

NO HOLDING BACK THE RIVER

Critics thought *River City* would be just another Eldorado, albeit in a colder climate. But five years on, racier storylines and the odd latte have created a modern-day Scottish soap success, finds *Aidan Smith*



PREDICTABLY, I got lost. The girl from the publicity department said turn right after coming out of the train station, cross the garage forecourt, and I would be greeted by an accurate portrayal of life in modern-day Scotland. But instead of *River City* I find a Job Centre with a queue outside it; the young and the old, gentlemen of leisure, a lad on crutches and lots of sad, defeated faces.

I say "predictably" because I don't watch soaps. A soap aficionado could probably find the set while blindfolded. I am trying not to be snobbish about this. For instance, I almost added there that the soap nutjob could "follow the smell of the deep-fried Mars Bar". And that just proves how out of touch I am: Shieldinch, fictional Clydeside setting for BBC Scotland's *River City*, features a deli rather than a chippy.

I mustn't be snobbish. It's not that I hate soaps: I don't watch them because I worry I might get hooked. The best soaps are clever like that. When you're least expecting it, they introduce a femme fatale with ironed hair and a glorious sulk (or, if you're *Hollyoaks*, five of them). Very clever.

Five years ago, almost to the day, I watched the first episode of *River City*. It was dull. You can use many words to describe Glasgow but dull shouldn't be one of them. I never tuned in again, and after the initial curiosity, neither did half a million others. Another word, much more sinister, was banded

about: "*Eldorado*." Not the fortified wine used to wash down deep-fried Mars Bars, but the Spanish-set soap which died a quick and unmourned death. It seemed only a matter of time before the entire population of Shieldinch would be joining that Job Centre queue.

But look at *River City* now. It's made it to its fifth birthday. Its audience share is a highly respectable 25% (600,000 viewers). The backlot is housed in a former whisky bottling plant in Dumbarton where today they're racing through November. Bus-stop chav extras sport poppies. The Versus nightclub boasts an autumn cocktail promotion: Fallen Leaves and The Bobby Burns. And in her office, executive producer Sandra MacIver is already reading through the Christmas scripts. They're funny, she says, but not funny enough.

The air around Shieldinch is thick with optimism. OK, optimism and golf balls. When the leaves fall, wayward shots from a veterans' tournament at a nearby course ensure part of the set is off-limits. But that's a lot more tolerable than the criticism which used to fly *River City*'s way, when it was a cheap source of gags for stand-ups, and when exiting actors would regard the axe as a kinder fate than standard viewer recognition – a shout in the street of "River Sh***s!"

So how did the soap turn itself around? How could the set designers produce a gable-end painting of falling men – a new addition, next to the basketball

court – confident in the knowledge that middle-class, Edinburgh-based meeja pundits can no longer pounce on it as being emblematic of an ailing show? And, anyway, when did it get a basketball court?

Racier storylines have helped. On Montego Street today, I am watching the Shieldinch Polis continue to investigate the whereabouts of Archie Buchanan who, last week, seemed to become the 11th stiff in *River City*'s history. His dragon of a mother stopped him strangling his drudge of a wife who was trying to stop him running off with his fancy wummin and, in the best scene involving a smashed urn since *Meet The Parents*, Archie appeared to become the soap's fifth murder victim as well. Have I just spoiled it for you, by suggesting the show's biggest bastard didn't die from that blow to the head? Never mind, you'll live.

Sandra MacIver, the Christmas cracker joke monitor, has been in charge of *River City* for three-and-a-half years. She's delighted with her 25% and is now going after 30. But she denies demanding sex from her scriptwriters (you know what I mean).

"It's not sensationalism – realism is what we're trying to portray," she says, "and if your show isn't believable in this game then pretty soon you'll be finished."

When *River City* started, MacIver couldn't believe it was still 2002; she thought she'd been time-travelled back to the last splutterings of industrial Glasgow. "It was working-class, it was nostalgic and



Photographs: Robert Perry

it looked 30 years old. I didn't recognise the Glasgow I knew which had become very aspirational."

Out went the corner shop; in came the deli. "I wanted a broader spectrum of language and culture," she says. Broad as in ethnic, but also broad as in wide boy; tycoon chancers in their pinstripes ordering a latte (rhymes with batty) to go. Yer actual cafe kulturn.

And out from the shadows, from the stairwells of the miraculous tenements (wood masquerading as red sandstone), emerged two actors who, though they wouldn't make this boast, pretty much saved *River City*.

Roisin and Shellsuit Bob were "satellite" characters in those troubled early days; duckers and divers in every sense. MacIver rates characters in importance from A to D and these two used to be down among the Qs (for Quirky Incidental Local Colour, perhaps). Now, very definitely, they're I for Icons.

Joyce Falconer plays Roisin, who began without a surname in keeping with her afterthought status but is now such a cult favourite there's no need for one. Nobody else in the show looks like Roisin. "At first, folk thought I was a tranny," she laughs during a break in shooting. And certainly nobody else sounds like her. It's a voice as deep as the Clyde – her siren-call of "Ray-mund" is inscribed in the pop-culture history of the post-Parliament years – though it's from further afield.

"Hermaphrodite Dundonian seductress" wrote one wag. Not quite. Try Torry, near Aberdeen. And it's a voice which follows her round the world. "I can be mindin' ma' ain business in Toronto or by the Trevi fountain in Rome and suddenly I'll hear a cry of 'Roisin!' I call them 'Roisin attacks'. You *nieir* know when they're goin' tae strike." Serves her right for creating such a memorable character.

The same goes for Stephen Purdon. He's Shellsuit Bob, maybe the (baw) face of *River City*. But is it a good face? "Ach, they kind o' questions aren't for me," he says. Purdon did not provoke that Tacchini-clad toerag to ambush Justice Minister Cathy Jameson's crackdown on neds.

"I knew Bob would get criticism but I just keep my heid doon... I'm a wee guy who likes the fitba"



From left: Archie (Gilly Gilchrist) comes a cropper; Niamh (Frances Healy) on set; Roisin (Joyce Falconer); cameras roll in Shieldinch; and below, Shellsuit Bob (Stephen Purdon)

He did not inspire every pedular act. "I knew Bob would get criticism but I just keep my heid doon," adds Purdon, who says that in real life he's just a "wee guy who likes the fitba". Bob without the bad bits, then, which is the opposite of a good soap – real life without the dull bits.

While I'm speaking to Purdon, a passing scene-hand shouts at him: "What happened to that guy you battered?" And when it's Falconer's turn, the wind-up is: "How did you get on in court?" Ah, the Glasgow patter – you cannae, as they say, whack it. *River City* was once a bad soap but, with humour, it's become one which has made that weird connection with its audience where the latter think they know the characters, even regard them as friends with whom they'd like to share a... focaccia.

See, I'm learning. But *River City* doesn't need me, not when real homes and a hotel are being built next to the set – surely a tribute to the show's veracity.

River City, BBC1 Scotland, Tuesday, 8pm