

Psychiatry and the media

Hating heroes

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The press hated 'Shrinks'. London's *Evening Standard* dismissed it as "one part guilt, two parts torment". *The Guardian* called it "really naff" and predicted it would be axed or, if it was lucky, rescheduled until after everyone with taste had gone to bed. But it wasn't, and there must have been many real-life shrinks who were glad of it.

For anyone who missed ITV's weekly psycho-soap, it was the casebook of a plush clinic in (where else?) north London. There was a middle-aged Lothario, a grieving father, a kidnap victim, and a man who could think only of money. And that, needless to say, was just the psychiatrists. So who were their clients?

Each edition was stuffed so full of skewed families, textbook neurosis and repressed sex that you would not have been surprised if Anna O had turned up for an appointment. Everywhere there was human drama as the vignettes, unfolding neatly like a psychiatric who-dunnit, followed a pacey if predictable path towards crisis, cure or, as is the way of fictional psychiatry, both at once.

It was impossible to resist the diagnostic guessing game. Exhibitionist lovers? He must be impotent. Shoplifting ex-actress? Craving the spotlight. Best of all was the man who had been writing Mills & Boon romances under a female *nom de guerre* but who had gone down with writer's block when describing how his heroines felt in the arms of their men-folk. Work it out for yourself.

The treatment in this psychiatric Never-never Land was brave, even reckless, but always spot-on. One patient was driven to the lake where he claimed to have murdered his girlfriend and forced to re-enact the crime – all to prove that he had merely failed to save her. The trick worked and he could finally start grieving. Each week patients walked out, acted out and railed against their therapy, but the caring, clairvoyant shrinks got them in the end.

Meanwhile the doctors themselves were an increasingly enmeshed bunch. Leo the womaniser, host of a dreadful Kilroy-style (yes, as dreadful as that) TV show spent every programme battling with his ex-wife who was now attending a group run by



Bill Paterson as Matt Hennessey
(Copyright Thames Television)

Beth. Beth, unless I imagined it, was the daughter of Magda, the wise old analyst in the Miss Elly mould, whose couch Matt lay on after his son died. Beth was also the ex-lover of the absurd cartoon American who, called in by Jack to assess the viability of the clinic, came up with the idea of ditching Win. As the series ended Win was refusing to talk to Jack, while Beth and Leo looked set to lie on each other's couches.

All of this made compelling theatre so why were the critics so disparaging? The ostensible reason was that, as a depiction of psychiatry, 'Shrinks' was unrealistic. It was said that no-one was given drugs (not true), that the clinic foyer was big enough to be in Hampton Court (true but who cares?), and that the way patients were given time to explore their emotions, the way the doctors were so involved, was nothing like the way real psychiatry operates. And here lies a likelier explanation for all the vitriol.

Of course 'Shrinks' was unrealistic, as most drama is unrealistic. But no-one criticises 'Inspector Morse' on the grounds that real policemen spend their time recording the details of car thefts. What reviewers found hard to swallow, I suspect, was not the absence

of realism but its mirror image, the presence of an ideal – the psychiatrist as magician. Because despite the personal traumas, the foibles and the feet of clay, the shrinks were heroes, mind-readers who could look deep inside their patients, see what they were hiding, and out-manoeuvre them with irresistible mind-games. It is a caricature that many people dislike and also fear, and, we may as well admit it, one that psychiatrists secretly cherish. So journalists resented the series for the same reason that most real shrinks enjoyed it.

In fact, the critics missed one piece of realism which will not have escaped those of us who grew up in Scotland. Bill Paterson, who in addition to playing Matt, produced the programme, has for years filled that familiar part in TV drama known as Man With Scottish Accent. In 'Shrinks', he not only played the lead role but brought with him several fellow countrymen as doctors, patients and extras, thus providing employment for numerous Scots who would otherwise be jobless. Who said 'Shrinks' had nothing in common with real psychiatry.



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