

Reviews

Maybury. Drama series on mental health. BBC 2 TV, Tuesday 9.25 pm.

On the face of it, television and psychiatry would seem to have been made for each other. Take people at random from any out-patient clinic and at least one in ten could unfold a tale that is practically a ready-made script. Add the sights and sounds of a mental hospital (though less so these days), the analytical couch with all its confessions, the drama of suicide or paranoid jealousy, and the screen should be filled for many absorbing hours.

In practice, things haven't turned out quite like that. From the documentary point of view, psychiatry has done pretty well in this country, going back to Christopher Mayhew's programmes in the 1950s, when Dr Stafford-Clark achieved the feat of being on both networks at practically the same time. The serious viewing public has had the chance of learning a good deal about psychiatric disorder, though if there is one complaint which can legitimately be levelled against the medium, it is an over-fondness for 'scandals', to the neglect of the enormous amount of good work being done every day in the NHS. Investigative journalists who work themselves into a flather of indignation over mental hospitals one week have totally forgotten about them the next. However, when one turns to drama, the record is not so good.

Some years ago, I found myself the psychiatric adviser to a series with the unfortunate title 'The Human Jungle', which I believe has since turned up on screens in some strange parts of the world. It was a frustrating experience because the scriptwriters had no idea what psychiatry was actually like, and in general didn't appreciate my efforts to make their stories conform to reality. Later, when anti-psychiatry was in vogue, it was eagerly seized on by some in television, often with primarily political motives; the culmination of this was the film 'Family Life', recently reshowed by the BBC, and an appalling affront to schizophrenics and their families. Otherwise, there have been relatively few worthwhile productions with a psychiatric theme, and virtually none which have portrayed actual practice within the NHS. Hollywood, of course, has had its forays into psychiatry, nearly all of them based on what might be called the Buried Treasure principle (following early Freud) that if people talk long enough about their childhoods, they'll get better.

Therefore, it is all the more welcome that at last, the BBC has put its considerable resources behind a major series which aims to show how psychiatric disorder is really dealt with here today. I was fortunate enough to be able to see a preview of three of the programmes, and to discuss them with the producer, Ruth Boswell. At the start, it should be said that these episodes were extremely impressive, and that they should do a great deal to increase the British public's understanding of the issues involved—probably much more than the same length of didactic, non-fictional programmes.

The dramatized documentary, which to some extent is what these episodes are, has been much misused, too often consisting of piling Pelion on Ossa, in an unrealistic way, to end up with a political statement. Ruth Boswell, however,

emphasizes that 'Maybury' is first and foremost entertainment, though at the same time seeking to portray its subject realistically. If the series is to keep its audience over 13 weeks, at peak viewing time, it has got to grab them with genuinely interesting material, and be funny at times as well as moving. All these things it succeeds in being.

The idea of the series was initiated by Dr Gregory Stewart and developed by a team of scriptwriters who seem to have had their feet more firmly on the ground than those I struggled with over 'The Human Jungle'. On the whole, the media still remain firmly rooted in 'The Snake Pit' era, so far as their ideas about psychiatric hospital treatment are concerned, but 'Maybury' acknowledges for the first time on the screen that the general hospital is a major centre of psychiatry, particularly in the NHS. The professional advisers to the series were mainly from Bart's Hospital, and the sets are a faithful mock-up of one general hospital unit in its district. In the three programmes I saw, there was only one incident which struck me as rather unrealistic—a GP comes to the unit to ask the psychiatrist for a home visit; after the discussion, he is invited to lunch in the ward and sits down with three patients, while the psychiatrist goes off. Possible, but unlikely.

Viewers will see that, while psychiatric wards have their dramatic moments, these are exceptions, and that the general atmosphere is neither frightening nor depressing. What is even better, the programmes illustrate very well the relationship of the unit to society outside; much of the action takes place in people's homes, showing both the way that illnesses begin there and the effect these have on families. The series is divided into two trilogies, three two-parters and one single episode; in these, a number of principal characters illustrate such conditions as schizophrenia, hypomania, endogenous depression, agoraphobia, alcoholism and impotence. The dramatization of schizophrenia, for one, is undoubtedly the best that I have seen in any film or television production, while the NHS gets a pretty honest portrayal. The psychiatrist and principal character, Dr Roebuck, perhaps gives more individual time to patients than most consultants in real life, and is sometimes a bit too good to be true, though at the end, he is seen to have his own problems. ECT is shown, without the deliberate manipulations of 'Family Life', for instance, which made it appear terrifying and sadistic. There's even a Mental Health Review Tribunal, which is getting to the small print of the subject, and the College tie is probably seen on the box for the first time.

Whenever a subject like this is approached with good motives, there's a danger that the result will be prissy and fundamentally rather boring. 'Maybury' is neither of these, but is what it sets out to be—high-quality entertainment, though with benign side-effects. Those who work professionally in psychiatry should enjoy it as much as anyone else; my only reservation is that after seeing Dr Roebuck in action, a lot of people may become very dissatisfied with their present psychiatrists.

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