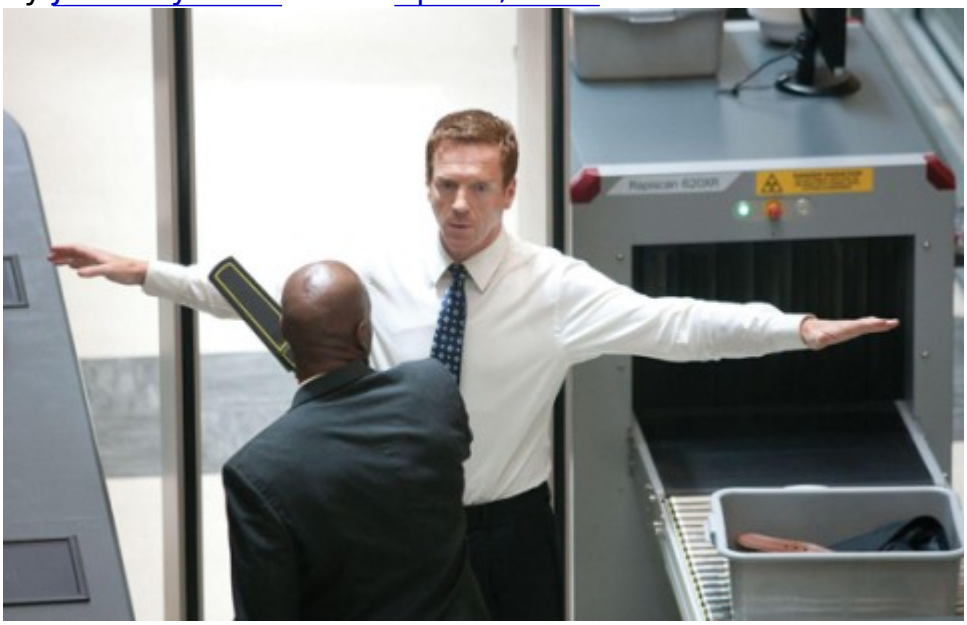
Spies and traitors

by Jason Byassee in the April 3, 2013 issue



TURNCOAT? U.S. marine Nicholas Brody (played by Damian Lewis) is suspected of being an al-Qaeda recruit in the TV series *Homeland*. © 2012 SHOWTIME NETWORKS, INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

I got into *Homeland* for local reasons. The action takes place in Washington, D.C., but the Showtime TV series is shot in my state—in Charlotte, North Carolina. Mandy Patinkin, the marvelous actor who was memorable as Inigo Montoya in *The Princess Bride* ("You killed my father. Prepare to die"), plays Saul Berenson, the mentor to Claire Danes's lead spy. He's not only been spotted around Charlotte, he's made his home there and said nice things about it. As a southerner I find myself beholden to such niceties.

The show is a redux of a redux. It's based on an Israeli book and TV series about captured Israeli soldiers turned into spies by Hamas. That story was based on the 1962 film *The Manchurian Candidate*. The Israeli show was popular and controversial: people worried that it would encourage kidnappings and attempted turnings. The show's genius lay partly in its ability to make persuasive the scenario of turning a soldier into an enemy spy. In *Homeland*, the worry is that a U.S. marine has become not only a Muslim but a spy for al-Qaeda. Herein also lies a problem

with the series: Do we really need another show equating Islamic practice with terrorism?

As marine sergeant Nicholas Brody, Damian Lewis is so convincing that even his Islamic prayer seems elegant. He washes his hands, sweeps the floor, puts his hands behind his ears and intones, “Allahu Akbar.” That he’s doing this in his garage without the knowledge of his wife and children is key to the plot. That he’s doing this at the terrifying conclusion of the show’s first episode is supposed to cement in the audience’s mind that this man is a mole, a traitor, a terrorist.

At other times the show goes out of its way to suggest that not all Muslims are terrorists: some become informants for the CIA, others carry out important ministry to the downtrodden, and lots of others are innocents blown up as a result of U.S. mistakes or faulty policy. The figure of Brody, the idealized marine hero who prays like a Muslim, captures a primal American fear: maybe “we” are not so different from “them.”

The first episode opens with a group of marines blowing their way into a bunker in Afghanistan and pulling out, to their surprise, a scraggly red-headed American POW. This rescue is a coup for the CIA, but one agent smells a rat. Operations officer Carrie Mathison had heard from an asset in the region that a U.S. soldier had been turned. She’s skeptical of Brody from the start and so risks jail by illegally spying on him. She fidgets nervously as she watches the Brody family readjust to one another: husband and wife together in bed, children with a father they last knew when they were toddlers. As viewers, we’re watching her watching them. Is anybody *not* under surveillance anymore?

Berenson is the show’s conscience. He is Gandalf without the wizardry, here packaged as a Jew from Indiana who doesn’t practice his religion much but knows how to say *kaddish* over a dead body. When he learns of Mathison’s clandestine operation, he advises her to get a good lawyer. But she manages to convince him that Brody is up to something. Still, he shuts the surveillance down: all the hunches in the world are not enough to “violate the constitutionally protected right to privacy of the Brody family.” Is this naïveté or principled morality? The show leaves it uncertain.

Later it becomes clear that a CIA hotshot had used his position to cover up a drone strike that killed dozens of children. “It was our joint opinion that the potential

collateral damage fell within current matrix parameters," the man explains. "Good God," Berenson responds, "Somebody actually came up with that language." As Catholic theologian Nicholas Lash says, the first casualty of original sin is language.

Danes is electric as Mathison. To add a twist to the story, she takes an antipsychotic medicine, which she gets secretly from her sister, since the CIA would kick her out if the agency knew about her illness. As she becomes more bipolar she also becomes clearer on the threat to America posed by Abu Nazir, al-Qaeda leader and Brody's clandestine superior. Danes plays a manic fit as well as anyone, only her "delusions" are real; Brody is a terrorist, but her bosses can't see it. This isn't the first show to suggest that a mentally ill person might be its sanest character, but Danes's acting saves what could be a cliché.

Brody's family is troubled in the usual ways: the teenager is smoking pot, the preteen is struggling to fit in. But there is an added challenge: Brody's wife, Jessica (Morena Baccarin), got her first call from her presumed-dead husband while lying in bed with Mike (Diego Klattenhoff), Brody's best friend. The family tries to act normal on Brody's return. He is surprised that they have taken up praying while he was gone. "We prayed every day for eight years that you'd come back," his son explains, implying that it worked.

When Mathison confronts Brody about his conversion to Islam, he explains, "Well the King James Bible wasn't exactly around." More plausibly, he says Abu Nazir was kind to him, brought him into his home, offered him solace in a brutal world.

What he doesn't say is that Nazir's son Issa was killed in a drone strike, which apparently solidified Brody's decision to become an al-Qaeda operative. But will he go through with it? Will he use his status as a celebrity to take out the highest-stake American targets imaginable?

One tossed-off line shows how brilliant the show's writing is. The U.S. secretary of defense is holed up with Brody and others in a safe house after a terrorist attack. Unbeknownst to the others, Brody is wearing a suicide vest. Will he push the button? Or will his loyalty to country and his love of family keep him from going through with it? "What a colossal screwup," the defense secretary says, reflecting on the day's previous attack. They're in the men's room together when the secretary intones again, in the exact same voice, "No paper towels. What another colossal screwup."

The murder of an innocent man equated to the inconvenience of wet hands—what a glimpse of callousness, an imperviousness to suffering that might provoke a suicide bombing. And yet annoyance at wet hands—what an everyday sort of problem, the sort that ought to keep someone intent on murder by suicide from acting. This show puts you in a moral vice and squeezes.