

This is what the BBC does best

I know when my mum's crying because she gets a different coloured face," says Natasha, the angelic nine-year-old in Brian Woods's new documentary, *Jobless*, which goes out on BBC1 next week.

It's not been the finest week for the BBC, as it announces £6m of cuts. No one can be happy that staff jobs are threatened. But I can't help being heartened by the promise that it will concentrate on more quality drama, documentary, culture and arts.

Woods's film – a small gem about the pain that ordinary families undergo, when one or both parents lose their jobs – is exactly what the BBC does best. It's beautifully filmed and never worthy. Like Jason Reitman's *Up In The Air*, it mirrors exactly how you would feel if the rug was pulled at work tomorrow. But it would be all too easy to miss it in the *Radio Times* – it goes out in the graveyard slot of 10.35pm.

The documentary is a companion piece to Woods's *Evicted* (2007) and *Bust* (2009) – both of which looked at the impact of major life changes through the eyes of the children. It gets you to watch the unwatchable – who needs a downer about unemployment on Tuesday night? – but also leaves you moved and inspired. Decent relationships can pull through adversity. Women sometimes come out of the recession as empowered breadwinners. It's amazing how perceptive – and grown-up – children can be.

A multi Bafta-winning factual filmmaker, Woods takes us behind the job-

less statistics and gets under the skins of his real-life subjects. His work is detailed, painterly. He understands kids have a wonderful naive wisdom. As eight-year-old Hannah says: "We don't tell people about mummy and maddy losing their jobs, because they'll just tell their mummies and then mum will get embarrassed." It's the direct antithesis of car-crash docu-reality TV, such as *Wife Swap* and *Tower Block of Commons*, where everything is speeded up in the blender.

Because Woods cares about ordinary working-class people, who have advanced up the career ladder (often without formal college qualifications) to earn a pretty decent living, only to have it taken away overnight. There's not a celebrity in sight. But this is proper edge-of-your-seats drama.

As he explains: "The bottom line is there are three key secrets to making any film – drama or documentary – watchable: casting, casting and casting... The film is only as good as the people who generously agreed to be in it; that it succeeds in giving us an insight into this painful world is all credit to them."

Back in the day with observational documentaries such as *40 Minutes* and *Modern Times*, we were allowed a proper narrative arc that paid ordinary people respect on TV. We've lost it. No wonder when programme-makers have to compete with marathon sport and dancing on ice.

But maybe that can change. Shows with "public-service value" don't have to be dull or unwatchable. Yesterday on the *Today* programme, National Theatre artistic director, Nick Hytner argued persuasively that in a climate of *X-Factor* and *Come Dine With Me*, the BBC have every excuse to aim higher: "I believe, unfashionably, if it's good enough they'll watch."

Tune into *Jobless* on Tuesday night and prove him right.

HOW ON earth does Lady Gaga eat dinner? Full credit to milliner Philip Treacey for giving us a surrealist eyeful this week. But anyone else ever managed soup with a lobster on their head?