

EXTRAS (published Courier-Mail, 2006)

Starting Wednesday August 16, ABC, 9pm

Self-deluded narcissist, David Brent, will surely go down in history as one of the great characters of television. Skilfully written and played by Ricky Gervais, Brent made you laugh, cringe and genuinely feel sorry for him at times. So, was it ever going to be possible for Gervais and co-writer Stephen Merchant to come up with an equally fascinating character and series to please the hordes of fans of *The Office*?

Extras is the result of their next collaboration, and it again stars Gervais as a bit of a deluded loser, this time in the form of Andy Millman, an extra in films and TV shows. Like David Brent, Andy thinks he's actually a lot smarter and better at his job than he is, and he's just waiting for the big break where he can get to say a line. But it seems no-one else seems remotely aware of his awesome talent.

Then there's Andy's best friend and fellow struggling actor, Maggie Jacobs, played by Ashley Jensen (who won Best Television Comedy Actress and Best Newcomer at the 2005 British Comedy Awards for this role). She's got her feet a bit more grounded in reality, knowing that she'll probably only ever be an extra. Every episode brings a potential new boyfriend into Maggie's life . . . and then out of it again.

Considering the weight of expectation on Extras, it didn't disappoint as I feared it might; on the contrary, it succeeds very well. You just have to be willing to forget *The Office* and take this on board as a completely different animal. It just happens to star Ricky Gervais doing the type of character he does best and which has remarkable similarities at times to David Brent. So be it.

An impressive feature of the series is the amazing array of top stars who were willing to completely trust Gervais and Merchant and play themselves in a very unflattering light. The first episode has Ben Stiller directing his debut feature film about war crimes in the Balkans, with the *Zoolander* and *Dodgeball* star using his Hollywood A-list status to bully everyone on the set.

The second instalment sees tough guy Vinnie Jones and *Eastenders*' Ross Kemp engage in a bit of bravado at the expense of their reputations, while Kate Winslet dressed as a dirty-talking nun in a film about Nazi Germany is a real laugh in the third episode. Upcoming stars include Samuel L. Jackson, Patrick Stewart and the English comedian Les Dennis.

Meanwhile, poor old Andy is an extra in all of the productions and manages to have every opportunity to get his dial on camera foiled by the director calling "Cut" just as he walks into shot. We also get to see Stephen Merchant as Andy's hopeless agent,

Darren Lamb, whose personally typed CV of Andy says that he gave up a good day job to try acting "despite his age, weight and looks." (Merchant also made an appearance in the second series of The Office as Gareth's friend, Oggie.)

The good news is that Extras, a BBC and HBO co-production, is going into its second series in the U.K., which helps soften the blow that this first series is just six episodes long. Watch it and enjoy it for what is.

Vicki Englund