

Fingers on the pulse

The Weekend's Television

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CASUALTY 1909

SUN BBC1

KINGDOM

SUN ITV1

goldsmith with a serious case of the rheum. This provoked a fierce row with his colleague about whether the Galenic theory of the humours may be overdue for a rethink. Then the anaesthetist (who was thinking about asking Mistress Pert to a hanging when his shift is over) arrived with his large wooden mallet and was obliged to get a bit testy with a nervous young apothecary's apprentice who had accidentally bled all eight pints out of a pamphlet seller who came in with the dropsy. Well, not quite yet, perhaps, though if **Casualty 1909** is a big enough success you can see that the principle will easily bear repeating. Take the standard template of hospital drama – collegiate rows, horrible accidents and romance in between the

bedpans – and backspace it by a century. Or two. Or three for that matter.

Casualty 1909 comes with footnotes – little on-screen facts that pop up at the end as if to assure you that this is history of a kind. It has a sort of bibliography, too, assuring you that the plotlines have been based on “hospital records, private papers and newspaper reports”. And it’s clear that part of its appeal is a rapid oscillation between nostalgia and whatever its antonym is (there really should be one, to balance sentimental fondness for the past with a clear-eyed disdain for its deprivations). You begin with the appeal of history as a crisply uniformed ward sister inspects the linen cupboards and chamber-pot shelves, a gleamingly candid display of Edwardian discipline and cleanliness, no hiding place for MRSA. Then you get the downside. “Before antibiotics and the NHS” reads the title, shortly after one of those hapless factory workers that are meat and drink to *Casualty*, this century or the last, had taken a gust of blazing naphtha full in the face.

The baddie in *Casualty 1909* is Mr Dean, an upper-crust surgeon of private

means who has a bad cocaine habit, a villainous pair of mustachios, and an utterly boo-able tendency to put the nurses in their place when they attempt to do anything more demanding than make tea or empty sick bowls. The goody is Dr Culpin, a figure of saintly kindness and understanding. While Mr Dean sneers at apprentice nerves (“For heaven’s sake girl it’s a male member, it’s not a cobra,” he snaps when a probationary nurse jibbed at inserting a catheter), Dr Culpin comes across like an honorary suffragette, encouraging the nurses to undertake daring medical procedures like picking shrapnel out of blast victim’s back. No wonder Nurse Bennett invited him to accompany her on a tram-ride to Hyde Park and back, the forward little hussy. Meanwhile, Matron, Cherie Lunghi at her most steely, has spotted the potential in Nurse Russel and is grooming her for A&E or “the receiving room” as they call it. And it’s not too bad really if you like that kind of thing, offering a fresh vocabulary when it comes to medical jargon (“Swabs and cyanide wool in the cavity please sister”) and a pretty

painless introduction to the medical and social realities of Edwardian life.

Alternatively, if you still have any appetite for bucolic whimsy after an hour of *Hope Springs*, you can watch **Kingdom**, which delivers the pleasures of rural eccentricity and metropolitan condescension in a far more palatable form. There are still bits you have to spit out, of course – life is never perfect. When Kingdom says, “There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy, Horatio”, you might well pray that the character he’s talking to won’t look puzzled and reply, “It’s Terry, Mr Kingdom”, but your prayer will not be answered. And you might find the hapless office junior a bit trying and overworked. But the saving grace is the frequency with which both Fry and Hermione Norris manage to convince you that the script is worth bearing with.

You might want to peel off about five minutes before the end – when Kingdom has a tendency to come over all avuncular and sententious – but elsewhere you should be able to see why it’s back on screen again.