

# David Hare's political thriller *Collateral*: “War has entered the blood”

By David Walsh  
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*Collateral* is a four-part British television series, written and created by veteran playwright and screenwriter David Hare (*Plenty*, *Map of the World*, *Pravda*, *The Absence of War*, *Stuff Happens* [about the Iraq War], *Gethsemane* and many others). It was co-produced by the BBC and Netflix and is available on the latter.

The series begins with the shooting death of a south London pizza delivery man, Abdullah (Sam Otto). The murderer, we soon learn, is a female British army captain, Sandrine Shaw (Jeany Spark), who believes she has killed an Iraqi “terrorist.” The individual who organized the crime, Peter Westbourne (Richard McCabe), seems to be the mild-mannered owner of a travel agency.

Kip Glaspie (Carey Mulligan), a police detective assigned to investigate the crime, and her partner, Nathan Bilk (Nathaniel Martello-White), quickly track down Abdullah's two sisters (one of them pregnant) in a miserable situation. The women, claiming to be Syrians, have nothing to say, or choose not to say it. Afterward, Glaspie comments to her colleague, “That's how it ends up, is it? Escape war, make your way to England and start your new life in a garage? That's the best we can offer, is it?”

The murder inquiry draws in and touches the lives of a number of other people.

The woman to whom the pizza was being delivered and therefore a witness, Karen Mars (Billie Piper), is the drug-addicted former wife of a “left” Labour MP and currently Shadow Transport Secretary, David Mars (John Simm), who opposes the government's and his own party's xenophobic immigrant policies. That position brings him into conflict with Labour's leader, Deborah Clifford (Saskia Reeves), particularly when he emphatically tells a television interviewer, “We really are turning into a nasty little country.”

Mars, rather coincidentally, has another connection to the killing. The only eyewitness to the actual shooting is a young Vietnamese woman, Linh Xuan Huy (Kae Alexander), involved in a relationship with a local female cleric, Jane Oliver (Nicola Walker). Oliver is coming under

pressure from her bishop, who himself is gay, to end or lower the profile of the affair. Making matters worse, it turns out that Mars, the local MP, signed a student visa application for Linh when she was in the country illegally.

Meanwhile, the manager of the pizza shop, Laurie Stone (Hayley Squires), who sent Abdullah to his appointment with death—for cash apparently—is racked with guilt.

Sandrine Shaw is obviously suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after deployment to Afghanistan. As she tells her military therapist, on “returning to normal life ... you see danger everywhere. You're trained for it. Everything makes you suspicious. You become like an animal.” And later, “Coming back home, you ... you feel like a germ that's entered the bloodstream.” An odious senior officer, Major Tim Dyson (Robert Portal), is sexually pursuing her. When he has an “advantage” over her, associated with her secret, murderous mission, this “sex pest” forces himself on her.

Various sides of a political conspiracy, bound up with the ongoing wars in the Middle East and their consequences, emerge.

A sneering operative from MI5, the domestic spy agency, Sam Spence (John Heffernan), suddenly turns up. He informs Glaspie and Bilk, “I'm here because we believe there's a national security dimension. ... Always the same. Police can't get a result on their own. We always have to step in and save the situation.” Glaspie replies, “Like you did with Iraq.”

Glaspie is able to get through to one of the dead man's sisters, Fatima (Ahd Kamel), now locked up in a detention center (a guard, or as she calls herself, a “custody officer,” explains, “It's a lot like a slaughterhouse. You need to calm the animals”). Fatima's information leads the policewoman to a human trafficking ring, headed by a former high-ranking British military officer and infiltrated by MI5.

Shaw hasn't, in fact, shot a “terrorist,” but an Iraqi civilian who was going to blow the whistle on the ring's chief. When Shaw discovers this, it is a final, devastating blow to her belief in the character of her “service” to her

country. She had previously told Peter Westbourne, a friend of her late military “hero” father and—unbeknownst to her—a cynical, homicidal liar and profiteer, “Sometimes I’m frightened. It’s just so obvious. They’re [the “terrorists” are] trying to kill us, they’re trying to take everything from us. It’s a way of life they want to destroy.”

The tabloid press come in for it too. Spence, the MI5 man, passes on misleading information to a lowlife reporter (Mark Umbers), who proceeds to smear Abdullah, the murdered man. Glaspie confronts him about the lies, “First, came the ‘economic migrant’ bollocks ... Then the ‘Islamic gang war’ bollocks. Where did that one come from? Someone’s spitting in your mouth, Robert. And I’ve got a fair idea who it is. ... I wanted to see your face when I said, ‘security services.’”

In other words, there is effective and affecting material in *Collateral*, directed by S.J. Clarkson, although the series as a whole is something of a slow burn.

It never hurts that the production brings together a fine collection of actors. Carey Mulligan, who has sometimes been mannered in the past, is thoroughly straightforward and convincing on this occasion. Simm, Spark, Squires, Alexander, Reeves, Piper and numerous others perform distinctly and conscientiously.

David Hare has a long history of writing and directing in the theater, film and television. He is not strong on everything, by any means. His well-publicized opposition to “extremism” of the “right and the left” does not result in the political golden mean he aims for. It means that Hare largely accepts the institutions of the present social order and urges working through them.

Thus, for example, the honest policeman (or policewoman) at the center of things here, who implacably hunts down the truth, willing to take on and overcome powerful elements in the security and military apparatus, etc. Such a figure is mostly a fantasy of current moviemaking and television production.

Hare’s picture of the “left” Labour MP is also in large measure a figment of his imagination. David Mars, although somewhat ineffectual, is prepared to denounce an immigration policy that is “just crass xenophobia.” He goes on, “I’ve been arguing for some time that we need to fulfil our obligations, and I’m not just talking about moral obligations, I’m talking about legal obligations—promises that were made that we seem conveniently to have forgotten. Now, I believe that when the history of this time comes to be written, we will feel ashamed of how few refugees we let in to this country and how badly we treated them when they were here.” This is Hare speaking, not Labour. Mars later revolts when the party leader insists that he “vote for unfettered powers for the security services tonight, along

with the rest of the party.”

Nonetheless, Hare is on to something important here: the contamination of British (and, of course, even more so, American) society by the new round of neo-colonial wars. According to Bush, Cheney, Blair and company, it would all be a relatively easy matter: simply invade, steal the oil and be done with it. Of course, it hasn’t worked out that way.

As socialists understood, whatever the immediate outcome in Iraq, American imperialism had “a rendezvous with disaster.” It could neither conquer the world nor find a viable solution to its internal ills through the medium of war. “Rather, the unforeseen difficulties and mounting resistance engendered by war will intensify all of the internal contradictions of American society” (WSWS, March 21, 2003).

In its own limited fashion, *Collateral* points toward the same truth. Audience members who are unsympathetic to the military—and perhaps even the writer himself—have a certain reluctance at first to accept the patriotic and murderous soldier, Shaw, as the central, tragic figure. But that is what emerges. Why? Because she is the one suffering from the most advanced stage of the contagion, her disease is terminal. She is damaged beyond repair and spreads her sickness, to a large extent unintentionally and unconsciously, as far as possible. It is a poignant characterization and theme in light of the horrific shooting in Thousand Oaks, California last week.

Shaw sits down to write a letter explaining her actions, noting that “I’m 35 years old and I’m totally exhausted. I’m ashamed.” But the most important passage goes, “Before I take a last step, I would like to write down exactly what I feel about the path I took and the reasons I did things wrong. I’d like to put everything down to my anger [but] I’m not sure I can. War has entered the blood.”

The series has various flaws, but this is an important, indisputable point.

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