

Russell T. Davies' miniseries *Years and Years* is *Black Mirror* with a heart

The easy pitch for the new HBO / BBC co-production *Years and Years* might be "What if *Black Mirror*, but a family drama?" But the more accurate pitch might be "What if *Black Mirror*, but with a full and beating heart?" That isn't intended as a slam on Charlie Brooker's anthology series about dystopian futures. It's more of an appreciation of what creator Russell T. Davies has been able to achieve with his six-episode limited series, premiering Monday, June 24th on HBO. (Its run on BBC One recently concluded.)

Years and Years begins in 2019, with a focus on the complicated intergenerational Lyons clan: Muriel (Anne Reid), her grandchildren Edith (Jessica Hynes), Stephen (Rory Kinnear), Daniel (Russell Tovey), and Rosie (Ruth Madeley), and their assorted spouses and children, including Stephen's wife Celeste (T'Nia Miller), and their daughter Bethany (Lydia West). The story begins simply for these Britons, with the birth of Rosie's second son, Lincoln, and the first public appearance of rising UK politician Vivian Rook (Emma Thompson). But then the show rockets into the future, in progressive leaps toward the year 2034. The segments along the way track the dramatic changes to global politics and technology, and consider how they affect the Lyons family.

The impact of international events on individual lives is a key aspect of the series, and it gives *Years and Years* much of its subtle (and overt) power. It's one thing to see a report on a country's banking crisis, and another to watch an increasingly familiar family lose their home as a result. Hearing about refugees being deported is an abstraction – watching a loving couple forcibly separated by the government

is a powerful, empathy-driving moment.

[embedded content]

Using the Lyons family as a magnifying glass for current events gives *Years and Years* a shocking immediacy. Over the course of six episodes, it builds up horror about what may come in the next 15 years. But it also brings in inklings of wonder and hope, taking a positive view about what humanity is capable of even in the darkest times.

Much as in *Black Mirror*, technology isn't the enemy in *Years and Years*. As time passes, both mobile and desktop interfaces enter the third dimension and become embeddable in the human brain, the shifting nature of agriculture leads to the evolution of synthetic food and beverages, and even the ways people lay their loved ones to rest starts to change. But innovations and changing technology aren't Davies' focus here, even on an allegorical level. The changes in the world are part and parcel of a story that's deeply rooted in its characters.

It's a unique, inclusive brew of characters, too, brought to life by a deep bench of a cast. Emma Thompson is arresting in her brief screen time as a political figure whose inner life remains a mystery. She's a politician for a modern, Trump-centric age: a maverick who makes polarizing appearances and uses extreme media savvy to claim center stage. She isn't the series star, though – that's a title any of the ensemble actors could claim, given the caliber of the cast and the distribution of the plot focus.



Photo: Robert Ludovic / HBO

Tovey, as a council official who upheaves his comfortable relationship for a newfound passion, carries a lot of the show's heart with him. Hynes fully embodies the role of fearless rebel, as an activist whose determination to fight the world is balanced perfectly against Kinnear and Miller, playing parents who just want to craft the best life possible for their teenage daughters. And Reid as the family matriarch is given clichéd moments that can only be followed up by, "Oh, silly gran" – but she also gets some of the series' most haunting monologues, capturing the anxiety and nostalgia of the older generation, flustered by increasingly tougher times.

Many family dramas have difficulties with inclusive casting, but on *Years and Years*, Davies puts in the effort to avoid that, and not just around racial representation. Wheelchair-user Madeley is a charming, compelling performer who deserves to get a lot more work. Lydia West as Stephen and Celeste's young daughter Bethany, who initially aspires to a transhumanism lifestyle, is just beginning her career. But her

bright energy and ability to show Bethany's evolution from angry teenager to confident young woman indicates her real potential to become a major breakout star.

Davies, meanwhile, has had a long career as a TV writer, working since the early 1990s in a variety of genres before becoming key to several iconic series. For fans of Davies' writing through his creation of the groundbreaking, soulful character romp *Queer as Folk*, or his role in reviving the iconic British series *Doctor Who* for the modern TV world, *Years and Years*' inherent darkness might prove startling.

But one of Davies' most profound works as a writer was the season 4 *Doctor Who* episode "Turn Left," which features an alternate reality in which the Doctor (David Tennant, at the time) dies before his time, and the entire universe slowly but surely turns to garbage as a result. "Turn Left" doesn't skimp on the dystopia, and one of its focuses is the rising xenophobia that eventually leads to non-British citizens being imprisoned in camps. "Turn Left," which aired in 2008, now looks prescient.



Photo: Matt Squire / HBO

Camps for refugees are a major factor in *Years and Years* as well, which is where the show hits one of its biggest snags. Watching debates set in the future over internment camps for refugees feels out of step with the fact that at this exact moment in time, Americans are debating whether the term “concentration camp” is applicable to the containment zones the United States government has created for asylum-seekers.

While the show is set in the future, many of the steadily dropping dominos which lead to the increasing darkness of this series – especially when it comes to the political rise of extremist governments and the growingly unavoidable threat of climate change – are vivid present concerns, not future ones. The discussions they inspire in the show have real impact, but they sometimes clash with the idea that this is a possible consequence hanging over us, rather than a showcase of where we already are today.

The immediate relevance of *Years and Years*’ political plotlines does drive a strong emotional engagement with the

series, though. Davies may not be imaginative enough about what the future might hold, but he is addressing current events with an immediate, raw vividness. With every big monologue and montage of world events, his series conveys a deeply embedded frustration that permeates nearly every scene and speech. That voice is hoarse, tired of shouting about the icecaps, extremist politics, and the way empathy for others keeps shrinking as life gets tougher, and human interactions become more transactional.

But *Years and Years* still takes time for a moment of drunken joy, set to the indefatigable musical stylings of Chumbawamba. It isn't a show about the inevitable horrors of the future, it's about a family trying its best to muddle through them. And even the worst characters, making their worst choices, are clearly and richly human, in a way that underlines the need for empathy and understanding.

Years and Years wasn't a massive ratings hit in the UK, in spite of Thompson's star power, and it may be in danger of slipping under the radar in America as well. (Maybe not enough people watched Jessica Hynes in the classic British sitcom *Spaced*, or appreciated Russell Tovey's work in HBO's *Looking*.) But it deserves more attention, both for its execution and for its good intentions.

Over five seasons and various special episodes, *Black Mirror* has used its roughly hourlong format to engage audiences with standalone scenarios about how technology is affecting us now, and how that might play out in the future. But *Years and Years* uses the very specific problems of the Lyons family to make viewers examine, in a general way, how choices made today affect tomorrow. The series suggests that change is only possible when people take conscious, decisive action – even if only by making sure they're paying attention to what's going on without them. Not everyone will engage with this show's message, but given how loudly it's shouting, people should take this moment – this relevant political moment – to listen

to what Davies is saying.

Years and Years premieres on HBO on June 24th, 2019 at 9PM ET.

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