

F***ING

WITH

EXPECTATIONS

How do you follow up one of the sharpest, bloodiest, teen shows in recent years? The cast and crew of *The End Of The F***ing World* are here to (fucking) tell you

WORDS PAUL SIMPER

IT WAS A very different teen romance for television. James and Alyssa first meet in their school lunch break. She thinks he isn't the answer to her problems, but he's, well, *something*. He thinks she might be interesting to kill. Neither trusts people who fit in. Both are struggling to feel anything at all.

Their subsequent spontaneous road trip away from their boring hometown in the 'burbs — *True Romance's* Clarence and Alabama relocated to a stylised South of England filled with diners and designer homes — brings them into the paths of all sorts of twisted individuals. James (Alex Lawther) and Alyssa (Jessica Barden) survive on just their wits and the exhilarating rush of first love until their luck finally runs out one morning on a windswept beach.

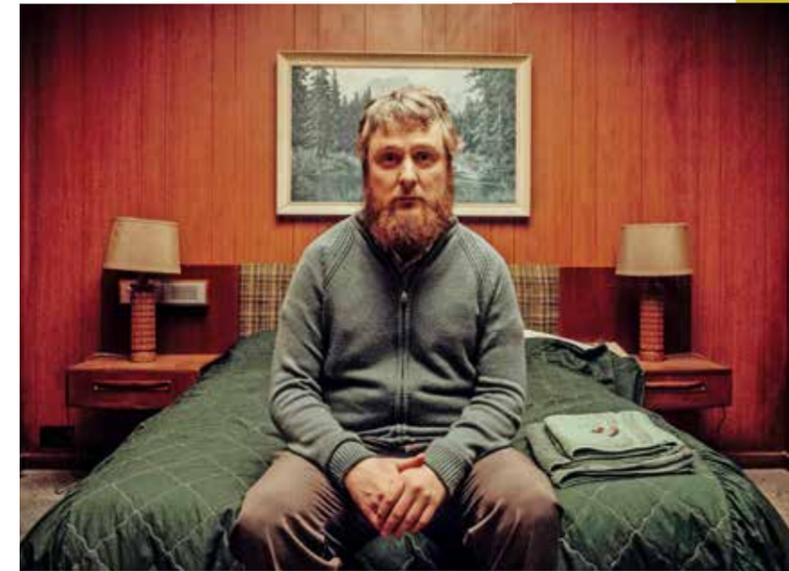
Two years later and *Pilot TV* is not on the Isle of Sheppey where the Season 1 cliff-hanger took place but in a resolutely greyer Cardiff city centre. We're being ushered into the back of an operational police station ready to interrogate two key witnesses from that previous crime scene, the show's writer Charlie Covell (whose big break came writing an episode of Russell T. Davies' *Banana*) and star Jessica Barden.

The challenge is clear: how do you follow one of the boldest, most buzzed-about shows in recent years that managed to surprise and satisfy in equal measure? To that end, all manner of speculation has been flying around about where the show might go next. The most out-there suggestion came from Barden: *Erm*, a musical with detectives Eunice Noon and Teri Darego (Gemma Whelan and Wunmi Mosaku).

"Ha. Yes. Alyssa disguised as Liza Minnelli, running around the Isle of Sheppey with Eunice and Teri in tow, trying to form a dance collective," says Covell. "It was strong. Very strong... But ultimately, not the direction we went in."

The direction chosen by Covell and the rest of the *End Of* team — executive producers Andy Baker, Dominic Buchanan, Murray Ferguson and Ed Macdonald — is not musical but it's still a bold one, shaped by that finale. While Alyssa is alive and present, her partner-in-crime James, aka actor Alex Lawther is, in fact, nowhere to be seen.

Funny, violent, sweet, nihilistic, romantic, *The End Of The F***ing World*, adapted from Charles Forsman's 2013 graphic novel, took almost everyone by surprise when it went into orbit. A critically well-



From top: James (Alex Lawther) and Alyssa (Jessica Barden); Barden on set; writer Charlie Covell.



received Channel 4 series — “funny and fabulous” said *The Guardian* — it became a full-blown international phenomenon when it dropped on Netflix the following January.

“I think the first time I realised how people were responding to it was when Jess texted me saying that she was being mobbed on the street in LA,” says Covell. “It was crazy — totally unexpected. I mean, I was really proud of the show and what we’d made together, but I truly thought that about 12 people would watch it and that — at best — we might get a nice but short review in a national newspaper.”

US critics championed it with *The New Yorker*’s Emily Nussbaum describing it as that rarest of beasts, “a convincing teenage romance”. Covell won a BAFTA for Outstanding Newcomer for British Television Writing and was snapped up by Netflix to write *Kaos*, a ten-part contemporary retelling of Greek mythology with a *Game Of Thrones*-sized budget. Barden was named a BAFTA Breakthrough Brit and became “more castable in things”, she says modestly.

Ultimately, *End Of’s* unflinching depiction of the experience of being a teenager resonated because it was both unflinching and *really* funny. “I think people liked the humour,” confirms Covell. “We undercut the bleakness of lives with moments of levity. Because I think that’s how human beings cope, isn’t it?”

There were so many quotable lines that both shocked and melted your heart. A soundtrack to die for (Brenda Lee, Bernadette Carroll, Tullycraft, Mazzy Star). An original “suburban noir” score by Blur’s Graham Coxon that propelled us through the gorgeously photographed locales of heightened Americana that dotted the English countryside.

Directors Jonathan Entwistle and Lucy Tcherniak, with

cinematographers Justin Brown and Ben Fordesman, saluted the works of David Lynch and Quentin Tarantino. James and Alyssa even had a *Pulp Fiction*-style diner dance to Hank Williams in serial killer Clive Koch’s home. “I made up that dance on the spot,” says Barden. “I need more credit for that.”

Success made it almost inevitable that what was once perceived as a cool standalone limited series would somehow, almost certainly, go again.

Sitting in a police briefing room, Charlie Covell reflects on the hill she has to climb with Season 2. Could she see the attraction of leaving the doomed teens suspended in time forever on that beach? “I was tempted, yeah,” says Covell. “Because it was finished — it was complete, somehow — even though we’d left on a cliff-hanger. However, I’d completely fallen in love with them during the writing process. I just needed to make sure — all the creators of the show did — that we worked out exactly how we’d continue the story in a way that felt truthful and satisfying after the events of Season 1, as opposed to just giving people more of the same.”

The pressure of continuing the book was intense, but Covell describes the starting point as: “The first season was about running away from stuff, the second season is about facing it.”

Both the novel and Season 1 end at the same point which allowed for a clean slate. As such, the second season opens two years later with a brand-new key character. Bonnie, played by Naomi Ackie, is another teenage outsider trying her best to connect with the world after a traumatic childhood. She and Alyssa have plenty in common: Bonnie also has an absent dad and a nightmare mum. Although the emotional and physical abuse that Bonnie’s mum metes out — including one excruciating formative experience involving a lipstick — makes Alyssa’s mum look like a saint.

“There’s a kind of nice duality in their characters,” says Ackie, who is fitting this in between shooting *Star Wars: The Rise Of Skywalker* and the *Game Of Thrones* prequel. “I think that’s quite a cool thing to see how different personalities can take the same kind of issues like growing up, an absent father and not fitting into society and take it in a completely different direction.”

Bonnie certainly does that. Where Alyssa is “somebody who is so

unashamedly herself by accident,” as Barden puts it, Bonnie is stoic, watchful and calculated.

“There’s this kind of antisocial energy about Bonnie,” says Ackie. “She can try to emulate what it is to be a human being but also has no interest in playing those games. You do come across people like that who don’t feel the need to waste energy with smiling, for instance. The way I saw it there’s a part of Bonnie that sees people as tools for whatever she wants.”

Season 2 also introduces a fresh love interest for Alyssa. Doing her best to move on from her true love, Alyssa impulsively kick-starts another precarious romantic adventure. Josh Dylan (*Noughts And Crosses*) is Todd, is the polar opposite of James. He’s blond, sporty, teaches canoeing to kids, likes chicken fajitas and believes Finland is a fabricated land mass made up by the Russians in the Cold War. “He’s kind of like a dog. In a good way,” is Alyssa’s verdict.

But it’s not only the characters who are refreshed. There’s plenty of dramatic potential in new location, the Forest of Dean, where Alyssa, her mum and the twins (the spawn of creepy,

Main pic: Naomi Ackie plays Bonnie in the new series. Above right: Tim Key as motel owner Gus.

predatory second husband Tony) are staying with her Auntie Leigh.

“We were also working on different sets that were built in the forest,” reveals Ackie. “That was special. There are some episodes set in a particular place so you would be there all day every day. It felt sometimes like time was stood still.”

The two-year leap in the timeline sees Alyssa firmly as a woman, not a girl, something subtly reflected by the work of new production designer Dick Lunn (*Next Of Kin*). “It’s perhaps a little darker and a little more adult than before,” says Covell, “but it should [still] feel like familiar territory for the audience. The world needs to feel consistent.”

The key note given to Naomi Ackie by Lucy Forbes (*In My Skin*) — one of two new directors with Destiny Ekaragha (*Soon Gone: A Windrush Chronicle*) — is dark and succinct.

“In regards to that grudge Bonnie has with Alyssa, Lucy would just whisper in my ear before a take, ‘F That B’, as in Fuck That Bitch,” laughs Ackie. “That was the only thing I needed to hear.”

So yes, clearly, what also remains unmistakably intact is the humour.

“The show has a very specific tone that makes it so special,” says Ackie. “It’s super deadpan, not playing for laughs and yet somehow you’re getting them. That’s why people love it.”

Old f***ing world or new, there are some things you just don’t mess with.

THE END OF THE F***ING WORLD SEASON 2 STARTS 4 NOVEMBER ON CHANNEL 4