

## Psychiatry and the media

### Black marks for Black Daisies

#### *Brice Pitt reviews*

'Black Daisies for the Bride' by Tony Harrison; directed by Peter Symes; Screenplay, BBC2

I've had difficulty in writing this review. I initially caught the last half of Tony Harrison's 'docudrama' about Alzheimer's disease shown at the outset of Alzheimer Awareness Week in July and hated it. My heart sank at the Brechtian device of putting the dialogue to the tune of a hymn (in this case the carol 'In the Bleak Midwinter'), and I found the approach to the three 'star' patients chosen for the film from those in Whernside ward, High Royds Hospital, sentimental and patronising.

Yet Harrison is a highly respected poet and dramatist. His translation of *Le Misanthrope* delighted National Theatre audiences in 1973, his *Phaedra Britannica* in 1975 was a notable achievement, and his translation of *The Oresteia*, directed by Peter Hall, in 1981 was one of the NT's greatest triumphs. A more recent poem is *The Mother of the Muses* (who is, of course, Memory) in 1987, the product of his involvement in his father-in-law's Alzheimer's disease. This, then, is a return to a subject which clearly concerns him deeply. Neurological disorders are increasingly fascinating to other than doctors – hence the adaptation to the cinema of 'Awakenings', to opera of 'The Man who Mistook his wife for his Hat' and the impressive film about finding a treatment for adrenoleucodystrophy, 'Lorenzo's Oil'.

Now that I've forced myself to watch the whole film I see that it is better than my first impression, but qualms remain. The 'black daisies' are the motif of a mosaic floor at High Royds, and Harrison links this to the song 'Daisy, Daisy' and shows the younger selves of his protagonists as brides.

The still beautiful Maria, an opera singer, who can now sing only one note, a thrilling 'A', is seen as Lucia di Lammermoor. Kathleen, 'angler, climber, gardener, cook, accordionist and pianist', who now just cleans and cleans, is shown as a bride singing of motorbike mountaineering with her fiance Harold. One or other of two Muriels – one was a 'therapist', the other says little more than 'I love you' – is also a bride. Another person of few words is Matthew, who just says 'Go away'. Actresses play the younger trio (and a rather challenging therapist) and presumably



Scene from 'Black Daisies for the Bride'  
(Copyright BBC)

agreed to do so and were paid. What about the patients? Do they now hold Equity cards? Was Leeds Community and Mental Health Services Teaching NHS Trust happy to give its consent to their exposure?

I found the 'docu' part of the programme more successful than the drama. Whernside is an authentic dementia ward and one wouldn't doubt that the patients need to be there. The screams, yells and squawks, the tussle between two old ladies, Kathleen's relentless perambulations, the slurped yoghurt now on the floor are utterly real; only the shit is missing. On the other hand the arty direction – shots in a convex mirror, confetti, petals, leaves and snowflakes in the blizzard which symbolises Alzheimer's, veils and bridal gloves discarded in woodland – sometimes borders on kitsch. The linking of the ward's coded entrance to the patients' loss of an access code to their memories, and the remark that Death has the only exit code from Whernside, is somewhat pretentious. But I liked the echoing howl which turns out to be the electric trolley making its way through the corridors of the old mental hospital.

What is Harrison trying to say? In one of his (fairly excruciating) couplets his angry therapist remarks:

"Thinking what they all have been  
Makes Alzheimer's horrible and obscene".

Well, yes. But is that all? Is it enough to be made aware of just how dreadful an affliction it is?

In a thoughtful epilogue on 'The Late Show', Michael Ignatieff, who has a grim family history of the disease, accuses the poet of offering too much hope! He is referring to the one sequence which I shall treasure. Enter guitarist Richard Muttonchops (*sic*), who serenades the ladies with "Oh, you beautiful

doll", Cringe-making? Possibly – until Maria gives him her wonderful 'A' and Kathleen first sways and then claps to the rhythm! Music, for the moment, makes a link between these lost souls and the world they have almost left.

*Psychiatric Bulletin* (1993), 17, 673–674

## Mental illness in British newspapers

### (or My Girlfriend is a Rover Metro)

RICHARD C. BARNES, Registrar in Psychiatry, Rathbone Hospital, Mill Lane, Liverpool L13 4AW; and STEPHEN EARNSHAW, Registrar in Psychiatry, Winwick Hospital, Warrington WA2 8RR

The main source of topical information in most parts of the world is through the mass media – principally newspapers and television. Television news and current affairs have a duty to remain impartial, as they provide a service for the whole population. Newspapers, on the other hand, have a greater journalistic and editorial freedom as they target subgroups. British newspapers are currently being scrutinised as to how they report both factual and speculative information of a general kind. At the same time there seems to be an increase in their interest in psychological matters. However, work on newspaper reporting of psychiatric disorders (Day & Page, 1986; Matas *et al*, 1986) has shown that the mentally ill are usually portrayed in a rather negative light with few positive images.

#### *The study*

We have recently examined two different formats of newspaper; 'broadsheet' (*The Independent*) and 'tabloid' (*The Mirror*), collecting all reports related to mental illness over the three months from October to December 1992. *The Mirror* has average daily sales of around 3.5 million, while *The Independent's* circulation averages around 368,000.

#### *Findings*

The survey yielded a total of 55 reports in '*The Mirror*' and 46 in '*The Independent*', and these reports were divided up into four groups. The first group included those reports giving information

about mental illness, and these totalled 7 (13%) in *The Mirror* and 15 (33%) in *The Independent*. Of the broadsheet articles, 13 were written by journalists and two by medically trained writers. They covered a wide range of illnesses, and six of the articles reported directly on published work in psychiatric journals as part of a regular review of medical literature. In contrast to this, the tabloid newspaper, with only seven articles, had no reports on scientific research, and over half of the articles were written by the newspaper's resident medical journalist, a practising general practitioner.

Reports of individual cases of mental illness formed the second group, and yielded 39 (71%) tabloid and 20 (43%) broadsheet items. Despite the large numbers of cases reported on, only seven were reported in both newspapers. This meant a total of 52 cases, 31 of which related to criminal acts or suicide.

The tabloid newspaper contained a much greater proportion of reports of suicides, 12 (31%) compared with two (10%), and these typically in unusual or otherwise noteworthy circumstances ('Love-rift tycoon's suicide horror', 'Santa's suicide plunge', 'Suicide of pilot who nearly hit a hotel'). In total, nine cases of people with identifiable psychotic illness were reported, and in all these cases the circumstances involved violent crime or murder. Of those cases concerning non-psychotic illness, all the reports (11 in total) linked the illness to unusual and generally humorous presentations ('Bizarre bagpipe phobia baffles doctors', 'Student stuns shrinks, "My girlfriend is a Rover Metro"', 'Little boy eats nothing but Spam'). Nine further articles mentioned doctors working in the psychiatric field, all but two