Television angst: Stages on a scriptwriter's way

by James M. Wall
October 7, 1997

A new television season always begins in autumn, which is really a shame. Television needs a spring start, with buds bursting, grass growing greener, and trees coming alive. But the television producers rely on the waning daylight and bleaker weather to drive people indoors to their television sets. This year's premiers have been depressingly familiar—full of noise and empty humor. With all the creative talent seeking to attract and hold our attention, you'd think an occasional program would surprise us.

Among the shows that could be of more than passing interest are *Nothing Sacred*, a less-than-daring portrayal of a Roman Catholic priest; *Michael Hayes*, which features the sensitive David Caruso as a troubled but earnest federal prosecutor; *George & Leo*, with Bob Newhart and Judd Hirsch playing mismatched in-laws; and the always welcome Bill Cosby as a retiree with too much time on his hands.

My inspection of the television season was brightened by the discovery of David Lodge's novel *Therapy*, which is about the travails of a British television writer. Lodge's account of Laurence Passmore is intricately plotted, and presented through Passmore's personal journal, with additional material from his wife, friends and coworkers. Saddled with the nickname Tubby because of his girth, Passmore is obsessed with a variety of therapies—acupuncture, massage, psychotherapy—to combat his sleeplessness, physical problems and, especially, sexual inadequacy. Nothing works.

Entirely by chance Passmore stumbles across the writings of Søren Kierkegaard and is inspired to make a "choice" to move from despair toward "authentic" existence. Passmore moves through Kierkegaard's three stages, from the aesthetic to the ethical to the final leap of faith.

Passmore's obsession with Kierkegaard does not impress his TV colleagues. "OK, Tubby, let me see if I've got this right. There's this Danish philosopher, nineteenth century, who gets engaged to a bird called Regine, breaks off the engagement, for reasons nobody understands, she marries another guy, they never speak to each other again, he lives for another twenty-odd years writing books nobody understands, then he dies, and a hundred years later he's hailed as the father of existentialism. Do you really think there's a TV drama series there?"

Obviously not. Television entertainment settles for the cheap laugh or the violent moment, offering escape into mind-numbing oblivion with inane programs that fill space between the commercial advertising to which television has sold its soul. There are few oases in that desert.

But a rejuvenated, Kierkegaard-driven Tubby doesn't care. He is on his personal journey, which includes writings his memoirs and making a pilgrimage to the burial plots of Kierkegaard and his onetime fiancée, Regine. His journey reaches a critical point when he recalls his teenage romance with Maureen, a strict Catholic girl whose moral scruples he had worked assiduously to overcome.

Passmore's wife, Sally, tells her therapist about her husband's quest: "Oh, I'm afraid I can't take this Kierkegaard thing seriously. I told you, Tubby's not an intellectual. It's just a fad, something to impress other people with. Perhaps me. Perhaps himself. A device to dignify his petty little depressions as existentialist Angst. . . . My father used to quote [Kierkegaard] occasionally in his sermons. . . . Tubby had a totally secular upbringing, knows absolutely nothing about religion, whereas I've been all through it and out the other side. It was painful, I can tell you. For years I concealed it from my father, that I no longer believed. I think it broke his heart when I finally came clean."

Tubby presses on with his quest for authenticity, recalling how cruel he had been to the vulnerable, trusting teenaged Maureen, the object of his lust. Rereading his memoir, he is struck by "an overwhelming sense of loss. Not just the loss of Maureen's love, but the loss of innocence—hers and my own. In the past, whenever I thought of her—and it wasn't very often—it was with a kind of fond, wry, inner smile: nice kid, first girlfriend, how naive we both were, water under the bridge, that sort of thing. Going back over the history of our relationship in detail, I realized for the first time what an appalling thing I had done all those years ago. I broke a young girl's heart, callously, selfishly, wantonly."

He goes on to muse, "It's really a very Kierkegaardian story. It has resemblances to 'The Seducer's Diary,' and resemblances to K's own relationship with Regine. Maureen—Regine: the names almost rhyme. Regine put up more of a fight than Maureen, though. When K sent back her ring, she rushed straight round to his lodgings, and finding him not at home, left a note begging him not to desert her."

Unlike Regine, who pursued Kierkegaard briefly, Maureen didn't fight for Tubby. She accepted her abandonment with a teenager's grief, cried for weeks, and then got on with her life. Passmore had also forgotten about her, but now he decides to find Maureen to seek forgiveness for his boorish behavior 40 years earlier. Kierkegaard has prompted him to realize that choice is what leads to authentic life.

Of his memoir writing he says, "I don't think I've ever done anything quite like it before. Perhaps I'm turning into a book writer. There's no 'you' in it, I notice. Instead of telling the story as I might to a friend or somebody in a pub, my usual way, I was trying to recover the truth of the original experience for myself, struggling to find the words that would do maximum justice to it."

Trying to recover the truth of an original experience is at the heart of authentic writing. It is also at the heart of the occasional moment of authenticity that appears on TV. Too bad there are no Kierkegaard-obsessed scriptwriters like Tubby Passmore at work these days.