

Farce that rose from the grave

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Last laugh: Joking Apart writer Steven Moffat and one of its stars, Robert Bathurst

The BBC2 comedy 'Joking Apart' is widely regarded as a cult classic - yet it has never been released on DVD. Now one man has rescued the show from oblivion. Shane Jarvis reports

What do you do if your favourite comedy series never comes out on DVD? You could do as Craig Robins has just done - buy the rights and release the thing yourself.

It has taken a lot of tenacity, patience and money, but Robins is about to market the little-known but critically acclaimed sitcom *Joking Apart*, by Steven Moffat, the precursor to his hit show, *Coupling*. Although independent companies have released other BBC and ITV material in the past, Robins is the first individual to achieve such a feat.

Featuring Robert Bathurst, star of *Cold Feet* and *My Dad's the Prime Minister* and soon to be seen as Mark Thatcher in *Coup!*, a BBC2 drama about last year's attempted revolution in Equatorial Guinea, *Joking Apart* was described by one fan as his favourite "why doesn't everybody know about this?" series.

The show, which often hit the farcical heights of *Fawlty Towers*, was aired between 1995 and 1997 on BBC2 and co-starred Fiona Gillies, Tracie Bennett and Paul Raffield, but it never made the transition to prime-time television.

A website devoted to the series is bombarded with messages: "Where is *Joking Apart* on DVD? I remember this being classic stuff..."

"*Joking Apart* has to be one of the finest shows I've ever seen... you'd be laughing so hard you couldn't get your breath... even among the best of the Britcoms it's a true gem."

"*Coupling* is good, in fact excellent, but *Joking Apart* was just unbeatable."

The really good news for fans of the comedy is that Robins is himself a TV editor, which means that the DVD has been restored, compiled and edited not only by a professional but a dedicated fan.

It is hard to pin down quite why the BBC's commercial arm has kept *Joking Apart* from the video and DVD shelves. "I've always thought the programme was hilarious and, like lots of people, can't believe it's never been released," says Robins. A BBC spokesman would only say: "Not all BBC programmes are released commercially for a variety of reasons... we are not able to comment specifically."

But Robins adds: "The funny thing is, the BBC should know, because although the viewing figures weren't high, there's something called the appreciation index, which is what people actually thought about the programme and it was apparently huge. It won a Montreux Rose and it got entered for the Emmys."

Certainly the axing of the show, about a comedy writer going through an often Cleesiastical divorce, is something that baffles its players and writer to this day.

Bathurst recalls: "It was a desperately frustrating time because the series just didn't get the momentum. But it was brilliant. I reckon about seven of the 12 episodes are classic farces which will endure."

At the time, the comedy was up against *Minder*, *Kavanagh QC* and the BBC's own comic jewel, *Absolutely Fabulous*.

"Both Steven and Robert have had enormous success since then," says Robins, "but pretty well everyone who worked on the show feels the same - that this series was seriously short-changed and was never given the chance it deserved."

Moffat puts it more bluntly: "I know a lot of people say their shows got screwed by the schedules, but this one really did."

Had it gone out on a Friday night on BBC1, says Robins, the show would have been regarded as an all-time classic. "It does seem strange to me that all the new BBC3 comedies get rushed out on DVD no matter how poor they are, while other more worthy candidates in the archives remain neglected. It's clearly a very political decision, but at least it creates opportunities for myself and other independent labels."

Fan worship and the internet, where many virtual shrines to forgotten shows flourish, are combining to become a potent tool in getting cult hits out of the vaults and on to DVD. *Joking Apart* follows in the footsteps of the BBC's own *Survivors* and ITV's *Star Maidens*, both independent releases.

If Robins's project succeeds, he plans to release more ignored classics, including *Joking Apart*'s second series. Initially, the DVD will be available only via the website www.replaydvd.co.uk, but the show's cult status, its long overdue release and the added interest brought about by *Coupling*, mean that it could end up shaming the Corporation that has shown so little interest in it. "This DVD release will be an interesting experiment," says Moffat.

♦ 'Joking Apart' is released on May 28