

That's Life

Alison Steadman trades Billericay for Manchester in new BBC drama Life

by PAUL SIMPER



WHAT do you know about your neighbours? Sure, you know that Tina across the street is a nosy curtain-twitcher and Daniel tinkers with his bloody motorbike at all hours. But what else? Do you know about the illicit messages your neighbour's husband receives in the early hours of the morning? That Sally isn't quite as happy-go-lucky as she seems? There's more going on behind those four walls than you'll ever know.

New BBC1 drama *Life*, from the mind of Mike Bartlett (he of *Doctor Foster* fame, of which this acts as a sort of sequel), relishes in the hidden lives of those who are, geographically at least, closest to us — and it's fair to say these residents have bigger problems than a misplaced Amazon package.

The six-part series — the first episode of which aired last night — revolves around the lives of the inhabitants of four flats within the same house in a leafy corner of Manchester. One of whom is Alison Steadman, who found herself drawn to this simple yet effective premise.



Questions: With Peter Davison in *Life*

'It's interesting, the idea of people living right next to each other but having no idea what's going on in their lives,' says Steadman, who plays Gail, a devoted wife to retired surgeon Henry (Peter Davison) on the cusp of her 70th birthday who starts to question her life choices after a dramatic encounter with an old school friend.

'I live in a similar house in London [with partner and fellow actor Michael Elwyn],' she says. 'It's two houses with eight flats. We've all certainly got to know a bit more about each other since lockdown. Before that, we didn't. We all live in a kind of world that tends to think that if you do too much you're interfering or being nosy or that you've got to let people have their privacy. Actually, that's a load of nonsense. We all need people.'

Steadman fans who remember her moving performance as a stroke and dementia patient in 2018 TV movie *Care* will know she is as capable of holding her own in a dramatic role as she is in her comedic performances in *Gavin & Stacey*, *Nuts In May* and *Abigail's Party*. All the same, it is a treat to see her as Gail.

'Yes, she's not from Billericay,' chuckles Steadman. 'She's not outrageous in any way. I have done a lot of comedy or roles that have a comic side to them so it was nice to have this character that didn't have any of that.'

'I understood her completely. I'm not saying my life is like that but I was certainly aware, perhaps more in my mum's generation, of women who would accept marriages and the way they were treated. Gail is not a ditsy lady who just says yes to her husband. There's a lot of strength in her. Her husband is an intelligent, bright, charismatic kind of man. Gail has always been there and supported him without really thinking about her own life.'

Our chat has come to its end. Steadman logs off to check on Steve the window cleaner, who has been doing his best to circumnavigate proceedings in her home. It's *Life* as we know it.

What's occurin' with *Gavin & Stacey*?



Special: With Larry Lamb in *Gavin & Stacey*

While filming *Life*, Alison Steadman also managed to hop on a train from Manchester to Barry to film a modest little TV special watched by 17 million of us last Christmas...

'I thought because of the way my hair was on *Life* I would never be able to look like Pamela as well but they made this brilliant half wig for me,' she says. 'Now my hair has grown so much in lockdown I could do it without the wig.'

'Obviously people ask me all the time when the next *Gavin & Stacey* will be. It's understandable. Will I still be alive in ten years if that's how long before the next one? Listen, I never thought we'd do a Christmas special and I was wrong. So I genuinely don't know.'

■ *Life* is on BBC1 at 9pm on Tuesdays