

“Masterpiece Classic” Presents New Series – “Mr. Selfridge”

Fancy window displays, cosmetics counters, merchandise you can touch and other marketing breakthroughs had to start somewhere, and they sprang from the genius of Chicago native Harry Gordon Selfridge, who combined guile, taste, boldness, the poise of a swindler, and the seductive charm of a Casanova -- qualities that spelled success but also trouble.

Jeremy Piven stars as the upstart American -- founder of the renowned London department store that bears his name and which opened to astonishment and some disdain in 1909, and who taught the English how to shop -- in “Mr. Selfridge,” a sumptuous new eight-part series airing on “Masterpiece Classic,” Sundays at 8 p.m. CT, beginning March 31, on NET1 and NET-HD.

The series begins with the newly arrived Harry -- fresh from success at Marshall Field's in Chicago -- checking the retail climate in London. Marshall Field pioneered the slogan, “The customer is always right.” But Harry finds that a demanding customer in England is likely to get thrown out of the store. Customers are expected to know what they want and, when presented with it, to make their purchase and leave.

Furthermore, English ladies get their dresses from dressmakers who make house calls, and beauty products are a hush-hush subject, associated with actresses and prostitutes. But all of that is about to change. Channeling the consumer culture of the future, Harry invents a shopping experience that is a cross between theater and fantasy fulfillment.

When the intrepid Frenchman Louis Blériot makes the first flight across the English Channel, Harry grandly displays the plane and pilot at Selfridges. When the Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova becomes the talk of the town, Harry invites the public to meet her at his store. Whatever the latest sensation, Harry hitches his star to it. Truly, in his personal life, as in his business, he is addicted to the sensational -- which creates exciting complications for all concerned.

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