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Top Boy, Season 1. Warner Brothers Home Video, 2013. DVD. £19.99.

Reviewed by

Kevin M. Flanagan
(University of Pittsburgh, USA)

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The first season of *Top Boy* (2011), Channel 4's social realist dramatisation of the drug trade in Hackney, features a consistent creative team of director Yann Demange and writer Ronan Bennett. Demange has mainly directed television, including *Dead Set* (2008) and *Criminal Justice* (2008). Bennett is best known as a novelist – his *The Catastrophist* was shortlisted for Whitbread Award in 1998 – but has recently worked steadily as a screenwriter. He is especially known in the United States for having written the screenplay to Michael Mann's *Public Enemies* (2009). Their work in *Top Boy* plays as quality melodramatic realism, touting location-based shooting, authentic East London accents, the evocation of poverty and a visual style based on immediacy, favouring hand-held close-ups over staginess. In short, it is wildly successful at telling a touching story that shows the various dangers of drugs and violence on poor youth, but it does this at the cost of formal experimentation or the bucking of genre expectation.

The crux of the show is Ra'Nell (Malcolm Kamulete), a pre-adolescent boy who lives in Summerhouse Council Estate in Hackney. Constantly referred to as a 'good kid' and consistently represented as having strong loyalties and keen ethical awareness, Ra'Nell is tempted by Dushane (Ashley Walters) and Sully (Kane Robinson), up-and-coming dealers who want to recruit him as a drug runner and associate. Ra'Nell's mother Lisa (Sharon Duncan-Brewster) is hospitalised for mental illness (an illness that remains relatively unspecified, but seems to combine anxiety and agoraphobia). While in hospital, she encounters Leon (Nicholas Pinnock), a former friend to her estranged husband who now works as a caregiver. He agrees to watch

over Ra’Nell so that she does not lose custody of him, but finds that he has his work cut out for him, as Ra’Nell remains sceptical over Leon’s past association with his long-absent father. *Top Boy* features several parallel – and eventually intersecting – plotlines, including Dushane and Sully’s worry over paying back Bobby Raikes (Geoff Bell); the heavily-pregnant Heather’s (Kierson Wareing) attempt to grow a crop of cannabis, so she can move out of the neighbourhood and have a safer environment for raising her child; and the story of Ra’Nell’s friend Gem (Giacomo Mancini), who temporarily joins Dushane and Sully’s crew but only suffers personal loss (his dog is killed) and estrangement (his father shuns him) as a result.

Top Boy welcomes comparisons to HBO’s *The Wire* (2002-2008), an earlier, if wider and more ambitious attempt at showing the systemic effects of poverty, racism, drugs and violence on the city of Baltimore, Maryland. While the possible comparisons are legion – a focus on black youth, the cyclical, escalating nature of drug-related murders, the drug trade’s exploitation of children and so on – *Top Boy*’s first season is perhaps more remarkable for how it uses its relatively short running time (four episodes of around three and a half hours in total) to focus selectively on the lives of a few kids. *The Wire* is very much about institutions, and well over half of its five seasons reveals the inner-workings of the Baltimore police. *Top Boy*, by contrast, is notable for its almost total absence of law enforcement (they only really appear in the season’s final episode, and even then are not afforded a voice or a point of view). For Hackney youth surveyed by Tracy McVeigh, this conspicuous lack of ‘cops’ detracted from the show’s authenticity, with the general air of the show being a drama that played to stereotypes rather than an authentic documentary assessment of their lives. One of McVeigh’s interviewees, Michael Brown, went so far as to declare ‘it’s like they’re living in some kind of police-free heaven’, noting that the fact that the gang violence was motivated by drugs was itself a cliché, since ‘not much of the gang violence around here is about drugs’.

This is not to say that *Top Boy* avoids or downplays the institutional influences on the individuals it portrays. Lisa’s time in hospital paints a relatively favourable picture of the NHS, while the brief scenes of Ra’Nell and Gem at school show an environment that wants to keep kids away from crime and drugs. But *Top Boy* is especially insistent that the precarious and constantly shifting nature of turf wars and the hierarchies of drug-dealing threaten to undermine any sense of stability, of the safe and consistent home life crucial navigating adolescence.

Top Boy’s London is not *Sherlock’s* (BBC, 2011-2014) London, although both are captured in vivid High Definition. This is not a West End, touristic London that locates through famous landmarks. *Top Boy* mainly takes place in the streets, at Summerhouse Estate, in nightclubs and in nondescript cafes: in short, on the margins of the city. When Dushane and Sully kidnap their rival Kamale (played by the rapper Scorcher), they bring him to an ex-industrial site and bury him alive in an attempt to recover stolen drugs and money. The sequence is shot at night, contrasting the ruinous landscape of this violence against the vibrant lights of the City of London in the background. This comparison is typical of the show, which maps the clandestine activities of the drug crews onto the underpasses, alleys and abandoned businesses of East London, with the comparable safety, openness and wealth of West London receding into the background. One recent point of comparison, albeit in a very

different genre context, is Joe Cornish's *Attack the Block* (2011), a film that at once illustrates the dangers of a poor council estate while at the same time showing its importance to its residents and its status as an unlikely site of safety (in both *Top Boy* and *Attack the Block*, bedrooms offer solace from external dangers). The poverty and uncertainty of *Top Boy* never reaches the levels of desperation found in some of Ken Loach and Mike Leigh's work, but it does suggest that there is another London, unthinkable to Ra'Nell and his friends.

Top Boy's first season is bleak, with characters dying with the rapidity of Shakespearean tragedy played in fast-forward. Ra'Nell's initial status as a relatively naive, principled and protected kid yields to a world-weary anger that predicts a troubled teenage life to come. But the series does offer moments of hope, sequences of respite and repose that relate to space and place. Gem accompanies Sully and Dushane to their flat in Finchley (which is used as a base for distributing heroin). They drive on a brilliantly bright day. Despite Sully and Dushane's joking, Gem admires the city, looking out the windows and contemplating his temporary remove from the familiar spaces of Hackney. That Gem is sitting next to love interest Chantelle (Letitia Wright) characterises this moment as one of growth and adventure. Gem's hope of endearing himself to this new group, his ambition of proving himself and making money, is dashed by a rival gang's robbery of Dushane and Sully, who eventually take out some of their frustration on Gem. But for a few minutes, *Top Boy* views travel through London as a symbolic rite of passage, one capable of altering fortunes, promoting personal growth and changing moods.

Works Cited

McVeigh, Tracy, 'Top Boy Gets a Mixed Reception from Hackney's Youth'. *The Observer*, 29 Oct. 2011. Web. 23 June 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/oct/30/top-boy-reviewed-by-hackney-residents-panel>.

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