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The V Spot

Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett and Holly Baxter of the Vagenda Magazine



Modern feminists can learn a lot from Suffragette sitcom "Up the Women"

Many of the questions faced by the women's movement today are played out in Jessica Hynes' new show. In a world where feminism still viewed by many women with distrust, wariness and even alarm, there's a lot we can learn from the ladies of the Banbury Intricate Craft Circle Frankly Demands Women's Suffrage.

BY [RHIANNON AND HOLLY](#) | PUBLISHED 12 JUNE 2013 11:15



Rebecca Front and Jessica Hynes in "Up the Women". Photograph: BBC

also the wit of the writing. Helen's mother Myrtle (played by Judy Parfitt) is a red haired bohemian with a sexy past who one suspects of having been a pre-Raphaelite. She is in constant conflict with her daughter, who claims that her mother has no understanding of the domestic duties of women. "I'm sure as I lie on my deathbed, I will cast my mind's eye over all the table arrangements I never made," she says, sarcastically. Perhaps most reminiscent, however, is the farcical nature of the plot, which, rather than focusing on the central, founding members of the Suffragette movement, instead follows a group of parochial nobodies and their attempts to come to grips with the huge social changes of the last century, with predictably mixed results.

Hynes' character Margaret returns from London having been caught up in a Suffragette rally, and suggests that the "Banbury Intricate Craft Circle" rename itself the "Banbury Intricate Craft Circle Frankly Demands Women's Suffrage". It is in the group's unwillingness to cause a stir that much of the farcical humour can be found, for what use is a radical protest group which is too frightened to do anything radical? Though the youngest member of the group, Emily, is keen on direct action ("Kill the king!") she's somewhat compromised by her romantic attachment to resident "mansplainer" Thomas, who appropriately describes himself as "a spanner in the works of your oppression".

For a comedy set in the Edwardian era, *Up the Women* documents some very modern problems as far as feminism is concerned. In fact, if anything the series shows how these problems can be seen to have stemmed from the very outset of the movement and have endured. Simply becoming a cohesive group with shared aims is difficult enough, without the scaremongering that tyrant Helen uses to dissuade the others from joining and undermine enthusiast Margaret's attempts at leadership. Helen demands to know whether Margaret's husband is aware of her new feminist principles and that she is "cavorting with skirted anarchists" (he doesn't as "he's been very melancholic since Nietzsche's death") and terrifies mother-of-fourteen Eva into joining her counter-movement by asking her to imagine her children orphaned and in the workhouse. This shitty kind of manipulation – the placing of equal rights in stark opposition to traditional female roles, such as motherhood – endures in the right-wing media today.

We see the Banbury Intricate Craft Group (Politely Demands Women's Suffrage) face all this in the first two episodes, as well as some well-worn questions (Do we let men join? Should we change our tactics? What is an acceptable euphemism for vagina? Can't somebody just DO something?) *Up the Women* is timely considering how we are seeing a new generation of feminists who don't take themselves too seriously and seem more capable than their predecessors of laughing at themselves (though there's still a long way to go, frankly), and it's refreshing to see some well-written female-led comedy on prime-time telly. Though *Up the Women* draws on the past, it's not so rooted in history and theory that it becomes alienating – a technique the feminist movement would do well to learn from. But perhaps most importantly this new comedy mirrors feminism's reception in the outside world, where it is still viewed by many women with distrust, wariness and even alarm, and the idea that it is not something that women need persists. Just as the members of the craft group are unsure as to whether they need the Suffragettes at all, many women today remain unconvinced of feminism's relevance to their lives, and those ensconced within their liberal bubbles would do well to remember that.

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Avatar Suki • 4 months ago "Can't somebody just DO something?"

Well quite.

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Avatar Catty • 4 months ago I must be the only feminist in Britain who finds this show facile and frankly insulting to women and the women's movement.

And also terribly, terribly unfunny.

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