



# Dear Abbey

How PBS' Costume Drama **Downton Abbey** Exceeded its Own Genre by EMILY TRACE

**W**HEN WE HEAR THE TITANIC MENTIONED in a period drama, it is almost invariably the central focus of the story; but in the pilot episode of Julian Fellowes' *Downton Abbey*, one of the largest-scale disasters of the 20th century is just the kick-starter for an array of new plots that expand relentlessly, addictively, beyond the Jack-and-Rose world we thought we already knew.

With that kind of rocket fuel driving the story forward, *Downton Abbey* has never slowed down since, and now launches into its third season by transitioning into the sensual, subversive Twenties. You may have already become entangled in Downton's new decade since PBS began airing episodes earlier this month, but on January 29th, North American audiences can follow the story at their own pace when the third season is released on DVD and Blu-ray.

The new episodes are brimming with everything that made the Crawley family and their servants so uniquely compelling to an unprecedented number of people, including their sassiest guest star ever in the form of Shirley MacLaine debuting as Cora's American mother, Martha. As well as being the fiercest rival that the audience-favourite Dowager Duchess has ever been challenged by, MacLaine's character will infuse the new season with an electric vitality characteristic to the Roaring Twenties. In a recent *Collider* interview, Julian Fellowes asserts Martha's importance in heralding the new age, saying that "one of the key elements that Shirley brings into the show is to remind us that Cora's upbringing was not the same as Robert's," and that as the plates begin to shift, Cora is much less afraid of the changes and challenges that the Crawley's will have to navigate. "If anyone understands the world that's coming, it's Cora," says Fellowes.



“The bringing in of Martha ushers in that new era.”

These references to the shaping of a new world are a huge part of what makes *Downton Abbey* so unique, and so successful. Very few costumed dramas have made fireworks across demographics like the epic poem of the House of Grantham; usually it takes the star-power of James Cameron or Keira Knightly to draw in the massive audiences that contemporary films and shows attract. Though BBC historical pieces are generally received in North America by a passionate but specific fanbase, *Downton Abbey* has captured the hearts and minds outside that consistent viewership. It's not just ardent English literature fans that can animatedly describe every intricacy of the show's complex social politics; even YouTube celebrity Michael Buckley is wild about the show, gleefully recommending it to his one million teenaged subscribers on a regular basis.

Though each episode's budget comes in at around a million pounds, this exceptional popularity can't be accounted for just by money. No show can buy its way to being the most nominated non-U.S. show in Emmy history, and the Golden Globe for Best Supporting Actress has been awarded this very month to Dame Maggie Smith. At this moment being express-shipped to the actress who was too badass to attend the ceremony, the brand-new award attests to *Downton's* staying power, a power that comes from the show's consistent connection to our own world.

Julian Fellowes went outside the box when he set the show in England's less-travelled post-Titanic, pre-war era, and left the box behind entirely when Lady Mary, his virtuous ivory goddess of a main character, engaged in some delightfully interracial “amorous congress” with a dashing Turkish diplomat. Setting up the potential for scandal so early on in the show, Fellowes created a world that teeters grippingly on the edge of precarious propriety, with lust or malice lying behind every gracious smile. The Abbey itself might be the largest house of cards ever built, held together by ceremonies that are bizarre and mysterious to a modern audience, but it is *Downton's* curious similarities to our own reality that have

made it such an unprecedented hit.

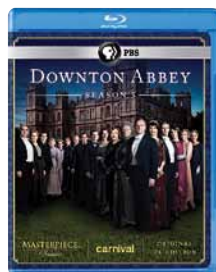
When creating the show, Fellowes says that he knew the Georgian and Victorian eras had been done to death in films and mini-series; audiences knew those eras better than the very decade that shaped our own: 1912 to 1919, the modern century's formative teenage years. Rather than interpret a work of literature from the time period as many have done before him, Fellowes gave himself the freedom to be original, saying that this allowed the show to “go into areas of the period that a contemporary novel would not have done. There are many subjects that we range, whether it's women's rights or homosexuality, or whatever, which you wouldn't find in a novel written in 1906.” This freedom, and the risks it took to get it, has paid off.

With the first season set in the very last breath of innocence before the First World War, we are introduced to the Crawleys as their aristocratic social power is both spiking and fading simultaneously. We see Sybil attending labour protests and suffragette campaigns, even rocking the closest thing to pants women could wear in those days. This is an England that is beginning to rebel against its own 1%; there may be strong elements of the Old World to charm us, but the show leaves enough room for us to see ourselves reflected in its transforming landscape. Fellowes cites this as one of the main strengths of the show, saying that the audience is constantly surprised that “these people are much more like us and much more normal, and that there isn't a place called Period where these strange people live in funny clothes.” *Downton Abbey* has all the drama and intrigue of classic escapism, but there are mirrors woven into the show that reflect our own world, showing us where it comes from. And in the second season, witnessing the Crawley daughters contributing to the war effort is like watching an entire generation come of age. Even the high-maintenance Edith desires a more meaningful existence than the useless one she led before the war, and is willing to sacrifice some luxuries for it. It's profoundly engaging to watch the era we know emerge as the character's identities develop.

And with Season 3 opening right at the dawn of the lustrous Twenties, *Downton Abbey* is only going to become more evocative of our time. We'll see the Crawley's face what millions of families affected by the unstable housing market have had to cope with, as well the gutting experience of investing in a company that sells out its shareholders. Featuring the challenges of being a single mother, the injustice of a high-profile court case, and even a look

into the world's first co-ed clubbing scene, the third season is packed with dramatized references to the present day. Fellowes relishes mapping out the transition from old to new, saying that “it's rather fun to be journeying through that bit in the middle” between the antiquated Victorian landscape and Nazi-dominated wartime Europe “that we've all seen exploited in different films.”

What could be more exciting than a threshold of such massive cultural scale? With enough familiarity to captivate and enough uncertainty to keep us in suspense, *Downton Abbey's* momentum is still on the upswing, ready to release forward into the modern world.



*Downton Abbey: Season 3* is available on DVD and Blu-ray January 29 from Entertainment One.