

Not quaint at all

# The BBC's Filth: The Mary Whitehouse Story

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With great fanfare the BBC broadcast a 90-minute drama based on the early career of one of its most implacable critics, Mary Whitehouse.

Whitehouse, who died in 2001, had for many years waged a campaign against what she regarded as permissive and immoral broadcasting. Amanda Coe's drama, based on an idea by Patrick Reams, was almost wholly inadequate in dealing with the events it portrayed. It amounted to an apology for Whitehouse's campaigns, and an appeal for self-censorship.

The tone was set from the outset, as Whitehouse (Julie Walters) cycled through an idyllic English village to church. Set in the early 1960s, the lush gentleness of the setting evoked a romantic nostalgia for an earlier period. Whitehouse was shown as defending a simpler life outside the cities. "Not all of us live in swinging London," she tells her first contact at the BBC.

She was portrayed as naïve but well-meaning, slightly out of touch with the contemporary world but determined to cling to the simplicity of her Christianity. She and husband Ernest (Alun Armstrong) are shown as having little grasp of current affairs. "Which one's Profumo, again?" she asks. "Housing, is it? I couldn't tell you," replies Ernest.

Coe plays fast and loose with the cultural context to maintain the idea that Whitehouse was just a slightly quaint, old-fashioned figure who could not quite keep up with the modern world. When Whitehouse is pondering her future in campaigning, we hear the 1977 Pink Floyd track *Pigs (Three Different Ones)*. Such moments certainly suggest that there was hostility to Whitehouse, as does playing The Addicts' *Mary Whitehouse* over the end credits. But this hostility is only ever shown as personal, never political. The drama portrays her as reacting, rather than pursuing, a line of her own.

To reinforce this portrayal, Coe resorts to a rather wearisome relentless whimsicality. Whitehouse is shown as being, at first, ignorant about television, confusing Sir Hugh Carleton Greene, director general of the BBC, with Hughie Green, presenter of *Opportunity Knocks*. She has Whitehouse failing to recognise the genitals represented by one of her art students, and oblivious to the gay sex taking place as she passes in the woods. ("Is it nature study? Lovely day for it.") She repeatedly lets slip limp innuendos without any self-awareness, and she has to have a painfully obvious filthy acronym pointed out to her.

This trivialises the matter. It serves to belittle the seriousness with which Whitehouse pursued her political campaigns, and their attendant personal vendettas. Without addressing these matters, Coe effectively belittles Whitehouse's attacks. She shows Whitehouse being shocked into action by an early evening broadcast discussing premarital sex while she and her family were having tea.

An art teacher in a secondary school, she is appalled to find not just that her pupils had seen the programme, but that a bishop had sanctioned

premarital sex on the show.

When she and the vicar's wife are invited to Broadcasting House, Whitehouse tells Harman Grisewood (Nicholas Woodeson), assistant to the director general of the BBC, that no "guidance" is being offered to youngsters. Grisewood suggests that premarital sex is a fact of life, which needs to be dealt with on current affairs programmes. Whitehouse's response is that it is "not a fact of life" in her home village. Campaigning on the doorstep, she tells one woman "we're not political."

The drama shows the campaign snowballing almost by accident, with Whitehouse launching the Clean-Up TV campaign at Birmingham Town Hall and being surprised by the response. This is a basically a sympathetic portrayal of Whitehouse as someone guided by innocent faith. She is treated as a benevolent, if misguided campaigner, who took a sterner approach only as a result of the failure of the BBC's director general, Sir Hugh Carleton Greene (Hugh Bonneville), to engage with her campaign.

The drama covers the period from the formation of the Clean-Up TV Campaign in 1963, through its transformation into the National Viewers and Listeners Association in 1965, to the resignation of Greene as director general in 1968.

In contrast to the clean bill of health effectively passed on Whitehouse, Greene, played with great brio by Bonneville, is depicted as lecherous and foul-mouthed, determinedly pushing ahead with his programme agenda regardless of popular opinion. The lazy visual shorthand for Greene's short temper is shaving cuts and sticking plasters.

Greene is repeatedly portrayed as patrician and out of touch. In a meeting with the then-head of ITV, Lord Hill (Ron Cook), who was subsequently appointed chairman of the BBC, Whitehouse expresses surprise that Greene will not meet her, a professional woman. Perhaps, suggests Hill, they would take her seriously if she were a teacher at an established public school like Roedean. This exploits a hostility to aristocratic aloofness to make a cosy appeal to a conservative Middle England.

Although the script acknowledges that Greene consistently opposed her attempts at censorship, his refusal to meet Whitehouse is seen as largely responsible for the successes of her campaign. His intransigent opposition to censorship is shown here as personal hostility. There is little indication of the exciting developments made under Greene as director general.

He presided over a period of new types of programme. The BBC produced a number of highly influential new sitcoms, like *Steptoe and Son*, and *Till Death Us Do Part*, and the satire of *That Was The Week That Was*. The Wednesday Play series marked a groundbreaking development in television drama, with emerging writers of the calibre of David Mercer, Ken Loach, and Dennis Potter (another frequent target of Whitehouse) all producing scripts. The significance of this series is absent here. It is mentioned primarily in terms of Whitehouse's objections to adult content

(“There’s a masturbation scene 10 minutes in”), and in terms of her personal conflict with the writer David Turner (William Beck).

Turner had attracted Whitehouse’s ire with *Trevor*, a radio play about a bored young man on a housing estate. The play was attacked at the Clean-Up TV campaign’s launch meeting, and Turner was denied a right to reply. Coe has Turner pursuing his revenge through the comedy-drama series *Swizzlewick*. He is allowed to mouth a few political comments (“Spoken like a true fascist,” he tells Whitehouse when she threatens him with removal from the meeting), but this is depicted once again as largely as a clash of individuals. Indeed, a spiteful attack on Ernest (Mr. Whitehouse) in an episode of *Swizzlewick* puts the sympathy firmly with the Whitehouses. The irresponsibility of television, Coe seems to be saying, gave Whitehouse’s censorious campaigning credibility.

This has been the line taken by many media responses to the broadcast. Whitehouse was irritating, but her heart was in the right place, they have argued. This is wholly consistent with the self-censorship line promoted by the Labour government over the last few years in the face of mounting attacks on freedom of expression, particularly from religious groups.

The script suggests that Whitehouse was seeking to pass onto broadcasters responsibility for addressing any liberalisation of the Church of England. This is true as far as it goes, but it is disingenuous to suggest that her political agenda was somehow naïve. As the script hints at, but does not explore, Whitehouse had an explicitly right-wing political programme, rooted in her religious activity. In the 1930s, she had joined the evangelical Oxford Group, later to become Moral Re-Armament. She met Ernest there. Portraying Ernest as a sympathetic butt of personal attacks, Coe does not recognise the extent to which he shared her views.

During the very period when Whitehouse was recruited to the Oxford Group, Frank Buchman, its founder, met several times with Heinrich Himmler. Buchman told the *New York World-Telegram* in 1936, “I thank Heaven for a man like Adolf Hitler, who built a front-line of defence against the anti-Christ of Communism.”

Whitehouse remained proud of her membership of Moral Re-Armament throughout her life.

She protested often about left-wing bias at the BBC, and is shown here saying that it bordered on the “openly communist.” She sought, and gained, the support of right-wing Conservative Member of Parliament Enoch Powell, before his sacking from the Shadow Cabinet for making his anti-immigrant “Rivers of Blood” speech in 1968.

In an early scene, Whitehouse doorsteps a black woman who has been receiving racist hate-mail from precisely the backward forces being succoured by Powell. Coe seems aware that there is a collision here, but she cannot respond to it.

Whitehouse’s campaign against the BBC was addressed to the government. Coe blames Greene for not meeting her, as if all that was involved was a misunderstanding that could easily have been cleared up by a friendly chat, a bit of “give-and-take.” But Whitehouse was busy seeking political support to oust Greene as director general. There is evidence that sections of the ruling class were more than happy to accommodate her attacks on the BBC. The Postmaster General Lord Bevins (James Woolley) gave her the code for hand-delivery of items direct to him.

It is significant, here, that Coe puts the firmest defence of Whitehouse’s right to complain into the mouth of Lord Hill on his appointment as chair of the BBC. Hill, a Tory peer, was appointed by Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson. Under the preceding Tory administration, Wilson had criticised Hill’s appointment as head of the Independent Television Authority. Hill had a history of conflict with the BBC, going back to his period as postmaster general, when he had criticised the BBC publicly for its coverage of the Suez crisis in 1956.

Wilson’s appointment of Hill smacked of a political hatchet job on the Corporation. Coe hints at this, with Greene indicating that his summons to

Hill’s office has come even sooner than anticipated, but she cannot explain the move more widely.

Hill is shown as sympathetic to Whitehouse, agreeing that the Beatles’ Christmas special *Magical Mystery Tour* should be pulled, or at least cut, because of potential offence in the line “pornographic priestess, Boy you’ve been a naughty girl, You’ve let your knickers down.” Greene resisted, but Hill is presented as the voice of reasonable and responsible self-censorship. “We can’t run our own show any more,” he tells Greene. “The world is changing—people power.”

Greene was unable to work with Hill and resigned. He was replaced by Sir Charles Curran, who promptly did meet Whitehouse.

Thus does Coe’s drama accept Whitehouse’s claim to represent the “silent majority.” In reality, from the very beginning of her campaigning history, with the 2,000-strong meeting of the “Clean Up TV Campaign” in April 1964, her constituency was overwhelmingly right-wing, religious and middle-aged. Her National Viewers’ and Listeners’ Association and, later, the Festival of Light, formed in 1971 with the support of broadcaster Malcolm Muggeridge and Catholic Labour peer Lord Longford and advocating the teaching of Christianity, never had a periphery of more than 150,000. The Festival’s launch rally attracted 50,000 people. Whitehouse could only wield such a level influence because of the backing she enjoyed within the political establishment—coming particularly in the 1980s from the Tory government of Margaret Thatcher.

On coming to power in 1979, Thatcher held a meeting with Whitehouse.

The failings of the drama are best highlighted by where it stopped. In 1976, Whitehouse brought a blasphemous libel suit against *Gay News*. The editor, Denis Lemon, received a nine-month suspended sentence.

In 1982, Whitehouse brought a private prosecution against Michael Bogdanov, director of *The Romans in Britain*. The judge ruled that the Sexual Offences Act could apply to theatrical representations of sex. Whitehouse then withdrew the prosecution, saying that a valuable point had been made, and claiming that she had no wish to criminalise Bogdanov. In fact, Whitehouse had not even seen the production: her one witness was at the back of the auditorium, some 90 feet from the action, and could not state authoritatively that he had seen the actor’s penis. Her barrister said he could no longer pursue the case.

Both Whitehouse and Bogdanov claimed moral victory, but the attack was part of a wider assault on freedom of artistic expression that she spearheaded for nearly 40 years. To play down the deliberateness of Whitehouse’s political agenda, as Coe has done, does a disservice to all those who have fought against censorship. Further, it disorients a new generation who must face down a fresh round of attacks on both artistic and broader democratic freedoms.



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