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FLATMATES FROM HELL

In eerie Bon Temps, Louisiana Bill Compton skulks around segregations metaphors as all around him indulge in high-end intercourse. In dusty Phoenix, Arizona, Edward Cullen pouts demurely, romancing chaste schoolgirls like an undead Jonas Brother.

And in, um, Bristol, John Mitchell... well, he works as a hospital porter, eats cornflakes and looks out for hapless housemates, George the werewolf and Annie the ghost. He is not your average vampire. Mitchell, played by Dublin-born Aidan Turner, is the star of *Being Human*, breakout Brit fantasy drama and BBC3's most successful production ever. A WW1 soldier who agreed to conversion in exchange for the lives of his men, he's now a recovering addict, having relinquished the bloodsucking (eternal) life and living as quiet a life as he can.

Sat in a portable production office on location on a freezing

November afternoon as shooting for series two draws to a close; Turner - as handsome a man as his more dashing US counterparts - sits slightly aghast at the question of who might win in a scrap between Mitchell, Compton and Cullen.

"Good lord. Well, *they're* all proper drinkers. Mitchell doesn't drink that much blood. If you gave me shitloads of blood and I was allowed to drink it I'd probably kill them. We've gone around it; we've said that if Mitchell committed to being a vampire more then he'd have all these supernatural powers he'd be able to run fast and the rest. But because he's not doing it, he can't. In this series you might see more of that kind of stuff, getting his strength back. But I don't know where to begin to answer that. There's too many vampires around!"

In 2009, only Susan Boyle and poverty were more ubiquitous

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than vampires, and the BBC might be praised for however, cynically, getting in on the act so readily. But the truth is that Being Human's protracted birth was in fact even stranger than its premise. As writer/creator Toby Whithouse explains: "It's without doubt a blessing. I think a lot of people imagine that we went 'ooh great they're really in at the moment'. But because this took place before any of those shows were win the public consciousness it felt quite weird. We were going 'hang on, is there going to be a market for this? Nobody does this anymore.' But gradually as the show started to find it's feet, other shows were springing up in a similar genre. It was pure luck that we happened to come up with the same ideas at the same time."

The facts were these: three years ago, the BBC was on the hunt for a new twentysomething drama in the vein of This Life. Whithouse and his team were developing a flatshare idea about three characters; an agoraphobic, a sex addict and a person with anger issues that was "going completely nowhere." In a fit of creative frustration, he half-joked that the George, the angry guy, should turn into a werewolf, just to give them some story. And then a bulb went off. "It then seemed quite natural that Mitchell should be a vampire and Annie should be a ghost, because their human personalities lent themselves to those specific archetypes very well."

This coincided with BBC3 commissioning a round of drama pilots in 2008, and having been pretty pleased with what they'd come up with, Whithouse was "completely deflated and terribly, terribly disappointed" when before any had even aired, the channel decide that



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only the woeful Jamie Hewlett adaptation Phoo Action would be picked up for series. But when they aired, strange things started to happen. An online petition calling for Being Human - started by Reading Chronicle journalist Narin Bahar - gathered over 3000 signatures. Facebook groups swelled and messageboards exploded.

"It was completely bizarre to watch it unfold," remembers Whithouse. "It was like the cavalry appearing over the hills. This had never happened before. And on one of the forums somebody went 'oh come on does anybody actually believe this? Can you not see that this is a cleverly orchestrated campaign by the producers? And I thought 'oh God you've clearly never met the producers!'"

The BBC reversed the decision, ditched Phoo Action and with a few tweaks (Mitchell and Annie were recast to slot neater into the channel's demographic) and Being Human returned for a full, altogether darker, full-blooded funny and heartbreaking series, last year. Where True Blood and Twilight romanticise the supernatural condition, Mitchell, George and Annie are just keeping their heads down, looking longingly at the rest of humanity, trying to fit in. It was with the third episode that Being Human really found its feet, in revealing the true horror behind Annie's situation. It showed this was a far more powerful drama than even the online fans had realised. A third series is already in pre-production, and there's a US remake in the works.

Back on set, a converted warehouse lab and Tovey, Critchlow and Sinead Keenan, who plays George's on-off girlfriend Nina, are filming a scene from the denouement, where the three of them are in the



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midst of confronting this year's shadowy human antagonists. The tension is piqued slightly by Tovey distracting his castmates with renditions of 2 Become 1 by the Spice Girls. It's the sort of camaraderie that in these temperatures, you couldn't fake for journalists. And as Tovey and Keenan reshoot the scene without Critchlow (everything must be shot again, from the perspective of people who can't see Annie), she ponders their chemistry. "We do have a hell of a lot of fun. When the three of us are on set it does get very hard to do anything but laugh and sing and play around. But we always find the truth in it very quickly."

Critchlow wasn't so easily welcomed by the audience at first, having replaced Andrea Riseborough (The Devil's Whore) from the pilot. But in fact, she brings a kookier vulnerability the Annie that makes her journey far more sympathetic. "What sets the show apart is that we're not very good at being supernatural. I think our characters have a different

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angst to these other shows."

Last year came hints of romance for Annie, but with her premise gag being that she spends all day making cups of tea she can never drink, is a physical relationship going to be possible? "With an alive person? I think it's quite complicated. But she meets other ghosts this series and she learns more about what it means to be a ghost."

On the subject of sexiness, Tovey attracted rather a different kind of attention due to the number of nude scenes he has to do every full moon. Is he OK with that? "Yeah, you've gotta be. For some reason George always gets naked before he transforms and you see my bum all the time. If that's what people want to see! No, I go to the gym quite regularly anyway. I keep myself physical. I don't think George would be a superhunk at all, he's a fairly average man."

And as the only survivor from the pilot, what does Tovey think is the secret of the show's success?

"It's the writing, without a doubt. It's kind of This Life/Buffy/Cold Feet, all the good shows you like, it's got those qualities. And it's got a warm, human element, people just trying to get on in life and be accepted."

Or, as Turner explains: "The situations are so ridiculous sometimes that that I guess they're funny. You'll be having these trivial conversations in a pool of blood, surrounded by naked people, and you'll be talking about cornflakes."

From the first episode back, from George's staggeringly tragic dilemma, to a hilarious sequence where Annie gets a bar job to one spectacularly gory scene you won't see coming, it's safe to say Being Human has already bested itself. Just nobody mention The Vampire Diaries, OK?●

Being Human, Sun, 9.30pm, BBC3

