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A gem of a tale

THE RUBY IN THE SMOKE on MASTERPIECE MYSTERY!

Sunday, September 21, 2008 at 9pm ET on PBS

A spunky heroine braves assassins, opium dens, and worse to get to the bottom of her father's mysterious death in MASTERPIECE THEATRE's adaptation of Philip Pullman's Victorian-era thriller for young adults, *The Ruby in the Smoke*, airing Sunday, February 4, 2007 from 9 to 10:30pm ET/PT on PBS (check local listings).

Called "a rip-roaring good adventure story" by *School Library Journal*, Pullman's 1985 novel introduced teenage sleuth Sally Lockhart, a self-reliant orphan schooled by her late father in shooting, bookkeeping, and Hindustani. The thrilling second story in the Sally Lockhart series, *The Shadow in the North*, will air on MASTERPIECE THEATRE next season.

The Guardian called this production "everything you could possibly want from a [TV] drama—a giant ruby, a beautiful orphan, an evil old hag, children buried in the garden, maharajas..."

British actress and former pop idol Billie Piper (*Doctor Who*) stars as Sally, who is thrust into the role of detective as *The Ruby in the Smoke* opens. Receiving an anonymous warning about the "Seven Blessings," she asks one of her father's business associates about it and he clutches his heart and expires on the spot.

Julie Walters (*Harry Potter*) stars as Sally's nemesis, Mrs. Holland, a homicidal old woman, obsessed with finding a fabulous ruby and convinced that Sally holds the key to its whereabouts.

Also appearing are JJ Feild (*To the Ends of the Earth*) as photographer Frederick Garland, who offers Sally a hideout and avidly joins her high-risk adventure; Matt Smith as Jim Taylor, an office boy fond of "penny dreadfuls," which have taught him a thing or two about crimesolving; and David Harewood (*Blood Diamond*) as the Bedwell twins: one an opium-addicted sailor who was the last to see Sally's father alive, and the other a clergyman not above a fistfight if the cause is just.

Then there is the title role: the fabled Ruby of Agrapur, spectacularly played by a red bauble enhanced with computer-generated effects.

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The story opens in London in 1872. Sally's father has recently gone down with the schooner *Lavinia*, while the South China Sea investigating suspicious activity in his shipping business. Alerted by a letter postmarked Singapore to beware of the Seven Blessings, Sally is also directed to look up her father's old friend Major Marchbanks (Miles Anderson).

The Major gives Sally a journal that tells the story of the Ruby of Agrapur, which disappeared during the Indian Mutiny of 1857. Sally is about to get to the passage that describes her father's role in this event, when the journal is stolen out from under her! Thus commences a chase that leads to dastardly deeds in high places and a shocking revelation about Sally's family history.

Author Philip Pullman is best known for his fantasy trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, which is set in a series of alternate universes. By contrast, the Sally Lockhart mysteries are firmly set in the universe of 19th-century sensationalistic fiction. Pullman calls *The Ruby in the Smoke* an "old-fashioned Victorian blood-and-thunder" with a genuine cliché of melodrama right at the heart of it, on purpose: the priceless jewel with a curse on it.

What Pullman does with that cliché is marvelous to behold.

The Ruby in the Smoke is a BBC and WGBH Boston coproduction. It is directed by Brian Percival, and adapted by Adrian Hodges (*Rome*) from the novel by Philip Pullman. The producer is Kate Barlett. The executive producers are Laura Mackie and Sally Woodward Gentle for the BBC and Rebecca Eaton for WGBH.

MASTERPIECE has been presented on PBS by WGBH since 1971. Rebecca Eaton is executive producer. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting and public television viewers provide funding for **MASTERPIECE**.

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