



Signs of the crimes

It was billed as gripping, but BBC2 drama *Soundproof* failed to grasp the professional realities of its central character – a sign language interpreter. **Mo Bergson** shares her professional point of view on the production



Mo Bergson has been a sign language interpreter for over 20 years in a variety of settings, from conferences to social service meetings to police interviews.

It is said that when a subject becomes plot fodder for *EastEnders*, you know it's mainstream. Whilst sign language isn't quite there yet, last week's prime-time BBC2 drama *Soundproof* certainly put it en route, with a story featuring, as its central characters, a Deaf man and a sign language interpreter. And it stirred controversy...

As an interpreter myself, I read with some interest previews which talked of a 'gripping new urban thriller' (BBC Press Release) that 'breaks new ground bringing deaf and hearing actors together' (BBC website), 'which just happens to include deaf people' (*Guardian*). So where did it all go wrong?

I felt the same as anyone who

watches an inaccurate dramatic portrayal of their profession. Police officers must groan at yet another 'bent cop' drama. Does every doctor and nurse spend most of their working hours plotting romantic trysts with each other? I know, from the postings on the interpreters' egroup and other discussion forums, that I was not the only one, head in hands, screaming at the screen 'No! Don't do it' as Penny, the interpreter, broke every rule in the book (and several not yet included!).

Plot points

The story centred on the death of Chris (Neil Stuke), who is seen leaving the balcony of his flat, without the help of stairs or lift (which we later

find is not too reliable, anyway). Did he jump or was he pushed? The police, taking the latter view, need to talk to flatmates, who include two deaf people. So they call on the services of the interpreter, Penny (Susan Lynch).

Our first glimpse of Penny is in a theatre, on stage as a play is reaching its dramatic conclusion. Sadly, Susan Lynch, while a splendid actress with many credits to her name, is not fluent in British Sign Language. At this point several friends, finding her use of the language just too painful to watch, switched off, begging the question – had it been a spoken language, would the director, Edmund Coulthard, have been happy to cast



someone who was less than fluent? But I am made of sterner stuff and carried on watching.

As our now less than impressive interpreter is leaving the theatre, she receives the police call. Does she explain that she has just interpreted a two-hour play and, as she is mentally exhausted, maybe they would be wise to contact another interpreter more able to cope with the rigours of an evening police job? No! She jumps on her bike and pedals off to the gig.

Safety first


I do need to point out that said bike had almost equal billing throughout the drama, and really should have been up there as credits rolled. We see Penny repeatedly donning helmet

and Sam Browne belt dashing from job to job (or job to illicit meeting with murder suspect). While this could be viewed as the director filling those awkward little gaps, by the end I had come to see it as deeply symbolic. Her professional life was, quite frankly, a mess, but she still had the good sense always to wear a safety helmet and, in character, she also practised safe sex!

So what insights did the general public gain from this first major portrayal of the profession? Well, we obviously do a lot of dashing around – safely. We can't sign; to be fair, most viewers would have missed this one and were probably impressed that an actress could become fluent for the part! And please, don't get me started on what message this gives out about

Character assassinations, from left: Dean (played by Joseph Mawle), Chris (Neil Stuke) and Jak (Joanna Dunbar); Penny (Susan Lynch); Dean (Joseph Mawle) for whom 'reality' takes some strange twists and turns in BBC2's Soundproof

the language – not least because a Deaf actor was not cast as the Deaf lead, Dean. We work for the police, and then have sex with the murder suspect, whom we later tip off in interview that the police are lying and, in doing so, reveal details of another suspect's interview. We meet up with the murder suspect, who is in breach of bail conditions and being hunted by the police. And finally, we approach the real murderer and get her to confess, which was more than the police managed, so that's OK then...

And what of that dodgy lift? Well, as the drama is concluding and the police arrive at the flats, sirens blaring, lights flashing... ready to arrest the suspect, our interpreter offers to take him back to her place. As the police don't stop her (in fact we never see them again), I had to assume they were stuck in the lift. And our intrepid lovers? Well, maybe they beat a safe retreat to happy-ever-after land – via the stairs! 

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