

Cheeky girl gives us a rude awakening

Last Night's TV

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THE SEX EDUCATION SHOW CHANNEL 4

OTHER PEOPLE'S BREAST MILK CHANNEL 4

MUTUAL FRIENDS BBC1

Anna Richardson, the likeable presenter of **The Sex Education Show**, appears to believe that there's a taboo on talking about sex in this country. In order to prove this, she put her pyjamas on, trundled a brass bed into the middle of Trafalgar Square and invited passersby to climb in with her and discuss their sex lives in front of Channel 4's cameras. "I want to find why we're so reluctant to talk about it," she said, haring along the pavement in pursuit of potential vox poppees. Would you believe that a number of people were so desperately inhibited – so sadly out of touch with their own sexuality – that they scuttled away from her as if she was a mad woman? Case closed, I think, except for those troublesome types who turned out to be only too happy to chat to her. And the members of the football team who agreed to drop their shorts so Richardson could conduct an investigation into penis girth. And the studio audience who chatted blithely about condom use and pubic topiary. And the teenagers who equably shared the details of their online porn consumption. They

did blur the issue somewhat, suggesting that far from any taboo existing, we live in a state of almost frantic candour about our sexual lives. If a researcher from Channel 4 pitches up to ask you how many orgasms you've had in the previous month or whether you trim your pubic hair, only a social delinquent would now reply, "Mind your own business, you nosy sod."

Richardson is an exemplary figure in this regard, not only prepared

to front up Channel 4's pick'n'mix sexual-education show (some soft centres, such as changing tastes in pubic trimming, and some hard, such as internet porn), but also laying her own sexual cards on the table. Things have been a bit slack in the bedroom for Richardson recently and she's feeling the social pressure to buck things up a bit. So, in between segments, she went shopping for naughty lingerie and took a crash course in Tantric sex. And setting aside the sillier aspects of the series she's in, she's great: funny, attractive and natural on screen. Though a little less natural, I guess, since allowing a jolly woman in a white coat to give her a "Hollywood" wax, named

after the pre-pubertal hairlessness made fashionable by porn stars. The consistency of a programme that both fretted over the distorted body images created by pornography and simultaneously required its presen-

ter to submit to them could be questioned, I think, but there was no doubting that it made for a memorable sequence. It didn't look comfortable, but Richardson lay back and thought of the ratings.

That genuine rather than factitious taboos still exist was neatly demonstrated by **Other People's Breast Milk**, in which Kate Garraway explored attitudes to breast-feeding, in particular the odd and turbulent feelings thrown up when one woman

feeds another woman's baby (cross-feeding), or hires herself out as a wet nurse. These range from a kind of male squabble over ownership rights ("It's hard enough thinking you're going to share it with your *own* child," said Garraway's husband when asked how he would feel if he found her feeding another woman's baby) to an almost hysterical dread of intimacy. One American "lactivist" confessed that a member of her family had

warned her that she might turn her daughter into a lesbian if she breast-fed her for too long. And you could tell that you were walking along a real faultline in our psychosexual instincts here, because even as you accepted the arguments in theory (what could be more natural etc etc), the actuality shown on screen (with women passing their babies from breast to breast is if they were swapping copies of *Grazia* magazine) could still unsettle. Garraway ended by declaring herself



a qualified convert to the cause of cross-feeding. She could imagine her nipple going into another child's mouth, she said, but still drew the line at another woman's nipple going into her child's mouth. See. Bit discomfiting, isn't it? I'm still not sure why, but I suspect the pleasure-dazed vacancy of a child just unlatched from the breast plays a part in it somehow.

Plausibility doesn't really matter in a comedy drama until the moment that nothing else seems to matter, which is generally a sign that things have gone wrong. After three episodes of **Mutual Friends**, I find myself fretfully picking at psychological loose ends and missing stitches nearly all the time now, provoked by the general weightlessness of the characters and the improbable way

they behave. Otherwise persuasive and talented actors have a febrile, overwrought air about them, not just because they're playing overwrought characters, but because the script obliges them to act up, with its sudden, arbitrary swerves of emotional mood. The series dropped a million viewers between episode one and episode two. It's just dropped another one.

THE TEN BEST TIGHTS

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Laid bare: in 'The Sex Education Show', Anna Richardson's subjects included the male genitals and bikini waxes

