

Bodyguard: A political thriller in six episodes from the UK

David Walsh

15 December 2018

Bodyguard is a British television series that aired in August and September and is now available on Netflix.

The six-episode series centers on a British Army veteran, David Budd (Richard Madden), suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Budd now serves as an officer with that section of the Protection Command—itsself a division of London’s Metropolitan Police Service—in charge of security for politicians. After foiling a terrorist bomb plot on a train, Budd is assigned to protect the home secretary, Julia Montague (Keeley Hawes).

Montague is an ambitious, right-wing politician who has voted consistently for military operations overseas. Budd has bitter feelings about his deployment in Afghanistan. In the course of thwarting the terrorist attack, he tells the would-be female bomber, “I was in Afghanistan. I saw mates get killed. Nearly got killed myself. For what? Nothing. Politicians. Cowards and liars. Ours and theirs. People full of talk but will never spill a drop of their own blood. But you and I, we’re just collateral damage.”

Nonetheless, Budd stoically takes on the assignment of guarding Montague with his habitual conscientiousness. She, meanwhile, is trying to push through parliament a new Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, the so-called RIPA-18, known as the “Snooper’s Charter,” which would give the authorities new powers to monitor phone calls, e-mails and social media without judicial review.

The home secretary tells the media, “I am committed to supporting our security services by giving them greater powers to confront greater threats. ... Only those intent on acts of violence have anything to fear.” Montague also seems intent on challenging the prime minister for leadership of the Conservative Party. This arouses resentment and counter-plotting against her.

As noted, early on in the series, there are hints of opposition to the bloody, US-led neocolonial wars in the Middle East and Central Asia. Budd attends a meeting of an anti-war veterans group and hears a speaker assert that for decades “the West has been inflicting suffering on the poor and powerless. The war in the desert, in the oil fields, we’ve brought it back to the streets of Britain. There’s kids growing up over here, all they hear is what’s been done to families and friends over there. Who can blame them if they want to push back? And when they push back, our politicians act like it’s come from nowhere, so they can pass laws restricting our freedoms and order new attacks against the so-called terrorists, and guess what? The cycle of violence goes on.”

This element more or less disappears, however, as *Bodyguard*

becomes swept up in all its police-and-security services fascination.

Over the course of the series’ six episodes, a number of plot strands unfold. One of the central ones involves a conspiracy to assassinate Montague and Budd’s relentless efforts to track down the perpetrators. He and the home secretary, in fact, had become personally involved. In one of her relatively few human moments, she tells Budd, “I’m not the Queen. You’re allowed to touch me.”

Terrorists seem to be roaming the streets of London, operating with considerable boldness and self-confidence. One of the targets of an attack is the school that Budd’s children attend (he is separated from his wife). An old army mate of his (Tom Brooke) also becomes involved in the murder plot against Montague, on the grounds that she should be given a “taste” of what it’s like to suffer “the consequences” of her actions.

Various sections of the intelligence apparatus are in sharp conflict with one another. The home secretary, in her attempt at a “coup,” aligns herself with MI5, the internal intelligence agency, against the Metropolitan Police and portions of her own party, including her former husband, MP Roger Penhaligon (Nicholas Gleaves) the Conservative Party chief whip. “This is a very, very dangerous politician. Someone who must be stopped,” Budd is told about Montague.

On the other hand, the sinister director general of MI5, Stephen Hunter-Dunn (Stuart Bowman), secretly provides the home secretary a tablet with compromising information (*komproamat*) concerning the prime minister (“A series of scandals, all covered up. A sexual assault. Drug addiction. Financial impropriety.”). The tablet in question eventually becomes the subject of a desperate search by a number of interested parties.

To say the least, Budd has his ups and downs over the six hours or so. Aside from being in the middle of several attempted or actual bombings and two assassination attempts, finding himself strapped into a suicide vest rigged with explosives, and trying to end his own life with what turns out to be a handgun loaded with blanks, he faces intense suspicion from nearly every official quarter and eventually becomes the target of a nationwide manhunt. The former soldier turned policeman more or less single-handedly unravels the complex conspiracy at the center of the series, which proves to be the work of an implausible and politically unlikely criminal alliance.

Bodyguard, which obtained a large audience in the UK, is suspenseful enough and sufficiently dramatic and efficient to hold

the viewer's interest. Some talented performers are involved, including Madden, Hawes, Bowman, Brooke, Vincent Franklin, Paul Ready, Ash Tandon and others. More than that, the series exudes a vaguely anti-establishment air, as long as it is not examined too closely.

Even leaving aside the important fact that the series never seriously probes, despite a few faltering cracks at it, the motives behind the quarter-century of endless war, it nevertheless hardly paints a flattering picture of the upper echelons of the British state. For the most part, as presented in *Bodyguard*, they are a cold-blooded, villainous lot.

When one of the innumerable culpable individuals—a member of the ruling party and faced with the accusation he had a hand in an assassination plot—complains to police interrogators, “We’re politicians. We’re not murderers,” the viewer seems invited to laugh out loud. Whether it turns out to be the case here or not, an audience member would be more than willing to accept that MI5 or one of the other government bodies portrayed would carry out murder and any other heinous crime without batting an eye.

The monstrosity of the Tory whip, Penhaligon, and the MI5 chief, Hunter-Dunn, is particularly striking. After a minion of the latter is apprehended in the very act of committing a serious crime, Hunter-Dunn’s response seems a perfect illustration of British imperialist sophistry and ruthlessness, honed over many decades: “I can neither confirm nor deny the suspect’s identity, but what I can confirm is that the requisite authorities apply which render his actions lawful. He should be released immediately.”

Unfortunately, here too for the most part the official brutality is not traced to its social origins. The critique tends to remain at the level of individuals’ or agencies’ power hunger as a thing in itself.

The unwillingness or inability to explore certain questions deeply is connected to *Bodyguard*’s oddly noncommittal stance in the end. Given the involvement of genuinely homicidal jihadist forces, is the government’s ferocity unfortunate but unavoidable? In the face of apparently widespread and devious, even devilish terrorist plotting, is the right to privacy necessarily a thing of the past? At the very least, the series is murky on these issues.

The choice of an uncomplaining, honest policeman endowed with immense physical ability, emotional sensitivity *and* political intuition as the central protagonist obviously points the goings-on in a certain direction. We are meant to see the police-intelligence universe and its accompanying mentality as inevitable and perhaps even legitimate phenomena.

Bodyguard, in the ostensible name of authenticity, wallows in police and security lingo and idiom. Mysterious and ominous acronyms abound, as in this excerpt from one exchange in Episode 2:

- We got MASTS in situ?
- Yes, ma’am. They’ve reported to the TFC.
- Subjects on the move. One team visual. ...
- Alpha 2-3. Brixton Road, northbound speed 2-5. Continuing north. ...
- OK, let’s mobilise SCO19 to holding locations for Waterloo Station–Southbank targets.
- Copy that.
- Sir. Order from SFC, Trojan to SE1 hold locations.

This sort of dialogue is intended to impress, or perhaps intimidate the more susceptible viewer into admiring the “professionalism” and precision of the units the British ruling elite mobilizes for its own protection—the professionalism and precision so much on display, for example, in the killing of innocent civilian Jean Charles de Menezes, into whose head a police or special forces squad fired seven shots at point-blank range in July 2005.

What the series creators, fully consciously of it or not, *doshow* is a country ruled by vehemently anti-democratic and authoritarian cliques, none of whom would exhibit the slightest qualms about establishing openly dictatorial rule.

Accepting *Bodyguard* as an accurate guide means drawing the conclusion that Britain is a highly evolved surveillance state, where virtually every word or action, private or public, is being watched or read by someone in authority. Residing in and traveling around London in particular, per this series, involves nothing so much as moving from the gaze of one closed-circuit television (CCTV) camera to another. At a couple of points, in fact, law enforcement agents express regret that this or that small fragment of time or space has avoided or been deleted from the otherwise seamless CCTV continuum. Moreover, when Budd anonymously enters certain keywords related to the *kompromat* in a computer at an Internet café, security operatives, presumably tracking every device in the UK, arrive within minutes. And no one is shocked by their ability to do so. All in all, *Bodyguard* reveals that British “democracy” is hanging by a thread.

For all intents and purposes, of course, the creators leave out of their calculations the working class and its activity, including its opposition to all the filth at the top of society. More than a few surprises lie in store along these lines.



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact