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# Durrells TV drama revives the dying ritual of family viewing

As the hit show returns to Corfu for a third series, two of its stars explain the secrets of its ratings success

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▲ ITV's surprise hit *The Durrells*, based on naturalist Gerald Durrell's classic memoir *My Family and Other Animals*, is shot on location in Corfu.

Common wisdom says family viewing is over: children play video games while teenagers watch YouTube on their phones, then, late in the evening, parents binge on violent thriller box sets. Yet *The Durrells*, back for a third series, is sunnily bucking the trend.

The show, set on Corfu and starring Keeley Hawes as the mother of naturalist and author Gerald Durrell and novelist Lawrence Durrell, is one of a small group of television hits that have re-established cosy evening dramas that can still appeal across the generations.

The first series of the surprise ITV ratings success won eight million viewers, while the second was close behind. Like other gently comic dramas such as *Doc Martin*, *Death in Paradise* and *Call the Midwife*, *The Durrells* is reviving a forgotten age, one when families sat on the sofa together on a Sunday evening to be jointly amused or moved.

“Sometimes I wish *The Durrells* was shown on a Wednesday night, when we all really need a lift from the working week,” said Simon Nye, who has adapted the series from Gerald Durrell’s classic memoir *My Family and Other Animals* and its two follow-up titles, and who is best known for his sitcom *Men Behaving Badly*. Nye’s latest show has already made a new star of one of its younger cast. Josh O’Connor, who plays eldest son Lawrence, was a Bafta contender last Sunday in recognition of his role in the acclaimed independent film *God’s Own Country*.

Now the two actors who play the lesser-known Durrell children - second son Leslie and daughter Margo - are also in demand, thanks to their clever portrayals of two English eccentrics. Daisy Waterstone, 23, will take an 18-year-old Margo through a love affair in this third series. “She is still tottering around, trying to find out who she is,” Waterstone said this weekend. “It is that age when you think you have grown up, but you haven’t.”

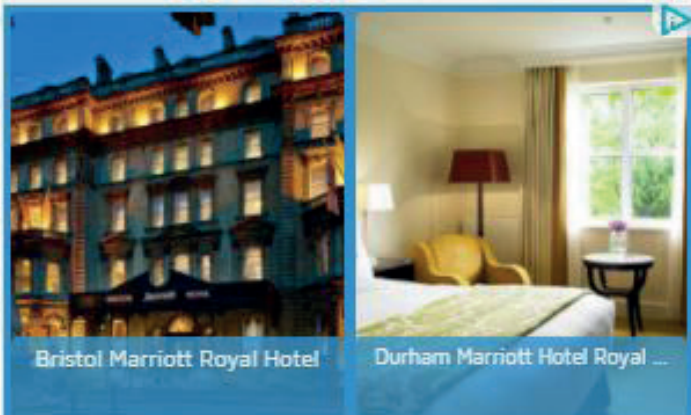
Waterstone, who grew up in west London and went to the exclusive Francis Holland School for girls before appearing on stage at the Old Vic in *The Crucible* in 2014, has also been seen on television in *Testament of Youth*, *Silent Witness* and the Agatha Christie adaptation *And Then There Were None*. It is *The Durrells*, however, that has boosted her career.

“I do get recognised when I am looking grumpy or angsty on the Tube,” Waterstone said. “That is when I must look most like Margo. But I am flattered, because she is such a great character. She is made of steel and yet with so many flaws. She doesn’t take advice and sort of enjoys her mistakes.”

Waterstone is now choosing other work but hopes she can play Margo for as long as possible. A fourth series is in preparation but has not yet been confirmed by ITV. “I had a feeling when

I was auditioning for the part: I felt very connected to Margo, and that I’d be annoyed if someone else got it. That hasn’t happened before or since.”

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The appeal of the show, Waterstone thinks, is the mix of light and shade, as well as the beauty of the island. “Margo has actually grown up more than I have in the time we have been filming. She has surpassed me in her maturity now, which is interesting.”

Nye weaves Durrell’s books together with the facts of the family’s rackets lifestyle on the island in the 1930s. Notes of real pain and difficulty are sometimes sounded in his dialogue.

“There are hints of an underlying darkness because they had lost their father. They all share a feeling of incompleteness,” said Waterstone. “And, sadly, it was Leslie in the end who was on his own. None of the others even went to his funeral.”

Whatever the bleak truth of Leslie’s later life, 24-year-old Callum Woodhouse plays him with an oddball comic touch that has earned him fans. The Geordie actor, who has also appeared in *Cold Feet*, said he feels “a very strong connection” to the real man, although he is wary of sounding pretentious. “I felt it from the word ‘go’. It wasn’t something that built up. I remember just falling into his skin, and it is horrible that his real life was so tragic,” he told the *Observer*. Woodhouse, who trained at Lamda, is now writing a comic television series with a group of fellow former students as well as auditioning for serious roles.

“I always play Leslie straight and it is still funny. I am never trying to make anyone laugh. I hope we portray the family as they would be, with a lot of bickering and arguments. This series starts off with Leslie having three girlfriends, making up for lost time, but it blows up in his face, in typical Leslie fashion,” the actor said.

Although Woodhouse had not heard of *My Family and Other Animals* before he took the role, he now identifies so much with Leslie that he has learned his onscreen skills: he can take apart and rebuild a shotgun, milk a goat and keep bees. “Unwittingly I have got into the Leslie thing so much that I find myself looking at Lawrence Durrell’s Alexandria Quartet of novels and thinking, ‘I am not reading my brother’s boring books’.”

Nye produces a new series of *The Durrells* each year (“Harry Potter style”) and promises that Leslie has “a particularly strong story line this time”.

Although Nye has been criticised by some fans of the books, the writer said he feels licensed to play with the truth because Gerald Durrell did the same - largely excluding Lawrence’s first wife Nancy from his memoirs, for instance. His main aim is to avoid “going all American” with too much sentiment. It would be anachronistic and un-English, Nye believes.

## **Family classics**

### **A Family at War**

Beginning in 1938, the series follows the Ashtons in Liverpool through the second world war.

### **The Family**

The 1974 BBC documentary series followed the everyday life of the Wilkinsons, a working-class family in Reading. The series is seen as a precursor to reality TV.

### **All Creatures Great and Small**

Based on the books by James Herriot, it was set in a Yorkshire veterinary practice in the 1930s.

### **The Darling Buds of May**

Set in rural 1950s Kent, it follows the Larkin family, whose rural paradise is shattered by the arrival of tax inspector Cedric Charlton. Adapted from the books by HE Bates, it was first aired in 1991.

### **The Royle Family**

A sitcom about a television-fixated working-class family from Manchester, starring Ricky Tomlinson and Sue Johnston as mum and dad.