

US television traditionally has broadcast only a skewed sampling of British television: the ones about forbidden inter-class love, the politics of primogeniture, or the difficulty of getting over Oxford.

And what of the less glamorous programmes about everyday working-class Britons? American producers bought the rights to adapt them into such fare as *All in the Family* (based on *Till Death Us Do Part*), *Sanford and Son* (based on *Stephie and Son*), and, more recently, *Queer as Folk*.

Even *Absolutely Fabulous* – which at first blush appears to be an exception to the rule – was still a spiritual descendant of the traditional yarn of the effete aristocrat, with a modernised twist.

It is unclear whether the fault lay with the networks or with the audiences, but it seemed that the only British Islanders shown on US TV were primped, precious, and on PBS.

But the days of the Atlantic class divide may be over. Some credit such films as *The Full Monty* (1997) and *Secrets and Lies* (1996) for whetting the American appetite for British stories about regular, dysfunctional folk. Importing such stories to television – without the refilming and recasting – is the logical next step.

Ulster-born comedic actor James Nesbitt is happy to rise to the challenge. "People being interested [in the average Joe] is a good thing, because I can't ever see them casting me in a Merchant Ivory movie."

Nesbitt is passing through New York, promoting the US

## TELEVISION EUNY HONG-KORAL

# Bridging the dysfunctional divide

broadcast premiere of *Cold Feet*, the immensely popular British dramatic comedy in which he stars (Bravo, Monday nights at 10pm from January 1).

This series – which follows a group of thirty-somethings in Manchester, England – is not to be confused with the NBC remake of the same name, which debuted and failed in autumn 1999.

"You should really try to catch [the American] one if you have a chance," Nesbitt says, rolling his eyes in a spirit of droll sarcasm – a gesture that he repeats frequently throughout the

**Perhaps the unofficial embargo on British-imported programmes will finally be lifted**

interview.

He hopes *Cold Feet* will be the series that warms US audiences to British-imported programming, though he is stunned to learn that the US censors have bleeped the word "shit" from one of the episodes. He asks worriedly: "You can't say shit? Do they at least show the scene where I've got the rose up my bottom?"

He is relieved to learn that scene – which has to be seen to be understood – has been left intact.

In spite of his insistence on nudity for comedic purposes, he's not too keen on heavy sex scenes. He reveals: "I was offered a part in [the original British version of] *Queer as Folk*. Thank God, I was busy, or my mother would have had a breakdown."

Nesbitt plays *Cold Feet's* Adam: nebbishy, gawky, and chronically incapable of entering committed relationships with women. Adam's credo: "Women around 30 who haven't got a man usually have a cat, and I'm allergic to cats."

His lack of nesting instinct becomes apparent in the pilot episode, when he courts Rachel (played by Helen Baxendale). On their first date, she bends down to pick up a fallen napkin. Adam jokes awkwardly: "For a moment there, I thought you were going to go down on me."

Meeting Rachel's yuppie friends at a dinner party, Adam presents his hosts a wine so wretched that it convinces them Adam is a transitional beau. They don't even bother to call him by his proper name. "So remember Alan, if a wine has 'blended from a number of European countries' on the label, it generally isn't any good."

Adam is a systems analyst, and a running gag of the series is that he promises to "explain later" what that actually means. Says Nesbitt: "Thank god it hasn't come up yet, because I have no idea what I'm supposed to be doing for a

living.

"Every season, there's at least one episode where they show me at work, but I'm kind of just doing this..." and he suddenly droops his face muscles into a slack-jawed, staring-at-computer expression, while he mimes a typing motion.

Like many physical comedians, Nesbitt is at ease communicating in gestures. He demonstrates this penchant throughout *Cold Feet*, unexpectedly darting about the room like some crazed soccer fan running

the field. On which subject, he says: "I'd give up acting altogether to play for Manchester United," he says.

Nesbitt seems a bit apprehensive about his imminent US exposure, perhaps not without cause. Co-star Helen Baxendale appeared in a handful of episodes of *Friends*, as Ross' second wife Emily. According to the actress her family was subsequently harassed by reporters. "That was a difficult time for her," sympathises Nesbitt.

But for the most part, he

is at ease. "In Britain, the interviewer is often more interested in himself than in the interviewee. I'm delighted with the enthusiasm and warmth I've gotten over here."

As if on cue, the waitress who takes our order asks him for his autograph, even though she doesn't know his name, and can't quite recall where she has seen him.

She asks: "You're an actor, right? Funny guy?" For the moment, that might be the extent of his recognition in the US. But with *Cold Feet's* US premiere, that is all about to change. And with it, perhaps the unofficial embargo on British-imported programmes will finally be lifted.

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