

The Pitt: The medical drama whose social realism and honesty have gripped millions

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There is genuine significance to the manner in which *The Pitt*, the television medical drama, has gripped and captivated tens of millions of people, in the US and around the world. The series has become something of a social-cultural phenomenon.

The Season 2 premiere of *The Pitt* drew nearly 200 percent more viewers in its first three days than the series' launch a year prior. By mid-January, the show was logging 1.19 billion streaming minutes a week and averaging approximately 12 million US viewers per episode. While no viewership numbers have been released for the finale, the concluding and post-credits scenes have gone viral on social media with overwhelmingly positive reactions.

The deep impression the television series has made speaks to the specific conditions of healthcare and the crisis in healthcare, but more generally it reveals a sympathetic response to an unusually humane treatment of social life as a whole in the US.

At a time when the national government under Donald Trump and many other official layers and institutions are increasingly identified with little else but cruelty, repression and gangsterism, wide layers of the population are looking for social forces and means that offer a way out of the current intolerable conditions.

Confronted by a hostile political set-up, dominated by two corrupt, big business parties, great numbers of people have chosen to focus on a Pittsburgh hospital and its emergency department as a microcosm in which major problems of life are solved on a rational human basis.

The Pitt's realism is unusual and welcome. Many of the popular streaming successes over the past several decades have demonstrated a lack of humanity, if not outright misanthropy, and an absence of genuine interest in complex motivations and interactions. Explorations of the so-called "dark side" of life, the colder and viler the better, have dominated. Those deemed "gritty" or "hard-

hitting" have often adopted a cynical and pessimistic stance. There has been a tendency to associate shocking and brutal twists and unrelenting defeat or tragedy with "quality" drama. Much of this "darkness" is simply cheap, marketable stuff, which only encourages passivity and numbness.

The Pitt, to its considerable credit, is different. While Season 2 does not shy away from contradictory and flawed characters, it is largely life-affirming. The makers set out intentionally and in a sensitive manner to engage with the social problems of our time and how they shape the human material.

The season, which takes place over 24 hours on July 4th, features an episode in which ICE agents attack and essentially kidnap a nurse from the hospital premises. The impact this has on both hospital workers and patients is shown in its various dimensions, which is its own political statement in the current climate.

A plethora of burning social questions emerge in *The Pitt* and, given the time constraints, are covered remarkably well. A nurse is strangled by a patient; a diabetic man abruptly leaves the hospital against medical advice because he lacks health insurance; a prison inmate suffering from scurvy appears in shackles; deportations tear apart families; and doctors have to battle constantly against medical misinformation that puts patients at risk of injury or death.

When writers, directors and actors choose to draw their narratives deeply from social reality, how much more powerful it is than the empty-headed, self-involved trivia that generally passes for "drama," much less the comic book and superhero trash. Art that engages with reality, that depicts "the sufferings, hopes and struggles" of working people in particular, the people who "don't count" in official American and global bourgeois life, has the power to move, entertain and enlighten.

The Pitt takes place in a big city hospital, and, thus by

its very nature, the staff and patients are multi-national, multi-ethnic, multi-racial. Yet identity politics is absent from the program. The racial and ethnic differences aren't significant issues. The viewer is struck by the high level of solidarity among the physicians, many of them from widely different backgrounds. A broad cross section of America is here, and yet there's no racial storyline. In a similar vein, when inter-generational conflicts arise, they are not presented as insurmountable. The characters are drawn according to the common problems and challenges they encounter.

The difficulties faced by the central character, an attending physician in crisis, also have a more general meaning. Dr. Robinavitch is attempting to fight through the serious, at times intractable problems in the hospital and in his life without losing his sanity. Although *The Pitt* has resonated especially strongly with healthcare workers, this is something to which the broader population clearly relates.

Workers are the ones who keep society functioning in all its aspects, but they come up against obstacles created by the existing social framework every day. How can we have decent transportation, quality education, safe construction and industrial projects, a functioning electricity grid, a working service sector and so forth, if workers are driven to exhaustion, budgets are slashed, positions are cut and conditions are generally made impossible? Workers can see and feel the effects of the system on themselves and on others in myriad forms, and they are looking for ways to not "succumb" to these pressures.

The Pitt has risen in popularity as the official political institutions and big business sink lower and lower in the public estimate. Of course, this is not simply a matter of one television program. Nurses have been named the most trusted profession in the US for 24 consecutive years as of 2026, according to annual polling from Gallup. Approximately 75 percent of American adults rate nurses' honesty and ethical standards as "high" or "very high." Medical doctors and pharmacists also receive the approval of the majority, typically being considered trustworthy by between 53 and 62 percent of those surveyed.

On the other hand, capitalists and business executives are generally disliked, if not despised. Recent data shows only about 12 to 15 percent of the public views such individuals as having high ethical standards: "They are often viewed more negatively than positively."

Members of Congress and other political figures from

both major parties are frequently the lowest-rated group in such polls. Gallup reports that positive ethical ratings for politicians often fall below 10 percent, with roughly 62 percent of the public rating them as "low" or "very low" in honesty.

In opposition to short-staffing, low wages and harsh working conditions, healthcare workers have dug in their heels in fierce battles with management in recent times, including in Providence, Rhode Island, and Grand Blanc, Michigan. Tens of thousands of nurses were blatantly sold out at Kaiser Permanente and in New York City by their unions. This is a major battlefield in the class struggle. It is not for nothing that the ultra-right *City Journal* recently (and nervously) headlined an article, "Why Are So Many Nurses Left-Wing?"

The Pitt has managed to grab hold of a considerable portion of public attention and interest for this combination of reasons: its moving intensity and social realism; its disavowal of racial and gender politics, which has no widespread support; its criticism of ICE and the vicious anti-democratic, anti-immigrant operations; its portrayal, "warts and all," of self-sacrificing human beings dedicated to the public welfare; and its general commitment to human decency, in opposition to everything filthy and rotten "coming from above."

The success of *The Pitt* coincides with the participation of millions upon millions of people in every sizable community in the US on March 28 in the "No Kings" protests against ICE, war and dictatorship. The population is moving to the left, to an ever more critical view of the status quo, of the gang of criminals and murderers who rule the US and of capitalism itself.



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