



‘Eldorado’s creators complain that they fell victim to the BBC policy of aiming for programmes that set out to be original or unavailable elsewhere... Will popular, high-audience shows follow it to the breaker’s yard?’

Eldorado crashes out this week, a legendary lemon. Some of television’s best talents went into it, some of the worst television came out of it. Limp balloons from the *Eldorado* fan club adorn some lamp posts outside BBC Television Centre, all that is left of this spectacular debacle.

What went wrong? Are there salutary lessons to be learned? The programme’s makers are indignant. Certain critics, always out for BBC blood, targeted it from the start, they say. The hounds scented fresh prey. Before it was even on the air they knew they had a lip-smacking, finger-licking good disaster on their plate. Or, perhaps, that they could use their might to turn it into one. Ten million pounds to build a façade of a Costa Lot village! Untrained actors who didn’t even speak English! Sun, Sex, and So What!

Bruised producers point out that its teething problems were no worse than many other programmes’, but it was never given the chance. Ratings picked up, it got better – though not fast enough. It has built up a curiously strong (but not big enough) cult following in colleges and universities, but that is partly perverse student taste for kitsch, for the fashionably unfashionable.

At first, it may have seemed like an idea that had everything going for it. The creator of *EastEnders* – Julia Smith – and Verity Lambert, originator of so many good television series, surely couldn’t fail? As *EastEnders-on-Sea*, it might have tapped into a new rich vein of British life and experience, in an era when so many upwardly-mobile people take foreign holidays, and plan a Spanish retirement. But it never quite did. It wasn’t the stock characters, the bad acting or pretty bizarre storylines that killed it. Those things were corrected. The idea itself was fundamentally flawed, and disobeyed some of the essential laws of soaps.

In the end, the difference between *EastEnders* and *Eldorado* was the So What? factor. *EastEnders* feels gritty and real, though heaven knows, it’s just as much a fantasy construct, with its cosy, heart-warming portrayal of inner-city community life. The characters may have difficult social problems to tussle with week after week, but in the Queen Vic, the greasy spoon and the launderette, they gather together as a tightly-knit clan. If modern urban life was really like that, sociologists

and social workers would be out of business. No, it wasn’t actual lack of reality that marked down *Eldorado*, it was lack of perceived reality. Who cared what happened to a bunch of washed-up expats with too much leisure on their hands? Who gave a damn about a bunch of Euro-dropouts, unrooted in anything like a life most people know?

And it really was pretty bad. Curiously, its handsome budget told against it. Soaps should be made in small cardboard rooms, with plenty of close-ups of intense faces emoting. Too much outdoor filming blew away that claustrophobia.

After all, *Neighbours* takes place in a sun-soaked setting, but they stay on their sofas and in their kitchens. All the attention focuses on the feelings. *Eldorado* blew it away on the beaches and the tennis courts.

Eldorado’s creators have been complaining that they fell victim to new BBC programme policies. A new Director General has proclaimed an end to providing popular programmes of doubtful quality to grab viewers that are well served already by commercial channels. The BBC has declared it will aim for programmes that at least set out to be original,



Eldorado lost its Fizz after only a few weeks – Kathy Pitkin’s role was an early casualty

different, better or unavailable elsewhere. That doesn’t mean abandoning popular audiences, but it does mean trying to offer them different diversions of higher quality. Every time the policy was promoted, the black spot seemed to descend on *Eldorado*. Why should the BBC indulge in a soap that was patently worse than *Coronation Street*? When the programme was commissioned, the BBC was in its age-old squeeze between the rock of ratings and the hard place of justifying its unique charter. Mocked because BBC1 ratings were falling (*Wogan* was a tired show), it felt it needed to make a last desperate clutch at a big audience, whatever the price. And such cynical strategy rarely fires the best creative spirits.

So perhaps *Eldorado* had to be the first sacrifice. It wasn’t a high price to pay, since its ratings were relatively low. The questions ahead are far harder. What about certain very popular high-audience shows the commercial broadcasters would die for, and yet couldn’t be called high quality, distinctive, unique or ground-breaking? One or two in the drama-doc mode quite blatantly appeal to low, near-pornographic instincts. Will they survive, or will a fleet of programmes follow *Eldorado* to the breaker’s yard?

Eldorado Monday, Wednesday, Friday 7.00pm BBC1