

= Chalk (TV series) =

Chalk is a British television sitcom set in a comprehensive school named Galfast High . Two series , both written by Steven Moffat , were broadcast on BBC1 in 1997 . Like Moffat 's earlier sitcom Joking Apart , Chalk was produced by Andre Ptaszynski for Pola Jones .

The series focuses upon deputy headteacher Eric Slatt (David Bamber) , permanently stressed over the chaos he creates both by himself and some of his eccentric staff . His wife Janet (Geraldine Fitzgerald) and new English teacher Suzy Travis (Nicola Walker) attempt to help him solve the problems .

Because of the very good reaction of the studio audience , a second series was commissioned before the first had been broadcast . However , journalists were critical of the show , highlighting stylistic similarities to Fawlty Towers . Some members of the teaching profession and its unions objected to the negative representation of teachers and the comprehensive system . The second series did not receive a stable broadcast slot , with many episodes aired after 10pm . The first series was released on DVD in December 2008 .

= = Production = =

= = = Inception = = =

Steven Moffat left his job as an English teacher at Cowdenknowes High in Greenock to write the BAFTA @-@ award winning show Press Gang . However , its high cost and changes in the executive structure at Central Independent Television meant that the show might not be recommissioned after its second series . As the writer wondered what to do next and was worried about future employment , Bob Spiers , Press Gang 's primary director , suggested that he meet with producer Andre Ptaszynski to discuss writing a sitcom . Inspired by his experience in education (in addition to his own former career , his father was a headteacher) , the writer 's initial proposal was similar to what would become Chalk . However , Ptaszynski realised that Moffat was talking more passionately at the meeting at the Groucho Club about his impending divorce and suggested that he write about that instead . That idea became Joking Apart , which received low audience figures but a high rating on the Appreciation Index . In an interview with The Herald , Moffat reflected on the nature of writing from experience : " I don 't think you have an alternative to writing about what you know . You 've no life experience to go on other than your own . Even if you 're writing something you think is entirely remote from you - Star Trek , for instance - you 'll find the finished result is actually very close to your own experience . That 's not a conscious decision a writer makes - it 's an inevitability . "

After the second series of Joking Apart had been transmitted , Ptaszynski revived Moffat 's original idea about a sitcom set in a school . In an article for The Guardian newspaper , writer and comedian Richard Herring observed that Moffat has not used the show " as a soapbox from which to satirise the government 's educational policy , preferring to concentrate on being funny ... yet beneath it all is a much more broadly satirical swipe at the implicit pointlessness of the way we are educated . " For this article , Moffat told Herring :

Secondary School is a big waste of time . What are French teachers doing ? None of us can speak French . How much maths can you do ? Do you know any history ? What is the point in training people to do things that none of us can do ? The system seems designed to qualify you for the Indian Civil Service in 1911 . We all leave school unable to drive ! Now that would be quite handy .

Moffat discussed similar institutional and political issues with The Independent :

Staffrooms are funny places , full of articulate , mad people . They have a tremendous sense of black humour , but there 's a layer of dust over them . They are immature because they 're in a children 's environment all the time . They have a strange perspective ; because they spend all day with kids , they are more aware of kids ' culture ' than adults ' . When they read about a former pupil who has become head of ICI , they always say , ' But that boy 's an idiot . He 's crap at geography . '

The boy is condemned forever because in the 1960s he didn't know all the capitals of the Third World .

The Independent reported that Moffat " stresses that Chalk is a sitcom , not some banner @-@ waving , agitprop pamphlet " , but is still " passionate about education " . Moffat criticises " the [Conservative] government talk about the specially talented needing more education , but that 's absurd , the equivalent of hospitals for the healthy . " Moffat expected that teachers would find the show funny because it " has certain notes of accuracy " , recognising familiar myths such as the dead teacher and teachers ' contempt for their pupils . Moffat continued to say that teachers would " also recognise the pathological preference for science over arts and all that league @-@ table shit . An official teaching organisation couldn't say , ' It 's a very faithful portrayal , ' but I hope they 'd say , ' It 's a comedy series . Why take it seriously ? ' You couldn't claim it is the most flattering series , but , there again , people continued to stay at hotels after Fawlty Towers . "

As with Joking Apart , Ptaszynski produced Chalk for independent production company Pola Jones . The positive reaction of the studio audience during recording of the first series in 1996 propelled executives to commission a second set of six episodes before the first batch had aired .

= = = Recording = = =

All of the location shots for Chalk were filmed at the beginning of the production block . Acland Burghley School , in the Tufnell Park area of Camden , London , provided the exterior of the fictional Galfast High . The cast recall that it was difficult to perform comedy on location without a studio audience to gauge the reception and success of the jokes . Another school near Wembley was used for large interior shots , such as the school hall featured in the episode " The Inspection " . Rehearsals took place in BBC premises in Acton , west London , colloquially known by those in the industry as the " Acton Hilton " . David Bamber , his colleagues note , knew the script at the beginning of rehearsals and never dropped a line . The cast recall that director Juliet May provided a calm working environment ; rather than losing her temper when things went wrong , she instead focussed everyone 's mind on how to solve the problem .

After the exterior shots had been filmed , the episodes were recorded at BBC Television Centre in London . Most of the episodes were recorded in studios three or four , but occasionally the larger studio eight was used . After a week 's rehearsals , the episodes were filmed on Sundays . The cast and crew would have a camera rehearsal followed by a dress run . After a supper , the cast were introduced to the studio audience . The studio audience responded very positively to the show during recordings . However , Moffat reflects that the show 's style was not suited to the home audience . In a 2012 interview , he says :

Of any sitcom I ? ve ever witnessed being made , and I ? ve seen loads of them like Men Behaving Badly and The Vicar of Dibley , Chalk had the biggest laughs on the night . As a piece of theatre it was brilliant in the studio ? people came back every week ; the audiences were rapturous . The trouble was when I watched the tape at home , it was far too loud and raucous [for TV] .

The BBC commissioned a second series based on the studio audience reactions during recordings . As development on series two had reached a relatively late stage when the first had received negative reviews upon transmission , it was too late to cancel the production . The cast and crew , then , had to work on a show which they knew was widely disliked . Moffat reflects on the experience : " There ? s no feeling on earth like working on a show that you know is doomed and already tanking . ?

BBC executives insisted that the title be changed as they felt that " Chalk " did not stand out in the schedules . They were also concerned that the title might be somewhat anachronistic because schools were beginning to use whiteboards rather than blackboards . Many people , including the actors , attempted to think of alternatives , but instead reverted to " Chalk " .

Funding was running low towards the end of filming the first series . Moffat contrived an episode , " The Staff Meeting " , where all of the main cast would be locked in the staff room to avoid paying for any guest actors . To reduce expenditure further , crew members were enlisted to provide the voices for the television news report at the end of the episode : producer Andre Ptaszynski played the

broadcast journalist , whilst second assistant director Sarah Daman voiced the protesting student Gail Bennett . When a guest actor delivered an inadequate performance of the psychiatric doctor at the end of " The Inspection " , Moffat coached assistant director Stacey Adair to perform the line . However , professional actor C.J. Allen lived near to the location and he was enlisted to deliver the line instead .

The expense and restrictions placed upon child actors limited the number of pupils that could be featured . The non @-@ speaking extras had to be licensed , a process that took four weeks , providing difficulties for assistant director Stacey Adair . The episode " Both Called Eric " features Antony Costa as one of the pupils , one of his earliest TV roles before going on to appear in Grange Hill and in the boy band Blue .

= = Episodes = =

The sitcom is based at the fictional comprehensive school Galfast High . It begins with the arrival of the young new English teacher Suzie Travis (Nicola Walker) . She immediately encounters the chaos of the school , a chaos enhanced by the manic Deputy Head Eric Slatt (David Bamber) . The Guardian retrospectively commented that the show 's " best episodes of ... manouevred their unwitting participants towards a climax of terrible sexual humiliation or violence . "

Moffat integrated many references to secondary characters and locations from his previous BAFTA winning show Press Gang into Chalk . For instance , the Chalk character Eric Slatt refers to his neighbouring school Norbridge High , run by Mr Sullivan : these were the names of the school and deputy headmaster in Press Gang . The scene where Slatt is being given instructions by wire is taken from the unfilmed Press Gang movie Dead Line . The pornographic video Lesbian Spank Inferno , owned by Dan McGill in the final episode , is later referenced in the Coupling episode " Inferno " . In an interview with The New York Times , Moffat admitted that the video is inspired by his then @-@ new partner , Sue Vertue , finding a similar video in their VCR .

= = Characters = =

Eric Slatt (David Bamber) is the deputy headmaster of Galfast High , who seems to " deepen the many crises that face the school (most of Slatt ? s own making) " . Jeff Evans , writing in the The Penguin TV Companion , observed that " Slatt is certainly keen , but regrettably he is also unbalanced , tactless , clumsy , snobby , sarcastic , at times pointlessly aggressive and always prone to appalling errors of judgment (an academic version of Basil Fawlty , it was widely noted) " . The Independent commented : " Chalk is in the idiom of sadistic farce : disaster begets catastrophe begets apocalypse , and they all engulf Slatt . There are inevitable echoes of other sitcom characters - a dash of Basil Fawlty 's unquenchable apoplexy , a slice of Gordon Brittas 's purblind monomania - but Slatt 's entanglements are caused by his own cocktail of failings . " Nicola Walker commented that viewers sympathise with Slatt because he is in charge of a bunch of lunatics . Moffat told The Herald that Slatt was inspired by a real person :

My main character , the deputy head , is a manic git , and he 's based on a guy I never actually met and is therefore being denigrated terribly . He had already retired by the time I started but I used to get a lift to work from his wife , who still worked there . And she would tell me stories about him with the affectionate disdain of anyone who has been married for more than a year . In the staff room , all these bitter teachers who hadn 't been promoted would describe him as someone who would only briefly consider stopping short of invading Poland if he got the chance . I 've since found out that the real man is actually a very nice bloke .

Ptaszynski had attempted to persuade his friend Angus Deayton , who wanted to move into more acting roles away from Have I Got News for You , to play Slatt . The producer reflects that Deayton would have brought a more " sardonic " element to the character . The cast regularly teased David Bamber during rehearsals , speculating upon how Deayton might have performed a particular line or sequence .

Janet Slatt (Geraldine Fitzgerald) is Eric 's wife and the school 's secretary . She has an

antagonistic relationship with Eric , with each regularly the butt of the other 's jokes . For instance , Eric suggests one morning that she had not shaved , and that she should rest her hind legs .

Suzy Travis (Nicola Walker) is a new English teacher who arrives at the school in the first episode . The press described Suzy as " the voice of sanity at Galfast High and the thorn in Slatt 's side . "

Amanda Trippley (Amanda Boxer) is the neurotic music teacher . Throughout the series , she invents her pupils to prevent her department being closed , uses the school 's telephone network to surf the internet about Star Trek , and demands the return of a musical instrument from a former pupil now on death row .

Dan McGill (Martin Ball) is a young teacher who instantly develops a crush on Suzy when she arrives at the school , and attempts to date her throughout the series . The character is given most prominence in " The Staff Meeting " episode , which was written in order to save money by not having any guest actors . In this episode it is revealed that Dan has agreed to teach several subjects in order to keep his job . Suzy is dismayed to find that he invented an entire language when he became a foreign languages teacher , and then invented its country (Estranzia) when made a Geography teacher . After Ball 's performance in that episode , Moffat promised him that he would not underwrite him in the second series .

Mr Carkdale (John Grillo) , the head of English , very rarely utters anything but expletives . Struggling to find a rationale for his character , Grillo paced up and down a rehearsal room carrying a brown briefcase , which he remembers all of his own teachers carrying around , and shouting profanities .

Mr Richard Nixon (John Wells) was the headteacher in the first series . Evans observes that he " shows precious little leadership " , and the running of the school seems to fall to Slatt . Wells was too ill to participate in the second series , and died a year after its transmission .

Mr J.F. Kennedy (Duncan Preston) replaced Mr Nixon as the head in the second series . Like Nixon , Mr Kennedy takes a back @-@ seat in the developments . In the final episode he reads a letter from the former head , which inadvertently serves to show how their characters are identical .

Jason Cockfoster (Damien Matthews) is a young religious education teacher . He arrives at the school in the first series episode " Both Called Eric " , and appears more regularly in the second series . Suzy is immediately attracted to him , making Dan McGill so jealous that he tells the pupils that he is Satan . The character was a deliberate attempt to add some sex appeal to the show .

= = Reception = =

Due to the positive reaction of the studio audience during recordings , a second series was commissioned before the first had started to be transmitted . However , the show was , as Mark Lawson summarised , " widely disliked " . The BBC 's publicity department compared Chalk to Fawlty Towers in the publicity materials . Critics , though , took exception to a new show being compared to such a renowned and respected programme . The cast point out that Fawlty Towers and Chalk are completely different shows , while Nicola Walker says that the comparison is like being asked to be " compared to a comedy God " . Writing for the BBC Guide to Comedy , Mark Lewisohn observes that the critical reception was mixed , with " its detractors pointing out that Eric Slatt was a carbon copy of John Cleese 's Basil Fawlty [and] its supporters praising its non @-@ PC , off @-@ the @-@ wall approach and the breathlessly paced plots that delivered moments of high farce . " Lewisohn also comments that while some elements of the show resemble Please Sir ! , " Chalk more closely resembled the ill @-@ fated Hardwicke House with its concentration on the teachers rather than the pupils , dark themes and overall depiction of the teachers as ... nuts . " Tom Lappin for Scotland on Sunday derided the combination of Chris Barrie 's Gordon Brittas and Cleese 's Basil Fawlty .

The first four episodes were transmitted at 21 : 30 , but the final two episodes of the second series were moved to 22 : 20 . The second series received an unstable timeslot , being replaced in its more mainstream slot by Men Behaving Badly . Commenting on the second series , the Glasgow Herald said , " the manic depute head of Galfast High , Eric Slatt , is looking more and more like Basil Fawlty on a bad day . So are those of us who remain glued to it in ghoulish fascination to see if it

can get any worse . " Tabloid newspaper The Mirror published a damning review of the show 's second series opener :

The head of comedy at Television Centre deserves six of the best for bringing back Chalk (BBC1) for a second term . If the opening episode of the new series is anything to go by , we are in for six of the worst half @-@ hours of comedy in the history of television ... It is no surprise that the show has been relegated to a late slot . It is a watershed for smut . Some of the jokes were in the worst possible taste . The standards of comedy are so pitiful , Galfast High School should not have been given a grant from TV licence @-@ payers ' money and it is time it closed its gates for good . David Bamber ... deserves a better vehicle for his acting talents . He was lured into playing Eric Slatt because the character was supposed to be the classroom equivalent of Basil Fawlty . They are as different as Chalk and Cleese .

In an interview in the early 2000s , Moffat refused to even mention Chalk , joking that he might get attacked in the street . The first series received criticism from some teachers and teaching unions , who criticised the representation of their professions . Letters were printed in specialist publications such as the Education Guardian . The Association of Teachers and Lecturers labelled Chalk as " perverse " and " vapid " , and its leader called upon the show to be axed . Teachers , according to the Daily Record , complained that the show portrayed teachers as " mentally unstable " , and deterred people from entering the profession . John Grillo , who played Mr Carkdale , recalls that he was appearing in a West End play at the time he was auditioning for the role ; a fellow actor in the play was meant to be auditioning for Chalk but , having been a deputy head teacher earlier in his career , was so disgusted by the material that he refused to attend . The unions ' derision actually inspired The Times 's Matthew Bond to like the show . However , despite identifying " genuine humour " such as Slatt 's rant against French teachers , Bond 's review is largely critical . He concedes , " the teaching organisations , you see , are half right . Slatt has no credible basis in the teaching profession , but far more importantly he has no credible basis in the human race . And what we don 't believe in , we rarely find funny . "

Kevin Lygo , the show 's executive producer and head of Independent Commissions Entertainment , who commissioned the series defending the show from the union 's criticisms , saying : " Chalk is a comedy . Just as Ben Elton 's Thin Blue Line does not reflect the modern police force nor The Vicar of Dibley the Church of England today , Chalk was never intended to reflect life in British schools . " Moffat said that Chalk was written " just for larks " and was not intended as a serious political diatribe . However , Scotland on Sunday responded in a piece placing Chalk in the context of other television shows about schools : " where such dramas fall down is not in shirking some contrived social responsibility but in their playing up to so many daft myths about the teaching profession . They could almost be written by one of those strange politicians who deny there is an education crises in Britain . "

= = Home release = =

The first three episodes were released on VHS in the United Kingdom on 7 September 1998 by BBC Video (now 2entertain) . During a DVD audio commentary for Coupling , Moffat claims that " no @-@ one bought it " , including him .

The complete first series was released on Region 2 PAL DVD by ReplayDVD , the independent label that had released Joking Apart , on 15 December 2008 . The disc contains audio commentaries on all six episodes ; Nicola Walker , Martin Ball , Geraldine Fitzgerald and John Grillo commentate over four of the episodes , with David Bamber and Amanda Boxer contributing to the remaining two . All of the above , along with producer Andre Ptaszynski , also feature in a 45 @-@ minute retrospective documentary , After the Chalk Dust Settled .