

ARTS



'The Simpsons' might have been considered subversive in the early 1990s, but now its lovingly dysfunctional family represents the Hollywood ideal

Meet the modern-day Waltons



The Simpsons Movie

PO. CERT. 87 MINS

At the Republican National Convention in 1992 George Bush Sr made a pledge to his party: "We are going to keep on trying to strengthen the American family, to make it a lot more like the Waltons and a lot less like the Simpsons." That year Bush was defeated by Bill Clinton, and *The Simpsons* has gone on to be the longest-running American sitcom, and the longest-running animated programme ever.

Watching the first feature-length *Simpsons* movie, out this week, Bush's soundbite seems so distant and old-fashioned that it serves as a shock reminder of how much has changed in the intervening 15 years. For although the Simpsons remain eerily unaltered – never ageing, never changing – the perspectives behind the president's remark have been altered beyond recognition.

First on the list is the idea that watching *The Simpsons* was somehow bad for children's moral development. It was a cartoon, but the lead characters were not

traditional heroes; cynical, knowing and adult, Bart Simpson and his dysfunctional family were shown doing rebellious, questionable things and – shock, horror – were not always punished for them. In 1992 it was considered morally subversive – some American public schools even banned *Simpsons* merchandise.

Since then children's entertainment has become exponentially more sophisticated and worldly: in comparison to lifelike video games and the internet, with its adult content and spooky online worlds such as *Second Life*, the idea of children watching *The Simpsons* on telly on a Saturday afternoon now seems like wholesome family fun.

In terms of moral rectitude, I admit to being disappointed by how faithful to the good-natured television series *The Simpsons Movie* actually is. The gags are a friendly mixture of cultural references (spoofs of *Titanic* and *Snow White*), some well-animated slapstick and some ironic pokes at the audience (Homer: "I can't believe we're actually paying to see something we can see on TV for free!"). The nearest Homer and Bart get to true political incorrectness is playing on rooftops without safety equipment, and the plot punishes Homer good and proper for his selfish deeds.

Even more unrecognisable in this movie is the reputation *The Simpsons* had in the 1990s as front-line political satire. In fact, the 2007 film is as politically satirical as the television series ever been, but in comparison to the brutal cartoon *South Park*, or to postings on websites such as YouTube, its satire

now seems soft, half-hearted. The plot touches on the politically "hot" issues of the environment and government encroachment on civil liberties – little Lisa has become an environmental campaigner, and her father's willful neglect of waste-dumping rules sees President Schwarzenegger impose a glass dome over the town of Springfield – but neither of these issues is tackled head-on. Even the evangelical neighbour is left off lightly (the only hint of hypocrisy being his predilection for luxury hot chocolate), and the subjects

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of Iraq and Islamic terrorism are almost totally absent.

Personally, I found every 87 minutes too long for this genre fare. The 24-minute television episodes suit the format better (I noticed a dip in the cinema laughter levels after about half an hour), and I reckon the producers know it, too – why else did they hold off doing a movie for so long? The whole project has about the whiff of a retirement fund for the production team.

As a cashing-in exercise it will work a treat, for the accumulated affection built up towards this yellow family over the last 18 years is a guarantee of success.

Commercially, the decision not to reinvent the concept is the right one, as is the nostalgic decision to maintain the basic television-style animation for the feature film. *The Simpsons* is a warm, good-natured family show that reminds us of how it used to be. You guessed it: it is the Waltons of today.

Which brings me to the most important reason why George Bush's remark would now be inconceivable: instead of the antitype, the dysfunctional Simpsons family now represents the Hollywood ideal. The parents argue, the children tell them where to get off, the baby threatens to attack with a broken glass bottle, and yet they all love each other really. *The Simpsons* started the "we're dysfunctional and chaotic, but aren't we full of love and isn't that great?" school of Hollywood family, and it has since become the ideal. From *Mrs Doubtfire* to *Little Miss Sunshine* to *Transamerica*, it is not a schmalzy, happy movie set-up unless the parents are divorced, the son is gay and their love comes through despite blazing rows. The respectable Waltons family are more likely to be the villains.

And you know what? That is *The Simpsons*' greatest achievement. The stiff Depression-era ideal of the Waltons was dishonest, keeping pain locked away in the realm of the taboo. If Hollywood has since too much elevated the difficult and wacky, it is an error in the right direction: I would rather know about the fundamental quality of a relationship than its model or etiquette. *Mr T* may be a Simpson over a Walton any day.

No expense spared for Napoleon's wife



ART REVIEW
Christopher Lloyd

France in Russia
SOMERSET HOUSE, UNTIL NOVEMBER 4

The Château de Malmaison to the west of Paris is one of the most romantic places in the world. It was the home of Napoleon and his first wife Joséphine de Beauharnais during his time as First Consul and his first years as emperor from 1804. After their divorce in 1806 Joséphine was allowed to live there in enforced retirement, but in considerable style. Joséphine's collection of pictures was greatly celebrated in her own time. It was shown principally in a specially built Grande Galerie (now destroyed), comprising 350 items. A small portion of the collection was technically looted from the Landgraves (rulers of Hesse-Cassel after the Battle of Jena, and in many respects symbolised for him the affection he retained for "the kindest and best of women"). Although Joséphine as empress presided for a short time over the great palaces previously associated with French monarchy, none was equal in her eyes to Malmaison. Now a museum devoted to the Napoleonic era, it was originally a shared passion ("un lieu de délices") and, in its final form, very much Joséphine's private creation. It is her taste for the arts and her patronage that the current exhibition *France in Russia: Empress Joséphine's Malmaison Collection* at the Hermitage Rooms in Somerset House explores. The results, as so often in this location, are only moderately successful, even though some magnificent works of art are included.

The Château at Malmaison was acquired by Napoleon and Joséphine in a ruinous state in 1799. It was renovated by C Percier and P F L Fontaine in the severe neo-classical style favoured by Napoleon (the design of the principal entrance, for example, was based on a military tent), but the interiors were gradually softened over the years by Joséphine. The grounds were re-landscaped for her in the English style and included a magnificent garden famous for its roses, greenhouses full of exotic botanical specimens and a menagerie. While Joséphine was alive, no expense was spared.

Part of the magic of Malmaison is that its heyday was so short-lived. Its decline was, for the most part, due to the huge debts accumulated by its owner and inherited by the two children from her first marriage. The link with Tsar Alexander I was established by Joséphine herself and it was he, and later his brother Tsar Nicholas I, who secured a number of works of art for Russia through her

family. Although the bulk of Joséphine's collection is now in St Petersburg, both her generosity and the chaotic circumstances in Paris after Napoleon's downfall led to other dispersals. Malmaison itself remained in private hands and was first opened to the public in 1867, and finally given to the nation in 1903 in a state of disrepair. Some items of a more personal nature (including a court dress and a pair of slippers) have been lent from the Château, giving added poignancy to the standard portraits by F Gérard and F Masset. A selection of letters demonstrates Joséphine's concern for every aspect of life at Malmaison. Accompanying watercolours and prints, as well as a set of photographs made for a publication in 1808, are especially evocative.

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More subtle, less grim

THEATRE REVIEW

In Celebration

DUKE OF YORK'S THEATRE

The best-known plays of David Storey appeared at the Royal Court in the late 1960s and early 1970s in an atmosphere of notorious backstage hostility and jealousy. They were directed by Lindsay Anderson, a man of such pent-up ferocity and sense of grievance that he would have brought aggression and angst to *Goodbye, Mr Chips*. People entering the theatre in those days half-expected a mugging in the foyer. At the Duke of York's theatre one of the best of these collaborations, *In Celebration*, is beautifully revived and directed by Anna Mackinn with a warmth and lack of aggression that transforms what once seemed heavy-handed and grim into an incisive, subtle and engrossing exposure of family guilt and attempted redemption.

Expectations are also in reverse for another sizeable minority in the audience. These care nothing for the directorial techniques of post-war British theatre and the emergence of the working-class dialectic. They are here to hyperventilate at the sight of the eminently sigh-worthy film star Orlando Bloom, fresh from cavorting in the rigging in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. There was, however, a shocked intake of breath from several girls sitting near me when

Orlando walked on stage in a raincoat, shapless, brown slacks and a nasty brown cardigan, sporting a horrid little pencil-thin moustache and slicked-down hair, looking as furtive as a prisoner on the run.

However, for these two nervous minorities *In Celebration* must be a revelation. It is nowhere near as intimidating and aggressive a play as it seemed in the 1960s and Bloom, making his stage debut, is a sensitive and affecting actor working successfully in a brilliant company, and not some egocentric big shot.

Three brothers in their 30s return home to celebrate the 40th wedding anniversary of their parents in the north of England. Their father is on the brink of a reluctant retirement after a lifetime down the pit and their mother (among other things) is fretting over whether her sons have managed to slip free of the grim world into which they were born. Although for some the celebration turns sour, it is glorious how the playwright Storey keeps the arguments and the recriminations under control, with even the most heated exchanges between the men of the family dying in the atmosphere of an enduring but admittedly fragile love.

Tim Healy, as the father, frequently stands on stage with a look of bewilderment that his sons could say such things. The best performances come from him and from Dearbhla Molloy as the buttoned-up, yet deeply emotional mother who sacri-

ficed her life for her children. Hers is a model performance of restraint and depth.

Despite its pessimism the play has a powerful humanity and a sense of hope. The ferocity of Harold Pinter's family reunion *The Homecoming*, written four years earlier, is a far cry from the mous success in 1966 but not revived in London for nearly 100 years. This is a light work, and a sense of Victorian "cup and saucer" decorum and morality weighs it down. But Phoebe Barran directs an imaginative revival in a highly restricted space that manages to be charming and touching. I would single out Nicholas Gadd and Emily Dobbs as showing the essence of 19th-century courtship.

Urs

DUKE OF YORK'S THEATRE

At the tiny Finborough studio theatre in East 1st Court, West London, an enterprising schedule of plays gleaned from the archives has thrown up the genuine curiosity of Tom Robertson's Crimean War comedy *Urs*, first performed with enormous success in 1866 but not revived in London for nearly 100 years. This is a light work, and a sense of Victorian "cup and saucer" decorum and morality weighs it down. But Phoebe Barran directs an imaginative revival in a highly restricted space that manages to be charming and touching. I would single out Nicholas Gadd and Emily Dobbs as showing the essence of 19th-century courtship.

Robertson possibly, and Storey certainly, deserve to be seen more. We must rely on skilful directors such as Mackinn and Barran to steer their plays away from unfortunate past associations.

Peter Shaw