



OUTRAGEOUS

Review by **John Davis**

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A six-part drama series available on BBC IPlayer. Written by Sarah Williams, directed by Joss Agnew and Ellie Hayden.

Given the need to spark immediate interest in any new drama venture, I can well see why the word 'Outrageous' was chosen to headline this new series. It is based on Mary Lovell's

biography of the The Mitford Sisters which, particularly to the uninitiated, would have been far too tame a sobriquet.

Some background first. The six Mitford sisters are the daughters of Lord and Lady Redesdale (affectionately known as Favre and Muv), down-at-heel but landowning aristocrats who live at the stately pile in Oxfordshire.

The girls, Nancy, Pamela, Diana, Unity, Jessica and Deborah, in terms of seniority, are numbers

one, two, four, five, six and seven in the family tree. The Redesdale's only son, Tom, occupies position number three and, hereditary being what it was in those days, he stands to inherit the title. (*See spoiler at the end or not as the case may be.*)

With such a large family group, the action is seamlessly able to switch from one character to another although, because of their fame and/or notoriety, several siblings demand more dramatic attention than the others. Eldest daughter Nancy, a novelist (*Love in a Cold Climate*), narrates and acts like glue to bind the whole thing together. Diana is best known for her association and later marriage to Sir Oswald Mosely, the leader of the British Union of Fascists (Blackshirts) in the 1930s, and Unity for her time spent in Munich and her love affair with all things Nazi. Jessica, the communist, swings as far to the left as Unity does to the right. She was later to fight for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, while Pamela, the quiet daughter, seems the only one capable of actually making enough money to be self-supporting. Deborah remained very much an aristocrat and later, as the Duchess of Devonshire, is well-known for her efforts to transform the estate at Chatsworth House.

While the attention to detail in the costumes, interior décor and locations is impressive, the opening episode of the series can seem a little frivolous and glitzy-reminiscent of the roaring twenties. But stick with it, the production matures with time to present a brief yet perceptive insight into aristocratic life during the period immediately before the Second World War while also attempting to reflect some of the serious political issues that pre-occupied Britain both at home and abroad.

The cast list is impressive. James Purefoy and Anna Chancellor anchor the production as Lord

and Lady Redesdale, Bessie Carter (Nancy) is both feisty and conciliatory while Shannon Watson (Unity) has that air of reckless abandon that only comes with youth. Joanna Vanderham (Diana) captures the characters' fluctuations between arrogance and vulnerability while Joshua Sasse is both suave yet menacing as Sir Oswald Mosley.

Interesting subtleties in the script include Unity scratching a swastika on the pew of an Oxfordshire church and Pamela's solitary European road-trips in an open-top car. Disappointing though are the sparse crowd scenes, a handful of soldiers in ill-fitting SS uniforms and a distant shot of searchlights which is intended to represent the mass hysteria of the 1936 Nuremberg Rally. Robert Daws does several brief but passable impressions depicting Churchill but a non-speaking Hitler is only seen from the back when Unity waylays The Fuhrer in his favourite Munich restaurant, Osteria Bavaria and later in fuzzy long shots.

The question of how a group of women, seemingly all brought up in the exactly the same way in an identical environment, could develop into such a clan of rebels remains an enigma but, given that many of the sisters went on to live into their seventies and beyond, subsequent series, dare I suggest, may come somewhat closer to providing a solution.

Footnotes: Tom, the third born of the Mitford family, never did inherit the title, Lord Redesdale. He was killed fighting the Japanese in Burma in 1945 before his father had died. The title passed to Tom's uncle.

An executive producer on *Outrageous* was Matthew Mosley, the great grandson of Sir Oswald Mosley.

