



Skins

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No one home to call

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Programme title:

Writer: Russell Bryan Elsie, Jamie Brittain, Jack Thorne, Ben Schiffer, Daniel Kaluuya

Devised by: Jamie Brittain, Bryan Elsie

Starring: Nicholas Hoult, Mike Bailey, April Pearson, Hannah Murray, Joseph Dempsie, Larissa Wilson, Mitch Hower, Dev Patel

Broadcaster: E4, Channel 4

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DVD classification: 18 (Strong language throughout, sexual scenes, drug use, violence and nudity)

[Image]

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There are many people who will have switched off during the first five minutes of *Skins*, E4's notorious wild-child. The show is preceded by its reputation for an explicit and exaggerated portrayal of teenage misbehaviour, and the first episode – which involves one character's quest to lose his virginity and sell three ounces of cannabis at the same party – does little to reassure. But those who stay tuned are in for a rich reward, because the first two series (the recent third, sadly, disappoints) turn out to be not a gratuitous reinforcement of the worst teen stereotypes, but a powerful and bittersweet drama about friendship, love and loss.

Charismatic Tony Stonem (Nicholas Hoult) is the

leader of the pack, idolised by his beautiful girlfriend Michelle (April Pearson) and awkward best friend Sid (Mike Bailey). Wide-eyed Cassie (Hannah Murray) has fooled almost everyone into thinking that she's recovered from her anorexia, but deep down she's as troubled as ever. Jal (Larissa Wilson) practices her precious clarinet at all hours, while Chris (Joseph Dempsie) would rather be out wreaking havoc and popping pills. Anwar (Dev Patel) likes to pick and choose from his Muslim faith, but finally clashes with sweet-natured Maxxie (Mitch Hower) over his homosexuality. The show gets beneath their skins as the eight of them laugh, cry, bicker, party, study (occasionally) and do some serious growing up in their final two years of school.

The uniformly excellent young cast and sharp, witty scripts give the series a strong comedic energy, but at its heart *Skins* is deeply poignant and, at points, very dark. The tone is set by the lyrics of The Gossip's *Standing in the Way of Control*, which plays during the précis at the beginning of each episode and seems to perfectly articulate the situation of the characters: '*Your back's against the wall / there's no-one home to call / you're forgetting who you are / and you can't stop crying.*' However much rebellious bravado they exude and however 'adult' they may be in many ways, the space that *Skins*' teenagers inhabit is a dangerous and lonely one. Whilst it does glamourise the lifestyle it portrays, the series does not pretend for a moment that the lives of the young, the hedonistic and the beautiful are protected from consequences or from tragedy. In fact, its insight into what lies beneath the surface of such a lifestyle is startling. The haunting trailer for the second series shows the characters looking desperate and lost at a wild party in a rotting house, which is slowly crumbling around them while rain pours down outside the windows. This serves as a powerful image for the lives they are living, hiding in distractions that can only ward off the encroaching darkness for a time before everything comes tumbling down.

In one of the early scenes of the first episode, Tony is spotted reading Jean Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, a novel in which the protagonist experiences a profound and disturbing alienation from the world in which he lives. The characters in *Skins* are undergoing something similar, and their behaviour is a reaction to this. Tony,

who understands the universe to be nothing but a series of collisions brought about by chaos and chance, manipulates people and revels in his power over them. Sid and Michelle find their worth in his approval, Jal pressures herself to overachieve, and Chris turns to drugs to distance himself from reality. Childlike and vulnerable Cassie, wounded by life, retreats into her own fantasy world and tries to take control through her eating disorder. As the character who, perhaps, loves most deeply and sees most clearly, Cassie, far more than the others perceives the thin ice on which they are all walking. Like the Shakespearian fool, the bizarre things she says and does actually show up the madness of the world, vindicating her as the sanest voice of all. *'What would you do,'* Sid asks her desperately, *'if everything's so f***ed up and you just don't know what to do?'* Smiling sadly, Cassie replies, *'I stop eating until they take me to hospital.'*

This exchange typifies the terrifying downward spiral in which most of the characters are trapped, only finding answers in things which lead to self-destruction. The underachieving, big-hearted Chris, grieving for his dead brother and abandoned by both parents, consumes such vast quantities of drugs that he is able to cover his entire bedroom wall in empty pill packets. Even when offered the chance of a fresh start, he sits on his bed in his bare new bedroom and carefully pins the latest empty pill packet to the wall: nothing has changed, and nothing seems likely to. He may seem to be a happy-go-lucky party animal, but Chris is bleeding on the inside – literally, as the second series reveals. Addiction and its destructive consequences may be writ large in his life, but he is by no means the only one caught in this cycle. More than two thousand years ago a prophet called Jeremiah wrote that the people of Israel had abandoned the God who was able to offer them life to the full – *'a fountain of living water'* – instead choosing to chase after hollow and fleeting distractions – *'cracked cisterns that can hold no water at all'* (Jeremiah 2:13). According to the Bible this is the state of every human heart, desperately thirsty for something but addicted to quenching our thirst in all the wrong places. Some of the places we choose to drink will offer more satisfaction than others – Jal's life choices, for example, are healthier than Chris's – but none of them can ultimately offer what we need most.

As *Skins* progresses it becomes clear that the characters are playing with fire and that there are bigger, darker forces in the world that they are not equipped to deal with. Even Tony's wild sister Effy, old far beyond her years and living a life of nihilistic chaos, is still a child who needs to be helped and saved. The crux of the problem, the sting particular to adolescence, is that there is nobody who can entirely be trusted to answer a call for help. The eight central characters are a surrogate family to each other, providing a place to run to when all other doors are closed, but they are far from infallible and it sometimes becomes necessary to look to the adult world for answers. Unfortunately they receive little real help or guidance either from the system which is supposed to be educating them or from their parents. One of the series' strengths is the way that the adults are all, in time, revealed to be three-dimensional people with their own very real struggles and weaknesses. The parents all ultimately love their children, but are deeply flawed and, in most cases, unable, however hard they try, to bridge the gap and relate meaningfully to them. Many of the teachers are well-intentioned, but they are working within a system that has no room for the needy and the directionless. As Chris's headmistress stiffly informs him, *'We don't like lost people.'* Observing that Effy never speaks a single word, Michelle wonders, *'Does nobody ask you why? It must mean something. Doesn't anybody care?'* Whilst not absolving the younger generation of blame, *Skins* does voice the possibility that a major cause of their behaviour is the adults who have failed them in many ways.

In fact, all of the characters actually inherit pain from their parents as surely as they inherit their genes. Michelle's mother is just as dependant upon men as Michelle is; Sid's father treats him like a waste of space because he has been treated that way by his own father. Whether they are distracted, callous, absent or too busy dealing with their own wounds, the adults are not 'home to call' when they are needed most. More than this, the lines between what it means to be an adolescent and what it means to be a 'responsible adult' are not by any means clearly drawn. Psychology teacher Angie, though she may be standing at the front of the class rather than sitting at a desk, is not really any better equipped to face up to life's crises or less prone to making bad decisions than her young charges.

The teenagers must learn that it is not only their age which makes existing in the world confusing and painful: Cassie's entreaty that her philosophy teacher tell her 'how to stop bad things happening' inevitably goes unanswered.

It isn't a plea she makes lightly. Towards the end of the second series Cassie becomes increasingly unable to live with the prospect of losing what she loves, and is running out of places to turn. As another character observes, romantic relationships can often be not so much a refuge but further evidence of human fallibility: *'Nothing ever works out. Nobody ever waits. Nobody ever loves anyone properly, do they?'* Cassie recognises that the comfort brought by Sid's love will pass away, time reducing even the most intense emotions to a storm in a teacup. When Michelle argues that growing up and moving on in life is simply the way of things, Cassie demands *'And you just put up with that?'* Deep down she wants to be rescued from her heartache, loved forever and all-consumingly, and even running away to the other side of the world does not allow her to escape from this longing. Cassie barely knows what it is she is searching for or what she is running from, only that a world of transience and of pain is not enough.

Sadly despite her insight into the way that the world will let her down, she does not know of any home, in the truest sense, that she can run to. She doesn't know that she can look towards the place described in Revelation 21:3-4, where people make their true home with a God who *'will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain.'* The challenge to us is not only to have a heart for the real young people represented by *Skins'* characters, but also to see ourselves in them. According to the Bible, no matter who we are and whether or not our lives appear to be respectable on the outside, we are essentially rebellious children who have squandered the gifts given by a good and loving father. In fact, reaching for an image to describe humanity's position in relation to God, Jesus told a story about a son who took what he was given and ran away from home in order to *'waste it in wild living'*. Our response to God can either be an insistence on living our own way, even if it destroys us, or an acknowledgement that we need his forgiveness. The son in the story, realising that his back is up against the wall

and that there is nowhere else he can go, makes the decision to head back to the father he abandoned. And *'while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him'* (Luke 15:20). There is one we can call on; there is one who not only longs for us to run to him but, in the person of Jesus, ran out to meet us in our deepest need.

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