Grave affairs: HBO's 'Six Feet Under'

by Thomas Lynch in the November 2, 2004 issue

Like David Fisher in the award-winning HBO series *Six Feet Under*, when my father died, I embalmed him. My brother Pat assisted. We dressed him, put him in a box and soon thereafter buried him. Tim did the obits and drove the hearse. Eddie called the priest and did the printing. Mary handled the florals and finances. Julie organized the luncheon that would follow. Brigid got the pipers and the soloist. Christopher called the sexton and stonecutter. Colonel Dan, the eldest of us, flew in from his army post in Seattle and assumed command. We all were pallbearers. Everyone played what part he or she could. Our circle of friends played their parts too.

It's what we do, we brothers and sisters—funerals. It is what our father taught us to do.

Like David Fisher I have siblings—alas, four times as many—and a funeral home. In fact, we have half a dozen of them. Lynch & Sons is what we call them. And unlike David and his brother Nate, we're not just on one night a week—Sunday at 9 p.m. on HBO. We're always on. Whenever someone calls, we answer. Round the clock and round the calendar we're at the ready. Dinners and Christmases, holidays and family outings, days off and our night's sleep—every imaginable intimacy has been interrupted by a death in the family, someone else's family. Our funeral homes are in Michigan—in real places where the cameras aren't running and the characters aren't acting and the corpses aren't manufactured by the prop-makers. Fisher & Sons and *Six Feet Under* hail from Hollywood. And it shows.

Six Feet Under is a caricature—deftly sketched—a cartoon, in the best artistic sense, of sex and death and matters mortuary. As such it traffics in hyperbole and lampoon—a purposeful distortion that helps us see the truth. Still, it is more than just another smart, hip, sure-fire hit show. Beyond the weekly belly laughs and heartbreaks, between which viewers are run up and back down the emotional register and are thereby "entertained," there seems a deliberate effort to probe much deeper questions—*What should we do when someone dies*? *What are the boundaries of love and grief*? *What are the dynamics of memory and desire*, *flesh*

and faith, *bodies and souls*?

Before Alan Ball, the Oscar-winning director of *American Beauty* and the creator of *Six Feet Under*, the prevailing cartoon of funeral directors, four decades old, was Mitfordian. Jessica Mitford's *American Way of Death*, which sold 5 million copies in 1963, made much of the sales pitch and oddments of the funeral biz, most of which she pulled from the pages of *Mortuary Management*—a California-based trade magazine still being read in *Six Feet Under*.

But where Mitford focused mostly on the math of caskets and the money issues, Ball pursues the meaning of things. Where Mitford saw flowers, monuments and other funereal accessories as needless expenses, Ball considers each as metaphor, symbol, symptom and substance. Where Mitford kept asking, "How much?" Alan Ball keeps wondering, "How come?" Where Mitford seemed bothered by all the "stuff," Ball is intrigued by the subtext. Where Mitford kept count of costs and profits, Ball keeps tally of what counts, what lasts, what loss is and what really matters. And where Mitford preferred to keep dead bodies out of sight and out of mind, the better to maintain her stiff upper lip and jaunty British humor (the bodies of her first husband, her first daughter, her first son and herself were all "disappeared," according to her family), in *Six Feet Under* the dead are everywhere.

So are the souls.

Every episode begins with an end. In the very first, Nathaniel Fisher the Elder, founder and father of Fisher & Sons, is killed when the new hearse he's driving is broadsided by a bus. He's en route to the airport to pick up his son and namesake, Nate, who is coming home for the holidays from Seattle and who, while his father is colliding with the bus, is having vigorous and blissfully anonymous sex with a fellow pilgrim in an airport broom closet. Like Shakespeare and the Book of Genesis, Alan Ball has a master's gift for getting sex and death, the good laugh and the good cry, the godsend and god-awful, the ridiculous and sublime, all in the same scene. And like Dickens, he loves his ghosts. The raucous soul of Nathaniel Fisher has roamed at will through the four seasons of the series since his demise, delivering up doses of wisdom and wry humor, happily haunting the places and the people he loved.

When Alan Ball was 13, his sister died in a car accident and his mother's abject grief was hushed and over- buffered by the fashions in funerals then—to treat grief as a structural weakness, by which folks were forever "breaking down" or "falling apart"

or “going to pieces.” Ball recognizes that both the undertakerly tendency to prettify death, with cosmetics and euphemisms and warm fuzzies, and Mitford’s suggestion to dispose of them by hasty cremation in the name of convenience and cost-efficiency are equally misguided efforts to get around rather than through the difficult business of mortality. Disguise and disappearance are both denials. So is diversion.

What Alan Ball so clearly “gets” is that funerals are about the living *and* the dead—the talk and the traffic between them. In his show, they constantly confront one another. He lets them occupy the same space, often the unlikely “space” of the Fisher & Sons mortuary, where the living look the dead in the face—not out of morbid curiosity, but because in the face of mortality we need to stand and look, watch and wonder, listen and remember. Alan Ball presses us to examine the difference between the fashions and the fundamentals in the business of death, what is essential and what is accessory.

And it is time we did.

With the erosion of religious, ethnic and social connections and the rituals and practices they provide to confront mortality and bereavement, more and more of us must reinvent, from the leftovers and borrowings of our various traditions, the wheel that works the space between the deaths that happen and the deaths that matter. This is what we do funerals for—not only to dispose of our dead, but to bear witness to their lives and times among us, to affirm the difference their living and dying makes among kin and community, and to provide a vehicle for the healthy expression of grief and faith, hope and wonder. The value of a funeral proceeds neither from how much we spend nor from how little. A death in the family is an existential event, not only or entirely a medical, emotional, religious or retail one.

“An act of sacred community theater,” Thomas Long calls the funeral—this “transporting” of the dead from this life to the next. “We move them to a further shore. Everyone has a part in this drama.” Long—theologian, writer, thinker and minister—speaks about the need for “a sacred text, sacred community and sacred space,” to process the deaths of “sacred persons.” The dead get to the grave or fire or tomb while the living get to the edge of a life they must learn to live without those loved ones. The transport is ritual, ceremonial, an amalgam of metaphor and reality, image and imagination, process and procession, text and scene set, script and silence, witness and participation—theater, “sacred theater,” indeed.

When the Fisher family gathers at the graveside to bury their dead man, in the opening episode of *Six Feet Under*, the cleric says the prayers, then passes a canister of sand for the family to sprinkle on the casket. The dutiful David observes the protocol, his wide-eyed sister Claire follows suit. But Nate, the blow-in elder brother from Seattle, refuses, protesting loudly that it is like “salting the popcorn.” He won’t have the experience “sanitized.” He searches for a clump of “real” dirt because it better represents his “real” grief—the untidy business of anger, love, guilt, pain and loss. His prim but apparently passionate mother follows suit, unwilling to go gently into the good night of widowhood. David gets his reality in the embalming room, conversing with his dead father, and argues for tradition, ceremony, decorum and calm. Claire sees her father’s ghost, propped on the hearse parked at the curb, smiling widely. Nate shows his mother how to dirty her hands in her husband’s burial while her wrenching whole-body sobs remove any pretense of ease. They all leave with their separate longings for the dead—the sons still fighting for their father’s approval, the daughter still hungering for attention, the wife wanting him back long enough to forgive her for her clumsy infidelities.

By the opening of the fourth season, the widow Fisher is remarried to an unlikely geologist. David remains in furtive, fitful love with Keith, a tall, dark, handsome cop with anger-management issues. Claire has been investigating her broadening sexual options, her rich artistic temperament and sad internal life, and Nate is, as his mother was, the guilt-tinged widower, still looking for love in what may turn out to be all the wrong places. When his dead wife Lisa’s putrefying corpse is found in the ocean, Nate goes with David to collect the body. Once again, *what to do* becomes a dense embrangle of love, grief, duty and desire. Lisa’s parents want her cremated and her ashes installed in the family niche “back home”—a tidy, neotraditional, “sensible” response to something senseless. But Nate, her legal next of kin, wants her buried, sans box, sans embalming, in keeping with her stated eco-friendly, return-to-nature preferences.

A quiet conspiracy of the Fisher brothers allows both sides to get a bit of what they want when Lisa’s parents are given an urn full of ashes, albeit not their daughter’s, and Nate drives out alone into the desert to do the needful thing for his dead wife and for himself. He deals with the notion of her mortality by dealing with the gruesome, decomposing “remains” of her. Not only the “idea” of the thing, as Wallace Stevens wrote, but the thing itself. Nate’s is a large-muscle, shovel-and-shoulder-work, dark-night-of-the-soul kind of keening that leaves him at daybreak

covered with the dust and dirt from which we humans come, quite literally a voice crying in the desert.

It is Ball & Company at their very best, avoiding, like the Book of Job, the temptation for happy endings, easy math or easy answers. If Nate's whole-body immersion in his wife's disposition is too much for most mourners, the bodiless obsequies of the Mitford set seem like too little ado, lacking any witness and rubric, any heavy lifting or human duties.

"Once you put a dead body in the room, you can talk about anything," Alan Ball wrote to me once in a note. "You undertakers always seemed to understand that part." And he is right. The presence of the dead at their funerals ups the existential, emotional and spiritual ante in a way that virtual or symbolic memorials fail to do. And it is likewise clear that there's a lot that Ball & Company want to talk about. On the evidence of the first four seasons, it will continue to be a wide-ranging conversation on sex, death, drugs and religion, love and money, heartbreak and desire, funerals and family.

Like funeral directors of a certain stripe, Christians of a certain kind will find the show impossible to watch. Its frank language, occasional nudity, gay, lesbian and bisexual plots and subplots are, for a fair few of the viewing public, deal breakers. And more's the pity. That homosexuals really kiss, really fight, really struggle with intimacy and anger, faith and infidelities is a familiarity that breeds contempt in huge portions of our religious citizenry. That sex can be addictive, love can hurt, faith is often shaky and Whomever Is in Charge Here has a dark sense of humor can be off-putting to triumphalists. That the best, the most noble, the wise, the old, the young, the lovely and beloved of our species often die ridiculous, hilarious, ignoble and untimely deaths while the worst of us sometimes get the best of ends unsettles some religious accounts.

Many who found the holy blood and gore of Mel Gibson's *Passion* quite acceptable will find the all-too-human flesh and blood of Ball's cast of characters unacceptably disturbing in its aching, uncertain, struggling humanity, weeping and giggling at the awkward facts of life and death. Too bad, because *SFU* is its own quirky, postmodern, inspired version of a very passionate play. Like the best of biblical characters, the folks who inherit Fisher & Sons, like the folks who inherited Lynch & Sons, often find themselves playing in the deep end of the pool, among the verities and uncertainties that are our human lot.

Sometimes Nate and David hear their dead father speak to them. The air is full of ghosts who both instruct and disturb us. It was ever thus. I hear my father still, these long years since he died. “We serve the living,” he was fond of saying, “by caring for the dead.”

“Love one another,” my sainted mother whispers to me still. “Say your prayers.”

Like the living, the dead are everywhere.