

Ricky Gervais' *After Life*: To be or not to be, that's one of the questions

David Walsh
9 May 2020

The second season of British comic Ricky Gervais' web television series, *After Life*, premiered on Netflix on April 24. The first season premiered last March. All together 12 half-hour episodes are available. Gervais writes, directs and stars in the program.

Tony Johnson (Gervais) is devastated by the recent death of his beloved wife Lisa (Kerry Godliman) from breast cancer. He finds it difficult to carry on with life and frequently contemplates suicide. Lisa appears as a character in the two seasons of *After Life* so far through the numerous videos Tony has made of her and stored on his laptop.

In any event, Tony decides to remain alive and use his new "superpower," not giving a damn about anything and saying whatever he wants. He works at a miserable local newspaper, one of those given away for free. The well-meaning but ineffectual editor of the *Tambury Gazette*, Matt (Tom Basden), is his brother-in-law. Tony generally torments the latter about the silliness of the paper and the pointlessness of his own efforts.

The *Gazette*, a money-losing proposition, specializes in features about local oddballs: a teenage boy who plays the recorder with his nose; a mad, unwashed hoarder; a baby that looks like Hitler; a 100-year-old woman who, it turns out, despises her entire life ("I may as well have been a tree"); a middle-aged man who "identifies" as an eight-year-old school girl; an elderly woman who talks to cats; a young woman addicted to plastic surgery, etc. Tony's companion looking into these "stories" is Lenny (Tony Way), the uncouth photographer at the newspaper.

Tony regularly visits his father, Ray (David Bradley), who suffers from dementia and lives in a nursing home. At the home Tony meets Emma (Ashley Jensen), a Scottish nurse for whom he develops feelings. Whether

he will pursue this relationship remains up in the air.

Other regular characters include Sandy (Mandeep Dhillon), a newly-hired journalist at the *Gazette*; Kath (Diane Morgan), the newspaper's empty-headed advertising director; Anne (Penelope Wilson), an older woman and widow, whom Tony meets and befriends in the cemetery; Pat (Joe Wilkinson), a hapless and homeless but affable postman; and Roxie (Roisin Conaty), a prostitute, or "sex worker," as she insists. Pat and Roxie, who threaten to become an "item" by the end of the second season, are especially appealing and sympathetic.

The humor in *After Life*—and there is genuine humor here—comes out of Tony's interactions with this collection of personalities and also his indignation at some of the more absurd aspects of daily life, including the awful pretentiousness of a yoga class, Kath's belief in the paranormal, the antics of a local amateur drama society director and many more.

Gervais is genuinely quick-witted, and his outrage at a great deal of modern-day nonsense is often legitimate. The comedian, born in 1961, has by now a lengthy and award-winning history in television and film that includes *The Office*, *Derek*, *The Invention of Lying* and *David Brent: Life on the Road*. He is well-known for his atheism and his belief in rationality.

At the Golden Globes awards ceremony in January (which now seems like it was years ago!), Gervais caused a stir by making fun of contemporary Hollywood filmmaking, the obsession with race, Apple, Disney and other fully deserving targets. When he was attacked by the identity politics crowd for giving aid and comfort to the right, Gervais responded, "How the f*** can teasing huge corporations, and the richest, most privileged people in the world be considered right wing?"

Tony Johnson's (and Gervais') program of being honest with other people about "everything" is all right as far as it goes. The refusal to go along with the ritual of pretending things are fine—when they demonstrably are not—and the banality of polite, middle-class society is also healthy and creates amusing situations.

These qualities also have their limits. The "shocking" comedian today who makes much of his willingness to tell the "awful truth," it will usually be found, tends to be "ruthlessly honest" about only secondary or tertiary questions and not touch on, for example, the economic foundations of society, the filthiness and greed of the rich or the criminality of the endless drive to war. The degree of "audacity" or "naughtiness" is generally, although not always, in inverse relationship to the weightiness of the subject matter.

Gervais grew up during the period of the final decline and decomposition of the Labour Party and the trade unions. For more traditional class feeling and solidarity, which had such strong roots in Britain, he tends to substitute his individual common sense and social-navigational skills.

The comic's sympathy for other people's difficulties, including their susceptibility for religion and other symptoms of oppression, is not informed by a great deal of social insight. If people don't see through the things Gervais claims to see through, they are largely dismissed as fools. Coming up at many points against the innumerable stupid and reactionary features of contemporary political and cultural life, he too often takes the easy way out and adopts a quasi-misanthropic character.

After Life is schizophrenic in its attitude toward its more eccentric or psychologically/physically unfortunate characters, alternately mocking or sentimentalizing them. The series picks and chooses those it laughs at, including sometimes the more defenseless, and those to whom it gives the best lines.

Mostly, Tony-Gervais gets the best lines, either the most comic or the wisest ones or the most emotionally compelling. In fairness, the series also provides its various female characters with attractive qualities. The series, in other words, written and directed by Gervais, provides Gervais' character and a series of female characters, who orbit around Gervais' character, the most intriguing and humorous material. ... Is this a little self-indulgent? Yes.

In any event, the series is enjoyable on the whole, as long as one takes it with a grain of salt. *After Life* tends to run in place. It goes something like this: Tony can't make up his mind whether to kill himself or not. He encounters a person or situation that provides him with a reason to live. However, someone or something stupid or thoughtless or cruel makes him think better of his decision to stick it out. He then remembers his dead wife and can't bear the pain. The process begins over again. The sharp-eyed moments compete with the sentimental or self-involved.

In any case, a third season is planned.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact