

Sherwood, Season 2: A bad idea expanded

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The dreadful second series of James Graham's television drama *Sherwood* (House Productions/BBC) exposes further the deeply disoriented political conceptions that undermined it from the start. Billed as a major state of the nation drama, it shows no grasp of social or political reality whatsoever.

The media were adulatory about the first series, but that became harder to sustain through the second series. Even so, a third season has already been commissioned.

It is not unreasonable to ask why such a heralded piece of prestige drama with such a stellar cast is so very bad.

The original 2022 season anticipated attempts by the British ruling class to drown the impending 40th anniversary of the 1984-85 miners' strike beneath a tidal wave of propaganda. The message in so many documentaries was that the strike was a tragedy, with miners, strikers and scabs alike trapped as victims of competing political ideologues—Margaret Thatcher and her Conservative government, on the one hand, and Arthur Scargill and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), on the other. The pair are supposed to have used the miners as pawns in a political contest when the mining industry itself was inevitably doomed.

Graham, from a former mining area of Nottinghamshire, dressed up in dramatic form all these claims.

Born in 1982, Graham grew up with the political disorientation and social devastation left by the pit closures. The 1984-85 strike was triggered by the threatened closure of less profitable pits. Nottinghamshire, with a richer seam than pits slated for closure and which voted against striking, became the focus for strikebreaking and the fight against it by "flying pickets" from Yorkshire and other areas.

It was the heartland of the scab Union of Democratic Mineworkers (UDM), set up to oppose the NUM. The UDM was the product of a concerted strikebreaking operation coordinated by state and business interests.

The Nottinghamshire pits were eventually closed anyway, leaving mining communities destitute and socially devastated. Strikers were victimised and blacklisted from other work, with former miners facing long-term unemployment or scabbling for low-paid jobs.

Youth had to move away. Around one in three households in former pit areas were affected by the problems of serious drug addiction.

The social crisis experienced in former mining communities was typified by two murders in Annesley Woodhouse, Nottinghamshire, in 2004. Former miner Keith Frogson was killed after a night at the pub. A striker and NUM member during the strike, Frogson was killed by Robert Boyer, who had been in the

UDM and scabbed. It was suggested that the murder was connected with the strike, but Boyer was found to be mentally unwell. Convicted of the killing, he received an indefinite hospital order.

Around the same time, Terry Rodgers—who had just sold his business and was reportedly in financial difficulty—killed his daughter. Rodgers died in prison before his murder trial began.

Both men hid in nearby Annesley Woods.

These tragic events provide the inspiration for *Sherwood*'s first season. But incapable of seriously examining the strike, or the reasons for and impact of its defeat, Graham sets out to heal all political wounds between strikers, scabs and even police officers, who are also portrayed as victims even when working undercover as spies and provocateurs. His central message is that the past is the past, it is time to bury the hatchet and restore a lost community and, yes, national cohesion.

Former miner Gary Jackson (Alun Armstrong), an NUM member and striker, is shot dead with an arrow as he is coming back from the pub. His wife Julie (Lesley Manville) is estranged from her sister, whose husband was a scab. Suspicion falls on another former scab neighbour.

The son of train driver Andy Fisher (Adeel Akhtar) is marrying local working-class Tory Sarah Vincent (Joanne Froggatt). Later, in a fit of angry frustration, Andy hits Sarah with a spade, killing her.

Investigating Jackson's killing, detective chief inspector Ian St Clair (David Morrissey) learns the miner was arrested during the strike. The file is redacted, so St Clair calls in a Metropolitan Police officer sent to the coalfield at the time. As random arrow attacks increase, the police look to the Sparrow family, local drug dealers who run a recreational archery range.

St Clair still suspects Jackson's killing is strike-related. It emerges that Jackson guessed infiltration by undercover police officers from the Special Demonstration Squad (SDS), and that an embedded officer, codenamed Keats, had an affair and never left.

The infiltration is dealt with in flashbacks, one assumes to maintain tension around Keats's identity, but by now the lack of grip on political reality is plain.

Graham aims to use overheated personal melodrama as a way of leaving the past behind. Jackson's killer is Cathy's embittered stepson Scott Rowley (Adam Hugill). Despite his hints, he knew nothing of the SDS officer's identity. He killed for attention.

Hiding in Sherwood Forest, Scott meets Andy, identified as Sarah's killer. Andy is shot dead by armed police when he refuses to drop Scott's bow and arrow. Subplots thrown in to look clever are conveniently eliminated.

These extensive spoilers are necessary to demonstrate just how overcooked it all is. Some excellent actors are left fleshing out thin stuff, with history and politics being used as a MacGuffin for personal dramas rather than to provide their context.

Graham is at pains to deny any connection with politics and social conditions. Sarah's politics are a red herring for Andy's failure to cope with the loss of his own wife. The police infiltration is transcended by an embedded love story. The remaining officer became Daphne Sparrow (Lorraine Ashbourne). The Sparrows are almost romantic outlaws, united around a love story but still part of their community.

Everyone, for Graham, is a victim of forces beyond his or her control, including the police. Forty years on, they protest at what they did—not its political content, but in an aggrieved plea for sympathy (“We were just kids!”). Yet the ongoing partial exposure of police infiltration demonstrates what actually happened: officers had relations and children in infiltrated communities, but did not hang around. They moved on to the next case.

This is crystallised in the miners' strike itself, where divisions between strikers and scabs are not seen as reflecting any class history or tension, or as the result of political attacks driven by changing global production. They are just unnecessary and tragic disputes between two sides who both believe they are doing the right thing. All can be resolved if old scores are set aside and everyone learns a little empathy.

In the final episode, Scott's father attempts to broker a truce between both sides from the strike. He is supported by Julie, who declares: “How the hell are we to move on when we talk about ourselves in terms of what we aren't any more? We've had 40 years of this. You get one bloody life and we are spending it hating. Aren't you all tired? I am. So fucking tired...”

There were clearly hopes that Graham could repeat the supposed successes of his first series, which in fact was despised by former miners and anyone with an ounce of class consciousness. Instead Graham has moved even further from political and social reality and into the lives of characters based on wild fantasy.

After an explanatory title sequence placing the social devastation depicted against a backdrop of brutal deindustrialisation following the pit closures, things go from bad to worse.

Set some time after the first series, we see new crime families dealing drugs. The Bransons (Stephen Dillane and Monica Dolan) are brutal and terrifying, and the killing of their son threatens to unleash a violent turf war.

Graham's political MacGuffins are further exposed, too. The new Sheriff of Nottingham, Lisa (Ria Zmitrowicz) opposes an energy hub, to include a new deep-mined pit, being proposed by a local tycoon's business. It is reported that tycoon Franklin Warner (Robert Lindsay in pantomime villain mode) was the local contact for the Thatcher government during the miners' strike, a charge he eventually accepts proudly.

Graham skates over this in so perfunctory a way that he cannot even feign the tension he tried with the undercover police story. He simply does not understand the history he is invoking.

The Thatcher government used far-right millionaire David Hart as a go-between with the scab union leaders to prevent accusations

that they were waging a political struggle to break the NUM and the miners. The viciously anti-communist Hart bankrolled scabbing by the National Working Miners Committee and the foundation of the UDM after the strike. Hart's direct role was confirmed by a Downing Street memo in which he urged the humiliation of the NUM. The campaign relied extensively on state surveillance of the NUM.

Graham's Franklin is only a cartoonishly unpleasant localised version of this but reveals the same political concern as the first series. Franklin is an embarrassment to his own family and has to be removed from the board by his son.

But there is the rub. He is removed so that business can continue. This is the reality of the world for Graham—not class conflict but how to get along in the system as it is. His references to contested political history are all the more offensive because he is so supine about how things are. The writing deteriorates and Manville is left giving another version of her season one finale speech.

Discussing the possibility of a third series, Graham told the press, “There's always going to be an infinite well of stories coming out of the Red Wall”—a reference to the working-class heartlands once dominated exclusively by the Labour Party. “I feel a responsibility to remind the world that it's not all wounds and division and trauma, that there is so much more hope and inspirational people, working on a community level.”

Graham's primary political interest has been backroom parliamentary negotiations and vote-wrangling, which was not the best preparation for a state of the nation piece set outside of the confines of Westminster. *Coalition* (2015) portrayed the tripartite negotiations that led to David Cameron and Nick Clegg's savage austerity coalition Conservative/Liberal Democrat government. *This House* (2012) fictionalised discussions in the Chief Whips' office at the end of James Callaghan's Labour government.

Such limited ambitions will restrict even good drama, and *Sherwood* is not good drama. It reveals a shallowness of worldview that prevents Graham probing further. This is not a call for didacticism, but drama about the real world must engage with that world and with the people in it.

Who is James Graham writing for? It seems to be a complacent middle class looking to find some way of making an evidently failing system operate once again to their satisfaction. But a generation of workers and youth increasingly finding themselves in struggle against exploitation, the destruction of living conditions and democratic rights, and the escalation of militarism and war will see through this clearly. It is not for them, because it is not about the world they live in.



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