

BREATHLESS

Paul Unwin in conversation.

What inspired *Breathless*?

I have for a long time – ever since Jeremy Brock and I first came up with the idea for *Casualty* back in 1985 – been interested in how medicine is a really potent way for looking at the way the world works. I have never been terribly interested in medical dramas as ‘will they or won’t they save the patient’ but am fascinated by how a patient gets ill, or how they have reached a certain crisis point in their lives, and what that tells us about the world at large.

After the success of *Casualty* and *Holby City* I wondered whether I could come up with another drama set in the world of medicine. It was always there in the back of my mind. Then I began to get interested in sexuality generally and more specifically the relationships between men and women before the arrival of the Pill, before abortion was legalised and when it was illegal to be gay. It struck me as a VERY different world from ours, although in many ways it feels quite recent, not least because so many people around us today lived through that era. A world with very different rules is fascinating as a writer to explore.

Attitudes we dramatise in *Breathless* will, I think, surprise and shock viewers.

I was determined to create an involving, character-driven series making use of multi-strand storylines that evolved over six or more episodes. I think TV is changing; people watch drama rather like they read novels; they want to consume big stories. So I pulled together the three key elements of medicine, sexuality and strong characters and set the drama in early 1960’s Britain. The result is *Breathless*.

So is it a ‘medical drama’?

No. Whilst *Breathless* is set in and around a busy Obs and Gynae unit in a London teaching hospital, it revolves around the personal and professional lives of a brilliant and charismatic surgeon, his wife and colleagues. Whereas a medical drama will be largely set in or around the hospital, *Breathless* lives with the characters in their homes, bedrooms and at their parties, nightlife and so on. The series does feature operations and life-and-death moments (and we do deliver babies) but our focus is on the characters and how they run their complicated, intertwined lives.

Tell us about the characters.

One of the many areas that interested me when I started writing was how English society in the early sixties was still living in the shadow of the Second World War. Whilst Harold Macmillan declared that the British had “never had it so good” it was also a time when people were relatively repressed and secretive. Under this veneer of respectability was a desperate sense of struggle and desire. I found this mixture of surface and undercurrent incredibly attractive in creating strong, bold characters.

I therefore set out with Peter Grimsdale - who co-created these characters with me – to give them all very complicated lives involving increasingly tangled lies. It is this that makes *Breathless* so interesting, I believe. While I won't say what they get up to – you have to watch all six parts to see how the series ties together – all of our characters are either party to a lie, or trying to carry one off themselves. No one is quite what they seem.

We had a lot of fun with this. By creating a world of “secrets and lies”, I think *Breathless* reflects something about the way Britain was and possibly still is. If I understand anything about the early sixties it is that it was harder to express and act on desire, and marriage was a formidable objective and institution. Of course sex happened but it was very risky for women. On another level, it was a world that was more formal and conscious of keeping up appearances, which meant that people had to keep the improper hidden or covered up. So, mental health – dementia – was far less discussed; sex education was lacking; an unwanted pregnancy meant marriage or adoption...

These are big character drivers. Otto Powell, Jack Davenport's character, is a superb surgeon but he is risking imprisonment by offering abortions to women who get into 'trouble'. A complicated man, he is seemingly totally in control but also driven by a sense of life passing him by. Passionate, restrained, a 'God' in the hospital, he is above all a man living a lie, hiding a devastating secret from his past which could shatter the careful illusion he has created.

Otto's oldest friend and closest colleague, Dr Charlie Enderbury (Shaun Dingwall), knows Otto's secret. Indeed, he is part of it. However, being party to this knowledge has become increasingly toxic and his growing anxiety is eating into his professional and personal confidence. The effect this has on his marriage to Lily (Joanna Page) is slow to emerge and both touching and sad.

Keeping the secret makes Otto's wife Elizabeth (Natasha Little) – the most sophisticated character – very vulnerable, particularly when someone from the past reappears – Iain Glen's Chief Inspector Mulligan. Throughout, I have tried to create characters that have depth but also surprise. The bad are vulnerable, the good are not always good, plans don't work out, lies are unsustainable.

At the centre of *Breathless* are two sisters whose lives are going in very different directions. Can you tell us about that?

I wanted to make a series that had more women protagonists than men, and I was keen to ensure that those women were real and true to the period. So at the centre of *Breathless* are Angela (Catherine Steadman) and Jean (Zoe Boyle): two sisters who are denying each other's existence as they struggle to find a way up in the world. Their mother died a few years before the series begins, and caring for her inspired them both to become nurses. When their father started to show signs of dementia, they realised that his existence – and the problem he represented – would be shameful. But that's not all: Jean is engaged to a doctor – Richard (Oliver Chris) – the dream of so many nurses and nothing is going to stop her from climbing up the slippery social ladder. It is this – the ambition and the obstacles – that drive both women.

What influences *Breathless*?

The premise of a world with very different rules is always a fascinating one. The long-story ideas and the depth of character come, I'm not ashamed to say, from *Mad Men*, *The Sopranos* and a few other American TV series. Much of the way we have written, filmed and imagined the series is inspired by Todd Haynes's feature film *Far From Heaven*. I love the way it explores subversive, difficult feelings, under the gloss of Connecticut in the 1950s. That is the key to what we were trying to achieve with *Breathless*.

***Breathless* looks very striking.**

Yes, we wanted to reclaim the early sixties. So often this period is tinged with sepia and drabness. We wanted to infect it with colour. This is true of the costumes, the extraordinary cinematography and the look as a whole.

***Breathless* doesn't seem like a 'normal' ITV show.**

What's normal? I think ITV is going through a golden period; immensely popular dramas like *Downton Abbey* and *Broadchurch* could barely be more different from each other but they share the same channel.

Also there is nothing 'eccentric' or 'arty' about *Breathless*. It involves a group of strong and varied characters living at a different time but each with a clear sense of direction and desire. Their stories weave in and around each other. Sometimes the drama is close to a thriller, at others - I hope - it is funny. It hits emotions firmly and takes the audience on a real journey. ITV have been incredibly supportive. As soon as they read the first script, they rushed *Breathless* into production and whilst it was a tall order story lining the whole thing, writing five of the six episodes and directing the first two, ITV have been a thrill to work with.

What next?

If *Breathless* finds an audience – as I know it will – most probably *Breathless II*. But now? A little holiday.

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