

● Television

A rattling minibus chugs into the driveway of an imposing building, attracting looks from well-heeled bystanders as it pulls up next to fleets of shiny Jaguars and Range Rovers. Manicured mothers stare open-mouthed as five black teenagers emerge from the minibus. In his parting words, the bus driver gives them some advice: “Don’t be who they expect you to be.”

This is the start of *Boarders*, a new BBC3 comedy drama. Unbeknown to the nervous teenagers, they are pawns in a cynical initiative to spruce up the school’s image after a group of wealthy white pupils were filmed beating up a homeless man and spraying him with champagne. *Boarders* is about how these children from London adjust to an alien environment. At one point, Leah, a black teenager determined to achieve real change, calls the head teacher by his name. She is told: “Master will suffice”, but promptly makes her intentions clear: “I am not going to be calling you Master.”

Daniel Lawrence Taylor, who wrote *Boarders*, was inspired by an article I wrote for The Sunday Times in 2018 about a social experiment in which five disadvantaged young black men from Newham, east London, had been sent to Rugby School in 2008. Ten years later they reflected on the shock of being dropped off and left to navigate the harsh complexities of Britain’s elite seats of learning.

“The article gave me flashbacks of my own experience leaving a pretty deprived part of south London and going to Royal Holloway university in the leafy green suburbs of Surrey,” Lawrence Taylor, 40, says. He started out as an actor, in shows including *Uncle*, and created and starred in the ITV2 sitcom *Timewasters*. “University was very white, very middle class, and a place which felt like a world away from what I knew. The experiences the boys spoke about in the article, of impostor syndrome, rubbing shoulders with self-assured and entitled elite, and experiencing racism and microaggressions, all while trying to better themselves but not lose their identity, resonated with me.”



WE'RE NOT YOUR TYPICAL BOARDING SCHOOL KIDS

The Sunday Times story of inner-city teenagers sent to Rugby has inspired a BBC comedy. By Sharon Hendry

About 6 per cent of children in the UK go to private school and this small minority still holds sway; in 2019, 39 per cent of the cabinet and 34 per cent of the chairs of companies listed in the FTSE index were privately educated. But research by the Institute of Education has found that black pupils, an extremely small minority in private schools, continue to experience low expectations and institutional racism.

Boarders – filmed at the £15,000-a-year Clifton College in Bristol – shows the clashes between the black students and the rich but emotionally impoverished white children.

Rupert, a white pupil firmly ensconced in the privileges of public school, tells a black student: “My dad bought the school a new hockey pitch. Your family probably couldn’t afford to attend a hockey game.” The black students see through much of the confident upper-class bluster with an observation straight out of Emerald Fennell’s film *Saltburn*, which takes a satirical look at class: “You’ve not lived a full private school experience if you don’t come back with an STI and a coke habit.”

Changing places

The *Boarders* cast. Below: students from the piece that inspired it

Ray Lewis, a former deputy mayor of London under Boris Johnson, is the architect of the original Rugby School experiment. It has now sent more than 270 black children to UK boarding schools. *Boarders* “is remarkable ... I nearly started crying when they arrived in the minibus because this is us,” he tells me. “This is our story. We have been conducting a social experiment and it raises more questions than answers.”

Lewis was inspired by a US reform project in Louisiana that he visited, where he saw the transformation of gang members through a combination of military drills, tough love and the teaching of black history. Back home in Newham, he set up the Eastside Young Leaders Academy (EYLA) programme



Private school wasn't plain sailing



and began to replicate the US model with impressive results.

Malique Zephar, 27, was selected for Rugby School by EYLA and attended sixth form between 2012 and 2014. He says the show is accurate.

“I wanted and needed the scholarship due to being affiliated with criminal activity and having behavioural challenges. I had lost my passion for education and had teachers who didn’t understand me. Private school wasn’t plain sailing, but it gave me opportunities.”

Lewis, in partnership with Rugby’s headmaster at the time, Patrick Derham, went on to forge relationships with other top boarding schools including Eton, Lancing and Stowe.

“The environment we live in in east London does not give us many options for good experiences and role models, so we had to look further afield. I was familiar with the boarding schools in Nigeria, Ghana and Kenya and naively thought the UK system might operate along the same lines. I thought the children were simply going to get an education and hadn’t reckoned on the social and psychological aspects.”

EYLA alumni still go to Eton and Stowe and the like, but now Lewis tries to give pupils more support in the process of preparation and assimilation and seeks more co-operation from schools. “If I had my time again I would do it differently,” he says. “What we have done is reinforce the idea that good things come from white people, which is not helpful. There needs to be a greater sense of equity and partnership with the schools. Now I tell the students: ‘What you have before you go to these institutions is as important as what you get when you arrive.’ In an ideal world we’d have better local schools, but we don’t.”

In *Boarders*, the black pupils find complex race and class dynamics that they are forced to adapt to, then must re-adjust to the values of their black family and friends in the holidays.

Carol Muraine, who works with Lewis at EYLA, calls *Boarders* “a no-holds-barred account of the rocky road to black excellence. I hope it provokes much-needed conversations about equality.”

Boarders airs weekly on BBC3 at 9pm and is available on iPlayer

MAIN IMAGE: JONATHAN BIRCH/RUSSELL KIRBY/BBC. INSET BELOW: TOM BARNES