

# “They’re not patients, they’re residents, and most of them are ... dead”: *Help*, Channel 4

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*Help* is available to UK viewers at Channel 4 All4 web site here .

Channel 4’s *Help*, written by Jack Thorne and directed by Marc Munden, is a powerful drama about the devastating effect of government pandemic policies. It shows how the government deliberately transformed adult social care homes into killing fields. The most vulnerable in the care system were shunted into confined quarters, without adequate provision, and left to die.

There have not yet been many television dramas about COVID, and most have dealt with personal lives under lockdown. *Help* tackles the medical impact of the pandemic, but also addresses the social crime that is ongoing.

Passionate and informed, it points accusingly at government policy decisions that saw 40 percent of the 48,213 COVID deaths between mid-March and mid-June 2020 being care home residents. Its anger and compassion have deservedly won a huge popular response. Within four days the programme had registered 1.1 million streams on All4, the platform’s biggest launch of a new drama.

Thorne has called it “unforgiveable” that “There were carers who felt responsible [for the crisis] ... Carers are massively undervalued, and they were massively undervalued during the pandemic.”

This has found a popular response in support for generally low-paid care home assistants, whose average wage is £8.50 per hour, and a growing desire to see real change.

On Twitter, Justine called *Help* “Incredible & vital viewing.” Sal said it was “deeply upsetting but it’s vital we watch #Help to fully grasp what care home staff were up against only last year.” James said, “I hope it moves the dial.”

This has created a problem for reviewers, who cannot but recognise *Help*’s force but who also inhabit and often speak directly for an upper middle class social milieu for whom the mantra that we must “learn to live with” with virus and resume their comfortable lives exercises a siren call.

In the case of the mouthpiece of anti-lockdown, back-to-work propaganda, the *Telegraph*, there was barely any attempt made to conceal the hostility to the drama’s message other than to focus on a gratuitous attack on the highly-respected actor Stephen Graham, one of an exceptional cast of fine

pedigree—Jodie Comer, Ian Hart, Sue Johnston, Cathy Tyson, David Hayman, Andrew Schofield, Lesley Sharp clearly keen to appear in such a serious and thoughtful work.

The drama, set in the fictional Bright Sky Homes in Liverpool, is roughly in three sections. Before the pandemic, we see Sarah (Comer) applying for a job. Manager Steve (Hart) baits her at interview, to test her mettle, and their angry clash turns on treating the residents not just as statistics or medical cases, but as human beings. “I understand dignity!” Sarah yells.

She enjoys the job, and strikes up a rapport with 47-year-old Tony (Stephen Graham), who has early onset Alzheimer’s disease. The scenes establishing their friendship are touching.

This sketch of pre-COVID life establishes just how overwhelmed the care home becomes once the pandemic hits. They take on extra patients from a local hospital. When asked about safety, Steve replies, “We’re being useful.”

Hart says of the terrible impact of the decision to send patients from hospitals into care homes: “releasing people and putting them into the care system without testing them, it could only go in one direction... putting people whom you didn’t know were infected or not into a system where you’ve got a closed unit is ideal for spreading any kind of viral infection.”

*Help* shows ambulance crews transferring patients from hospital shocked to see care home staff not wearing personal protective equipment (PPE). But the care home staff are acting in accordance with official guidance. No PPE is available to them. Eventually we see them in binbag PPE and builders’ dust masks, all that they can obtain. They demand “Just a few pieces” of PPE from the hazmat-suited crew removing the first corpse from the home.

The second section, the centrepiece, is a *tour de force* from Comer and Graham. Facing staff shortages, Sarah is forced to stay on alone for a second shift overnight, with one of the residents becoming critically ill. Comer is remarkable in a 25-minute sequence shot in single takes. Increasingly frustrated and furious, Sarah remains determined to do all she can to help the residents, even though no help is forthcoming.

No emergency support is available, from out-of-hours doctors to, eventually, an ambulance. Much of the scene is played against a soundtrack of non-emergency number 111’s pre-recorded message announcing that it is busy.

The sequence is compelling, brilliantly played, and utterly truthful in its representation of the impact of government policy as it played out in the lives and deaths of those who needed protection. Sarah says to her replacement, “No one would come. It’s like they’ve forgotten about us.” “No,” says Tori (Angela Griffin), “They haven’t forgotten.”

Thorne and Munden reference the government’s initial refusal to issue advice on public mask-wearing on the grounds that it might jeopardise PPE supplies to the health service. This came during a period when the government supplied 80 percent of NHS Trusts’ PPE requirements, but only 10 percent of the adult social care sector.

We also hear then-Health Secretary Matt Hancock’s false claim that care homes were protected. As Hart put it, “Hancock said he put an iron ring around it, but it was more a rubber ring... what happened is what happened, that’s not deniable, despite statements made by certain politicians.”

Thorne presents the victims, however vulnerable, as ordinary people with lives of their own, especially in the person of Tony. In the last section of the drama, an increasingly distressed Tony is quietened with stronger medication. Sarah, already stood down for refusing to keep quiet, breaks him out to get him off the new medication and to keep him isolated from the viral risk. In one heart-breaking scene we pan from Tony’s room along the corridor, where the other doors are sealed shut after the residents’ deaths.

This last section is artistically less successful than what comes before it, but Thorne and Munden deserve praise for trying to focus on the social crime of government policy and the lives of those affected by it. As Sarah cries, “They’re not patients, they’re residents, and most of them are fucking dead.”

If the writing here is more didactic it is because the anger at what has been done is reaching uncontainable levels. “When did our lives stop being worth the same?” demands Sarah.

It is this direct calling out of a social (and cultural) crisis that has triggered a vile reaction from critics.

The afore mentioned *Telegraph* review by Camilla Long is particularly so. She asks, “Is there anything Stephen Graham isn’t in? Turn on any primetime drama and there’s a good chance you’ll catch old Paddington features peering out as some undercover copper, or a bent prison warder, or a useless moustachioed detective—he averages two or three depressed uniforms a year. If I had to sum up the appeal, I’d say small tender chunk of a man who’ll be delivered some awful news that will make him howl like a kicked dog and rush at the camera. Having him in your drama is now some kind of televisual kitemark, a guarantee of stars in *The Guardian*.”

Ed Cumming, in the *Independent*, called Thorne “the most Stakhanovite scribe in England.” While pointing to Graham’s presence as “a reliable indicator of quality” drama, he pontificates that “None... will have you tumbling down the aisles” and sneers, “Actors love Alzheimer’s. It lets them rummage around in the bottom of the thespian toolbox and flit

between compassion, rage, terror, kindness, warmth, melancholy, and any other emotion they care to throw in. Reach a certain level of stature and eventually you will be offered a crack at a degenerative brain condition.”

As for the jibe that Graham’s participation would be a “guarantee of stars in *The Guardian*,” its review by Lucy Mangan is decidedly snuffy, using *Help*’s final section as an opportunity to downplay its significance. Sarah’s question, “When did our lives stop being worth the same?”, is ridiculed as a “preachy monologue” and the closing section compared with “the first hour” as “a fine addition to the wealth of pandemic testimonies that can and must be entered into the record in any way they can be.”

The truth is that *Help* is unfortunately not merely one addition to a wealth of “pandemic testimonies”, not artistically at least. It is something of an outlier and should act as a pointer to other dramatists that they should possibly consider refocusing their own work on addressing the most significant event of the 21st century. In this light, Mangan’s strange ending to her review, the brief declaration, “On we go,” might possibly be read as an instruction to “Move on! Nothing to see here.”

Finally, regarding *Help*’s ending, many viewers have defended it, including a significant comment on Mangan’s piece from a careworker, who writes:

“I think Lucy Mangan misunderstands the final act. What is being dramatised is a common care worker fantasy. I have absolutely wanted to rescue some of the people I have cared for. The film portrays the reality of what would happen, it’s one of the why’s we don’t, why we remain professional. The point of it, is to show that even in a good home with dedicated staff, that even there they can be pushed to a point where they feel they have no option than to take away Tony’s rights by medicating him, and there is no one ultimately who will step in and speak up for Tony. I thought it was an excellent piece of dramatisation, and the actors involved gave brilliant performances.”

*Help* is a truthful and angry work, showing a healthy social conscience. The underhanded attack on these artists for having dared to engage truthfully with a devastating and entirely preventable social crisis proves that they have accomplished something of genuine significance and value.



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