

BOOK REVIEWS

FAME, GILDED AGE STYLE

Another Period (10 episodes, 2015). Directed by Jeremy Konner. Creators Natasha Leggero and Riki Lindhome.

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The activities of the extremely rich during the Gilded Age were often so outrageous that they do not need to be embellished to be humorous. How can you improve on Marion (Mamie or Mrs. Stuyvesant) Fish letting a flour-covered dachshund loose among her elaborately-dressed guests? While I found *Another Period* funny, in the extremely crude Comedy Central manner, I found myself wondering if there is a large audience of people who find both excessive amounts of specialized eating utensils and human poop funny. With a theme of excess, the show is amusing and interesting on many levels, especially as a satirical look at our current obsession with wealth and fame.

Another Period skewers both “famous because they are famous” reality shows and serious period dramas. As the cocreator, stand-up comedian Natasha Leggero, has put it, the show is like if “the Kardashians moved into Downton Abbey.” The focus of *Another Period* is the Bellacourts, a very rich family of Newport, Rhode Island. The father, Commodore Bellacourt (portrayed by David Koechner) is mostly absent and his wife Dodo (Paget Brewster) is physically present but uses morphine to escape her oppressive life. Their children are Lillian (played by Leggero); Hortense (Lauren Ash as the smart and serious suffragist); as well as twins Beatrice (played by cocreator Riki Lindhome) and Frederick (Jason Ritter), who are in love with each other. We join the family in 1902; both Lillian and Beatrice are married with children (though their husbands are having an affair with each other) and Lillian is doing all she can to become famous. As Snoop Dog sings in the theme song, “I want the money. I want the fame. I want the whole world to know my name.”

Both the general background and many details are historically accurate. Newport became the most popular summer residence of New York’s extremely wealthy during the Gilded Age. For about ten weeks, between Caroline Astor’s Summer Ball and Marion Fish’s Harvest Festival Ball, they stayed in their “cottages” and engaged in intense socializing. Competition to be named to “The Four Hundred” was intense (Lillian and Beatrice rejoice when their friends, the Claudette sisters, die of tuberculosis because now there are two openings). Excessive wealth brought excessive behavior that is only slightly exaggerated in *Another Period*: a seventeen-course dinner for dogs, eating exotic foods such as bald eagle and toast points, ordering a cape made from puppy fur, and a woman versus cabbage beauty pageant. The rest of America eagerly kept up with the Newport gossip (in *Town Topics* and newspapers) and also, if they were able, toured Newport to gawk. While earlier generations of America’s elite avoided publicity, the new-money rich increasingly sought notoriety. Real historical figures make cameo appearances in the show: Mark Twain, Helen Keller, Gandhi (who almost gets into a fistfight with Leon Trotsky until he discovers nonviolence), Charles Ponzi, Dan Ringling, and Charlie Chaplin (who tries to amuse the family with his tramp routine, but all they want to watch is him falling down).

Just as the Astor and Fish women controlled the real Newport, women run the Bellacourt household and many of the themes of the show are gendered. *Another Period* demonstrates well the power and powerlessness of the women of new money. Lillian and Beatrice are queens in their home, being fed by hand, carried from room to room, allowed to rename servants at will (even with names like “Chair”), and indulged in their every whim (“Cream Hour” consists of them throwing empty puffs at their servant after sucking out the cream). Their father, the Commodore, can and apparently will do anything for them, such as covering up murder and speeding up the process of having their husbands declared dead. Their acceptance into Newport society, however, is in doubt. The Marquis de Sainsbury (partly modeled after Ward McAllister, who claimed to have originated the idea of the “The Four Hundred”) says his job is to “separate the elite from the almost-rich vomit people,” and it seems certain from the start that he places the Bellacourts in the latter category. The women’s disadvantages are real also. Beatrice cannot read (though her occasional flashes of brilliance, such as when she explains the faulty math behind Ponzi’s pyramid scheme, are hilarious) and when Lillian tries to have her husband arrested for beating her, the police laugh. When Hortense organizes a woman’s suffrage event at Bellacourt Manor, Lillian says (expressing a not-uncommon present day misconception of the movement), “haven’t women suffered enough?”

The much more precarious position of the servants is also displayed well. One is raped by a wealthy visitor and receives little sympathy; the twist is that the servant is male. Their backgrounds also show desperation: orphanage, asylum, brothel. Head butler Mr. Peepers (played by Michael Ian Black) is impossibly hard on the servants, excessively indulgent to the Bellacourts, and believes the family members truly care about him but cannot show it. “Chair” (Christina Hendricks as prostitute Celine) is manipulative and cruel to other servants as she maneuvers her way into the family. Again with only slight exaggeration of the historical record, the Bellacourts’ servants are in charge of keeping an exact count of the linen, exercising the swans, and carrying buckets of human feces to dump in the ocean.

If Leggero and Lindhome are to be believed, most people who watch *Another Period* seem to assume that they made everything up. The excesses of the Gilded Age wealthy can hardly be exaggerated, but if the show can introduce the period to a new audience and continue to provide a commentary on our own fame-obsessed time, it will be worthwhile. If you missed the show when it originally aired, you can watch entire episodes on the Comedy Central website. A second season is being planned, so we will be able to see where Lillian and Beatrice next take their quest for fame.

MURDER IN CHICAGO, DYNAMITE IN LONDON

O'BRIEN, GILLIAN. *Blood Runs Green: The Murder That Transfixed Gilded Age Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. xiv + 303 pp. \$25 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-24895-0; \$17 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-37999-9.

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On May 22, 1889, workers in the North Shore suburb of Lake View, soon to be annexed to Chicago, responded to complaints about a putrid sewer and discovered the corpse of Dr. Patrick Henry Cronin, dumped there after having been bludgeoned in the head. All that was left on his nude, badly decomposed body was an Agnus Dei medallion, “a Catholic safeguard against harm” (89).