collins (Guy Henry). But Elizabeth is on the other side of that door and apparently not listening, not even when Amanda, keen to get the plot back on track, pounds on it in frustration, yelling at her to come back because ‘it’s all going completely tits up!’

Indeed it is, and the unpredictability of events is one of the chief charms of *Lost in Austen*. First-time viewers should be allowed to discover these delights for themselves; suffice to say that all the key scenes from the novel are here: Jane’s enforced stay at Netherfield and Miss Bingley’s bitchery; the Netherfield ball; Mr Collins’ proposals; the entertainments at Rosings; the visit to Pemberley; the scandalous elopement; and the ultimatum of Lady Catherine (Lindsay Duncan). Just not exactly as you remember them.

And what of Mr Darcy, the other key casting decision? Elliot Cowan is suitably tall, handsome and darkly glowering, perhaps a bit too brooding and arrogant; he might have exhibited some of Darcy’s underlying vulnerability. Amanda admits he is no Colin Firth (‘But even Colin Firth isn’t Colin Firth; they had to change the shape of his head with makeup’), but she quickly revises her opinion after he accedes to her request and rises, in all his dripping manhood, from the lake at Pemberley. ‘I am having a bit of a strange postmodern moment here,’ she gasps, gazing at him lustfully.

The postmodern moments come quick and fast in episode four, when he follows her through another door and suddenly finds himself standing in the middle of twenty-first century traffic outside Boots. (‘Are my wits disordered by opium? What is this dreadful place?’) Being London, nobody gives her empire gown or his top hat and frock coat a second glance, and soon the two of them are strap-hanging on a Green Line bus (‘a surfeit of Negroes!’) in search of Elizabeth, who has found employment as a live-in nanny.

Wearing jeans and a striped hoodie, and sporting a chic, low maintenance hairstyle, Elizabeth has taken to mobile phones, laptops, credit cards, an independent income and a microbiotic diet like a duck to water. She knows all about Austen’s novel and her role in it but is in no hurry to return to her old life. Amanda, on the other hand, finds the pull of Pemberley and the charms of Mr Darcy hard to resist.

It all works out in the end and both heroines get their heart’s desire. Elizabeth, one feels, will be blissfully fulfilled. (‘I was born out of time, Miss Price. Out of time and out of place.’) As for the new Mrs Darcy, one hopes that romance compensates for the lack of modern medicines, antiseptics, dentistry, detergents, deodorants and cosmetics; one hopes she doesn’t miss piped water, plumbing, electricity, gas or oil, that she survives childbirth, and that her children (who will belong to her husband, not her) live past infancy. One hopes she will not die of boredom at Pemberley. Elizabeth has surely got the better deal. But then, as Mr Bingley exclaims apologetically to Amanda when they collide at the Meryton ball, ‘We are both of us in a dream, Miss Price.’

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