

Ricky Gervais' *Derek*: A glimpse into the lives of caregivers

Christine Schofelt
26 September 2013

Written and directed by Ricky Gervais

Set primarily in a nursing home, *Derek*, a television series written and directed by British comic Ricky Gervais, is a sympathetic and pointed commentary overall on the lot of the carers who work in the home and their elderly charges. The series' first season appeared on Channel 4 in the UK earlier this year. All of that season's episodes became available for streaming in the US on Netflix on September 12.

The program provides a look at the people who take up the work of caring for the aged and the impact it has on their lives. Billed by Channel 4 as "A bittersweet comedy drama about a group of outsiders living on society's margins," it is actually a look at the challenges faced—though the particulars may differ—by an ever larger portion of the working population.

Gervais (who stars as Derek, a care-giver and the central character) and company make good use of the by now familiar "mockumentary" style used in the comic performer and writer's best-known work, *The Office* (2001). The actors frequently speak directly to the camera and, through this device, reveal aspects of their lives they generally conceal.

On occasion this is heartbreaking, as in *Derek*'s first episode, when Hannah (Kerri Godliman), the facility's manager, tries to convince us—and herself—that having no time outside of work to meet any potential partners is fine with her. Her loneliness and exhaustion are badly masked by a cheery "carry on" attitude.

The desperation felt by those affected when a career and way of life are threatened comes into play in the second episode, which deals with a visit from the local Council. Hannah dresses professionally to impress the representatives sent out to determine whether the home, Broadhill Retirement, is to continue receiving funding.

The interaction between the Council officials, the

carers and the residents—the impact on whose lives is not a factor in determining the fate of the home—is honestly portrayed. Hannah angrily notes that a high percentage of elderly people die within six months of being "re-homed." She is determined not to let Broadhill close and the twenty-two residents be torn from what has become their home.

Dougie (Karl Pilkington), another employee at Broadhill, initially seems uncaring, but proves over the course of *Derek*'s first season to be not only aware of the hard work put in by Hannah, but risks his own job by letting the Council representative know in no uncertain terms that she worked 68 hours the previous week, rather than the 40 she was paid for. Although his interactions with the others are not as tender as the scenes between Derek and Hannah, it is clear that his feelings are heartfelt.

Unlike most other shows set in such a facility (the BBC's *Waiting For God* [1990] springs to mind), *Derek* does not relegate the elderly to mere backdrop status, nor does it reduce them to stereotypical "old people." Rather, their lives, strengths and weaknesses, are genuinely treated as part of the reason why Derek, Hannah and even the cynical Dougie work at Broadhill.

The series employs photographs and film footage of the home's residents in more youthful days, which bring home the immense richness of experience and history of a generation that is slipping away from us. It does this without glorifying a particular generation—rather it brings out the value inherent in people as people.

The treatment of the young people sent to the home for community service is likewise deft. Through contact with the elderly residents and the efforts of Derek, Hannah and the others to include them, they come to appreciate themselves more, as well as their

fellow human beings, and to reach for something higher. The series suggests that none of us ought to be discarded when we become old, frail, weak, or make a mistake.

Gervais' Derek, as he puts it in the first episode and reiterates throughout the season, may not be good-looking or smart, but he is kind. This is appreciated by those whom he cares for, both professionally and personally. However, this kindness seems to indicate a mental deficiency to those, such as the Council representatives, for whom the bottom line is the bottom line. When someone suggests that he be tested for autism, Derek refuses, reasoning that either way he would still be himself.

In an interview with CNN's Piers Morgan, Gervais asserted that he was good to people simply because that was the way he wanted to be treated himself. However, in creating and performing this character, Gervais has gone deeper than merely satisfying himself and has made something of a broader social appeal. In our day, arguing for caring and sympathy, without mawkish Pollyannaism, has an almost polemical character.

Of course, the struggles portrayed in the series are very real and not given short shrift—kindness alone is not going to solve everything. When asked in one of the later episodes what they pray for, the main characters give some thought and Hannah, for one, mentions money, but there is a general consensus that prayer is not going to do much.

Gervais told an interviewer from Channel 4, "Half my family are care workers. My sister works with kids with learning difficulties. My sister-in-law works in a care home for people with Alzheimer's. And four or five of my nieces work in old people's homes. I always write about what I know."

The writer-performer is making a serious effort to bring the lives and challenges of such people to light here. Helping others is not a career path that promises fame and fortune, and it is one that is under constant threat at present as the drive to austerity deepens. The slashing of funding is a recurring theme in the show and well-integrated into the daily lives of those involved.

There are a few false notes, mostly involving one character, Kev (David Earle), who seems to be included for unnecessary 'comic relief.' His obsession with sex is crudely portrayed. When Kev breaks from character,

he immediately becomes sympathetic as a self-loathing "loser" all too aware of his situation.

It is rare to see a television show that deals honestly with the conditions facing the working class and some of the weakest elements in society. That complex characters are portrayed and everyday situations scrutinized with a critical eye is surely something to be encouraged. This viewer looks forward to *Derek*'s second season.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact