

Rough diamonds shine

CURRY and beer with a couple of teachers last week reminded me that a few things never change. Classrooms still stink. Maths remains boring. Youngsters still know the easiest way to get a free lesson is to put up their hand, assume an expression of genuine curiosity and ask why they have to learn history/Latin/French/geography.

Actually, one of my teachers was wise to this dodge and instead of waffling on about the importance of Latin grammar simply said that it teaches you to "shut up, sit still and listen and once you're married, you'll have to do that all the time".

WONDERLAND: BOY CHEERLEADERS (BBC2) suggested that life lessons can be learnt in the strangest of settings



Matt Baylis
on last
night's TV

including if necessary while waving pom-poms about to violent music. The Dazl Diamonds, based in Leeds, was Britain's first all-boy outfit of cheerleaders.

You might make all sorts of assumptions about the sort of boys who'd join a cheerleading team, especially if it was the country's only boys' cheerleading team but this clever, compassionate film blasted many of them to bits. Most

of the Diamonds wore the obligatory crew cut and slouch of inner-city lads everywhere. Some were in and out of trouble. They stayed up all night fighting, they bunked off rehearsals and staged major strops when they didn't like what they were hearing.

However, their chippy, shirty, inspirational leader Ian wasn't just teaching them how to do dance routines. He was teaching them how to knuckle down, work as a team and think about others.

He was also teaching some of them that father figures can be a force for good, that not all men are finger-wagging teachers or absent dads and that it's possible to be a man and still care about others. If anyone deserves a mention in the New Year's Honours list it's this tough-mouthed

Yorkshire dance teacher with his cockatoo haircut.

The only downside of films like this is that the limelight can get nabbed for the wrong reasons. Clearly the Dazl Diamonds also contained boys who weren't always in trouble. Those lads, of course, featured far less, a classic case of something else that never changes among young people. The naughty ones get all the attention.

Professionalism is a desirable attribute in a presenter but a little blind terror can also be very appealing. **EXPLOSIONS: HOW WE SHOOK THE WORLD** (BBC4) sent engineer Jem Stansfield to a range of remote quarries and underground labs to reveal the science of gunpowder, dynamite and nitroglycerine and no matter how many bangs the poor bloke sat

through he still jumped like a scalded cat every time.

He seemed more comfortable with the history than the practical demonstrations, revealing that the first form of gunpowder was mixed with honey and taken as medicine.

Realising, by means we might prefer not to consider, that this substance was dangerous when packed into tight tubes the 11th-century Chinese inventors developed a range of new and poetically named weapons.

Our AK-47's sound so drab compared to the Scary Ingenious Fierce Mobile Victorious Fire-rack and the Orifices-Penetrating Flying Sand Magic Mist Tube.

More often than not, these devices failed to fire or blew up the wrong people but with names like those who cares?

Television What To Watch



Wonderland: Boy Cheerleaders, BBC2

Inside The Box What Keith Watson Saw Last Night

There were times in **Wonderland: Boy Cheerleaders** (BBC2) when Glee turned pretty Glum. Deciding that a bunch of boys from a rough estate in Leeds bouncing around with pompoms was not enough of a story in itself, director James Newton went looking for a deeper meaning beneath the razzmatazz. Absent dads and aspirations bubbled away beneath the beats: could dance enable these lads to overcome their troubled backgrounds?

Add in to the mix a sub-plot about nine-year old Harvey's dreams of becoming the next Billy Elliot and you had all the ingredients for an old-school tearjerker. Except the boys themselves, despite the odd scrape at school, were almost defiantly non-messed up. They danced for the fun of it, skipping lightly over schoolyard taunts of 'camp' and 'gay' and 'poof'. Most of them played footie and rugby as well: the whole boys don't dance thing is an old story, they're all over Britain's Got Talent like a rash.

Still, they did their best to play the angst angle, Harvey talking wistfully about the dad he no longer saw. 'If he comes to see me dance, I'll be chuffed to bits but I'm not really expecting

him.' But it felt pasted on, a storyline prompted by preconceived notions about struggling kids from single parent families. Much more fun – and more to the point – was watching head coach Ian Rodley and his amazing hair do a priceless line in mock exasperation as he whipped his boys, the DAZL Diamonds, into shape for the UK Cheerleading Championships. There, they were taking the girls on at their own game.

The dance nerd in me feels compelled to point out that cheerleading was an all-male preserve in the US until 1923, so the Leeds boys were in fact paying homage to history. But facts were not what Boy Cheerleaders was about: in its own way, Newton's film was every bit as manipulative as an edition of The X Factor, our emotions twisted this way and that by faking drama where none really existed. Will Elliott master the worm? Will tough mum Keeley ban misbehaving son Harvey from dancing? The story didn't need those distractions. There was enough joy in the dance, in Ian's banter with the kids – 'we've got to learn to spell swapshop with our poms' – to more than carry the show.



The Only Way Is Essex, ITV2

I'm from Essex and I don't wear white stilettos and smother myself in St Tropez. Sorry to shatter the illusion. But that's probably why I'm not on **The Only Way Is Essex** (ITV2), a 'reality' show on a mission to confirm every lazy stereotype in existence about Essex. It's a knock-off version of Jersey Wives, full of mouthy geezers and birds with talon nails. It makes me hang my head in shame.

BBC1

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