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The birth of Being Human

“So... a werewolf, a ghost and a vampire decide to live as humans do. They get jobs, a house and a TV licence”

Herrick summed it up quite neatly in the last episode of series one, but what about the journey that took *Being Human* to that point? (And who actually went and bought that TV licence? I bet it was George!)

Being Human first existed as a non-supernatural drama. Developed by Toby Whithouse for Touchpaper (an independent production company founded in 2001 by Rob Pursey, the eventual Executive Producer on both series of *Being Human*), the original version was a flat-sharing drama about three university friends. Toby confided in the BBC's online *Writers Room* in March 2010 that it was one of the dullest ideas he'd ever heard! Despite this the three lead characters came to him fully formed, it all seemed to fall neatly into place and a year was spent getting absolutely nowhere.

At the last meeting before packing the idea away in the 'could have been good' box, Toby had a thought: "Well of course we could turn George into a werewolf," and so *Being Human* was conceived. After that, the notion of a vampire and a ghost made perfect sense. The first version of the show was a 'proper' sit-com where Mitchell worked in a call centre and George had his own company; even Annie had a job in an office.

Of course, the idea of making George into a werewolf had to have come from somewhere and Toby let slip a secret to Jason Arnopp's screenwriting blog *Bloggery Pokery* in May 2008. Apparently he'd been working on a rom-com about a werewolf, called (and he did say he cringed at this point) *Mild Thing...*

When the BBC asked if he wanted to be involved in a series of pilots for BBC Three he was initially reluctant, but it was an opportunity to actually get his idea made (*Being Human* that is, not *Mild Thing*). So a re-written version of the show was submitted and *Being Human* as we know it was born.

So... who is Toby Whithouse?

Toby Whithouse, the creator and writer of *Being Human*, aside from being a writer is also an actor and a stand-up comedian – and has possibly worked out how to have more than 24 hours in a day! He started writing when 'resting' between acting jobs and partly as a reaction to the quality of scripts he was reading, convinced that he could do better.

As an actor he was a regular on TV in *The House of Eliott* between 1992-4, playing Norman Foss who married seamstress Tilly Watkins (Cathy Murphy). He also appeared in shows such as *Goodnight Mr Tom* (1998), *Goodnight Sweetheart* (in 1999), *The Last Musketeer* (2000) and *Holby City* (in 2000 and 2004), and in several films, including *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *Breathhtaking* (2000) and *Shadowlands* (1993).

His first play (what he wrote), *Jump Mr Malinoff, Jump*, won the 1998 Verity Bargate Award and, directed by Jonathan Lloyd, was the opening production for Soho Theatre's launch season in April 2000. The Soho Theatre also put on Toby's 2005 play *Blue Eyes and Heels*, which starred Martin

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Freeman and John Stahl (Coroner Quinn in *Being Human*).

Toby's TV writing credits include: *Where the Heart Is: Letting Go* (1999); *Hotel Babylon: Episode 1.5* (2006), in which he also made a cameo appearance; *Torchwood: Greeks Bearing Gifts* (2006); and *Comedy Showcase: Other People* (2007), which again starred Martin Freeman. Channel 4 commissioned him to develop a new drama and Toby devised a tale of four nurses based in Leeds. *No Angels* ran for 26 episodes from 2004-6, eight of which were written by Toby, who also popped up as a waiter in the final episode.

He was invited to contribute to *Doctor Who* and wrote the episode *School Reunion* (2006), which reintroduced 1970s companions Sarah Jane Smith and K9. He talked about the challenges involved to the *Radio Times* in May 2006: "Until I started working on *Doctor Who*, I thought the fact that I could name the Doctors in order made me a sad anorak. But when I met [fellow writers] Matt Jones, Steven Moffat and Tom MacRae, I realised I was paddling in the shallow end." Despite this, the episode was a great success and Toby returned to *Doctor Who* in 2010, writing *The Vampires of Venice* which starred Alex Price (Gilbert in *Being Human*) as Francesco Calvierri.

Toby gave an extensive and fascinating interview to the BBC *Writers Room* in March 2010 in which he talked about how he writes, about *Being Human* – lots of really interesting material. One quote that still amuses me every time I see it is this one: "Occasionally I'll get a phone call from my Script Editor saying 'Such-and-such isn't sure about this line.' 'Isn't he? Oh. He's not sure if he'd say that? I think he does. It's in the script.'"

BBC Three Drama Pilots

Danny Cohen, the Controller of BBC Three, announced a new look to the channel to take effect in February 2008. He said that: "The channel should be obsessed with all things new – new talent, new programmes and a new relationship between television and the internet. So, in February, BBC Three will be transformed – and I hope will become known for being Britain's most ambitious attempt to combine television and the web."

Looking for a target audience in the age range 16-34, the week after the relaunch (and the week that saw the *Being Human* pilot aired) certainly delivered. BBC Three recorded its second highest weekly share of 4.5% and the highest ever weekly reach for the target 16-34 group of 4.7 million or 36.6%. Danny Cohen said: "I hope we will continue this excellent young audience growth over the next year or so, and take lots of risks along the way."

Part of the BBC Three relaunch was a series of six very different drama pilots, billed as youthful and fresh – a new generation of drama. The pilots were:

Phoo Action – a kitsch kung-fu drama co-written by *Spaced*'s Jessica Hynes, starring Ray Winstone's daughter, Jaime, as a high-kicking futuristic crime fighter

The Things I Haven't Told You – a mystery drama about a group of teenagers whose lives get extremely complicated when one is involved in a car crash. The cast included Lenora Crichlow (Annie in *Being Human*)

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West 10 LDN – written by and starring Noel Clarke, delving into the intense and passionate lives of the teenagers who live on West London’s Greenside estate

Dis/Connected – a group of disconnected teenagers from very different backgrounds are thrown together after the suicide of a mutual friend, forcing them to examine who they really are

Mrs In-Betweeny – a darkly comic look at modern British family life in all its guises. The Winslow kids’ parents are dead; Uncle Brendan arrives to make it all better – but now he’s ‘Aunt’ Emma...

And – of course – the pilot episode of Toby Whithouse’s *Being Human*, described in the BBC Three press release as the story of a house share with a difference; a tale of three twenty-somethings, each of them outsiders with unusual afflictions: one is a vampire, one a werewolf and one a ghost.

Mitchell is a hospital cleaner. He’s good-looking, laid-back and a hit with the ladies, but also something of a blood-sucker. George works in the same hospital as a porter. He’s an awkward but loveable geek who, every full moon, sprouts a snout and grows a very hairy back.

Having had enough of sleeping in hostels and temporary accommodation, Mitchell and George decide to get a house together. They just want to have a go at being normal; being human. But, as soon as they move in, they discover an unwanted lodger – Annie – a ghost with a distinct lack of self-esteem.

Rob Pursey of Touchpaper described it as being “a warm, funny, aspirational drama with an irresistible twist. Mitchell, George and Annie are supernatural creatures but they are desperate to be a part of a life we all take for granted. It’s an exciting and contemporary take on friendship and finding your way in the world. Toby Whithouse’s witty, emotionally powerful script makes these three misfits come alive, even though they’re far from human.”

Of course we all know now how it turned out and *Being Human* was a huge success for BBC Three, but try and look at that list as if you’ve never seen it before. Which was the least likely to fit the new revamped 16- to 34-year-old BBC Three? Well, if I’m honest it would have to be *Being Human*... Where would you put your money? *Phoo Action* looks a decent bet – good cast, good writers and based on characters created by Jamie Hewlett (*Gorillaz*, *Tank Girl*) for the comic strip *Get the Freebies*, which first appeared in *The Face* magazine.

There was never any pretence that this was a publicity contest and there was no public vote. After all, the BBC have droves of very clever people who know about these things – or at any rate that’s what they tell us! In fact, a full series of *Phoo Action* had already been commissioned before any of the pilots went out (although this wasn’t widely advertised at the time). Despite this, all of the pilots were promoted reasonably equally by BBC Three.

The *Being Human* pilot was billed by BBC Three as a “witty, exciting, sexy and extraordinary look at the friendship between three, twenty-something outsiders.” The comedy angle is well to the fore and the supernatural elements are presented in a humorous way – the press releases don’t portray the darkness that is such an important counterpoint to the humour and the

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reality, and maybe that delayed the audience response, with many more viewers coming to the pilot after seeing the initial reaction.

It is interesting now to revisit the original interviews with Russell Tovey and the first incarnations of Mitchell and Annie – Guy Flanagan and Andrea Riseborough – about their characters and reactions to the show. Comparing what was said then to what we now know about the characters after two full series of *Being Human*, there are some differences and some constants – rather like life, it never goes quite as you planned...

As always, Russell was asked about the nudity and werewolf transformations, but in the *Being Human* Press Pack he talked about George's back-story:

“George is around 26 years old; he is an academic; he's really bright with an IQ of 156. He was studying for his finals at university and was going to marry his fiancé. Everything was going well for him until he went on a recce to Mexico to find a wedding venue. Whilst he was there, he was attacked by a werewolf. When he came back, the transformations started to happen and he had no idea what was happening to him, so he had to get away. He slept rough on the streets and became suicidal. George was in a bar one night, about to be attacked by a group of vampires, when Mitchell stepped in and saved him. Ever since, George has been in debt to him.”

The bones of George's story didn't change that much, just the details – the werewolf attack moved to Scotland (can't imagine Tully in a sombrero) and the vampire attack to a café where George was working. Russell seemed to have already 'found' George – the agony of the transformation, the curse, the sense of loss and the desperate, burning desire for normality.

As Guy Flanagan said at the time: “Who wouldn't want to be a vampire? I get to be invincible and bite beautiful people, what more could you want? It's a hard job, but someone has to do it!” The vampires in the pilot were much more gothic and Guy had taken this from the script, his research therefore went back to the films he had seen and the classic book Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Some aspects of Mitchell were there from the beginning – he is described as laid-back, with an emotional coolness coming from his 120 years of existence. Despite this he has a respect for humans and a desire to be in their company. An interesting comment from Guy was that “He can't fall in love or experience the same love as normal people.” In light of Mitchell's search for true love and his relationships with Josie and Lucy, this shows how the detachment, the languid watchfulness of Mitchell had to change after the pilot to make the character less of a spectator.

There's a nice remark about what was the standout scene for Guy – he chose the sex scene with Mitchell and Lauren, when Lauren is recruited. Not for any of the obvious reasons, but because it was filmed on the day of the Rugby World Cup Final – and they were running late! It was his first TV sex scene and he expected it to take some time, but “with 20 minutes to do the scene, I was thrown in at the deep end and all the electricians were threatening to pull the plugs if we didn't get it done because they didn't want to miss the final!”

In common with Russell and Guy, Andrea Riseborough was attracted to *Being Human* and the role of Annie by the quality of the writing, but for her it

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was also the opportunity to work with Russell who she had long admired. Her take on Annie was informed by the back-story she had been given – she saw her as “a young ghost-next-door. I decided that she might come from Barnsley – so I gave her that accent. She’s a sweet, yet pushy, young woman who was engaged to be married.” Andrea focused more on agoraphobia and self-esteem in her portrayal of Annie rather than just seeing her as a ghost. She could see the feelings of invisibility that are universal and human. Interestingly, Andrea saw an attraction between Mitchell and Annie: “Mitchell is so accommodating, wise and old; I think she becomes emotionally attached to him in a romantic way and starts to admire him.”

In the pilot, Annie is played more for humour and there is less about the darkness that was to come for her as the series progressed. The pilot was portrayed more as a comedy-drama, but as the stories developed, the darkness and the drama became as important if not more so than the comedy – although it was still an essential component.

One lovely comment – when asked if she believes in ghosts, Andrea replied: “I believe in Annie.”

So – let’s go back to February 2008. It was a Monday, it was cold, and depending on where you lived it might have been raining. I think it’s fair to say it was dark, and it was definitely three days from the full moon.

Are you sitting comfortably? Then we’ll begin...