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ARTS AND LEISURE DESK

TELEVISION/RADIO; TV's Damaged Detectives Are Sherlock's Children

By HAL HINSON (NYT) 1519 words

THERE is an eccentric new generation of crime fighters in prime time -- brilliant, obsessed and, if not dysfunctional, then at the very least damaged. They are modern descendants of the detective story's greatest hero, Sherlock Holmes. And by reaching back to this early model, their creators have revitalized the genre, reclaiming it from several decades of psychic charlatans, grandmotherly amateurs and foot-weary plodders with booze on their breath.

Ross MacDonald described Holmes as Arthur Conan Doyle's "portrait of the artist as a great detective." In this eclectic new assortment of cops and criminalists -- which includes William L. Petersen's Gil Grissom on "C.S.I.," Tony Shalhoub's Adrian Monk on "Monk," Vincent D'Onofrio's Robert Goren on "Law & Order: Criminal Intent" and Jill Hennessy's Jordan Cavanaugh on "Crossing Jordan" -- the artist and the scientist are mixed in roughly equal portions. Though they may use luminol and microspectrophotometers instead of a magnifying glass, they share their predecessor's encyclopedic knowledge and masterly powers of observation.

But while they share their predecessor's brilliance, they have also inherited his darker side: his obsessiveness, his mood swings and his tendency toward solitude and depression.

Childhood traumas pushed three of the characters toward their chosen profession. Grissom was deeply affected by his mother's deafness (a hereditary condition, which has already affected Grissom and which, producers say, will develop into a main story line.) Goren's mother was institutionalized for schizophrenia and Cavanaugh's mother attempted suicide and was eventually murdered. And Monk is in a state of perpetual mourning over the death of his wife.

Like Holmes, they spend their lives solving puzzles. And when the game is afoot, they delight in putting the pieces together. But take away their puzzles and they are left alone with their demons. Though they may not use a 7 percent solution of cocaine to ward off the ennui, they're still lost in what another detective, Raymond Chandler, once called "a darkness more than night."

"Holmes only needed the drugs when he wasn't working," said Mr. Shalhoub. "When Holmes was engaged in a case, his brain was on fire and he was doing what he was born to do. The same is true for Monk. When he latches onto some important detail in a case, he's free of all his phobias and neuroses and at least for that moment is at peace."

Monk seems to be plagued by every neurosis and phobia known to man, including fears of germs, heights, crowds and milk. Andy Breckman, an executive producer of the show and its head writer, admitted that he did more than borrow a detail or two from Conan Doyle in fleshing out the show's detective hero. "It's almost as if I used a Xerox machine," he said. In fact, he said, all three of the show's main characters are lifted straight out of Doyle: Monk; his nurse, Sharona (Bitty Schram), who is his Watson; and Captain Stottlemeyer of the San Francisco Police Department (played to exasperated perfection by Ted Levine), who is their Lestrade of Scotland Yard.

"Monk is like Holmes," Mr. Breckman said, "in that he is the most gifted guy around and the most troubled. He's just not happy out

in the world. Everything is just in such disarray that he can't deal with it."

What's most important, according to Mr. Shalhoub, is that Monk, in his apartment or out solving crimes, remains fundamentally alone. "As totally dependent as he is, Monk pretty much exists by himself," he said.

None of those neo-Holmeses are sympathetic in the conventional sense. And they go beyond the traditional "hard-boiled" detectives of pulp fiction to a more extreme state of existential isolation.

Mr. Shalhoub acknowledged that this was not only rare for television, but also risky. "What intrigued me so much about Monk was this idea of creating a character who was really annoying, who was really irritating and got on your nerves," he said. "I worried about whether audiences would sit still for this kind of character. But now I've come to embrace it."

And so have viewers. "Monk" has been so successful in its first season on USA that reruns have been appearing on ABC, an extremely rare case of a cable show being rerun by a broadcast network. (USA has a "Monk" marathon today, from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., and will show the season's final episode on Friday at 10 p.m.)

"For decades," Mr. Shalhoub added, "the networks have been so obsessed with making sure that the characters on their shows were likable and sympathetic, so much so that audiences have gotten bored with them."

Both "Crossing Jordan" and "Law & Order: Criminal Intent" have made it to their second seasons on NBC (and "Criminal Intent" has become a top-20 show) despite being built around flawed and sometimes unlikable characters. And CBS's "C.S.I." was the top-rated drama on television last season even though its principal character is a man who "keeps chocolate-covered ants and grasshoppers in his refrigerator and, as a rule, is more comfortable with dead bodies than live ones," as Anthony Zuiker, the show's creator, pointed out.

Carol Mendelsohn, an executive producer of "C.S.I." (Thursdays at 9 p.m.), asked: "Was it Donne who said, 'No man is an island'? Grissom, I think, refutes that notion. I think he really is an island unto himself."

Mr. Petersen confessed that Grissom remained something of a mystery even to him. "I'm not sure how much Grissom knows about himself," he said. "And there are certainly many things about him that I don't know."

While Mr. Petersen concedes that his character is a "misanthrope," he doesn't see him as emotionally stunted or, like Monk, neurotic. "I see him as a man who makes very careful choices about everything," he said. "And I think that Grissom is still making up his mind about human beings, about whether they actually deserve to be trusted. As a scientist, he is forced to look at the empirical data. And in his line of work, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that, as a species, human beings are at best flawed."

If Grissom is Sherlock Holmes in a labcoat, Mr. D'Onofrio's Robert Goren is Holmes in a black leather jacket. René Balcer, a creator of "Criminal Intent" (Sundays at 9 p.m.), wanted a sexier, hipper version of Conan Doyle's detective. What he came up with, he said, is "Sherlock Holmes meets Bob Dylan."

Mr. D'Onofrio said of Goren, "I see him as coming from a pretty dark place." He added that the character's past, especially the family history of mental illness, would be addressed more directly this season (particularly in tonight's episode, which features Olivia D'Abo as a university professor who's a cross of Holmes's nemesis, Moriarty, and Brigid O'Shaughnessy, Sam Spade's murderous lover from "The Maltese Falcon").

Though the link between Ms. Hennessy's Jordan Cavanaugh on "Crossing Jordan" (Mondays at 10 p.m.) and Holmes is less obvious, she is hands down the most dysfunctional of the new crime fighters.

This season picked up where last season left off, with Jordan spiraling out of control because of new revelations about her mother's killer. "Because the murder was never solved, she carries around all this pain and has never had a chance to heal or grow beyond it," Ms. Hennessy said. "She's shut down almost everything in her life, except for her work."

Tim Kring, the show's executive producer, said he wanted to create a woman who was "a complex and complicated character, who had flaws and, in general, possessed traits that we usually only associate with men." Jordan was written, Mr. Kring said, primarily as

a reaction to his work on NBC's "Providence," where the female lead didn't have flaws. "I wanted to write a character who was more id than anything else, and who was difficult and driven by demons and had a certain impetuosity that caused her to act first and ask questions later."

He and Ms. Hennessy both said that the move toward more complex characters in network shows could be traced directly to the influence of cable, which Ms. Hennessy said had "raised the bar." She added that difficult characters like Jordan also reflect how people feel about themselves. "I think we all feel that we are imperfect or that we've made mistakes, and are struggling to make sense of our lives," she said.

Mr. D'onofrio echoed that sentiment. "Because of all we've gone through as a society, I think that the only heroes you can get away with now are the imperfect heroes," he said. "What we're seeing now are people who, yes, might save the day if the circumstance arises, but their lives are a mess just like my life is and they are afraid of the same things I'm afraid of because I think we are all afraid of the same things right now."

CAPTIONS: Photos: William L. Petersen as the misanthropic Gil Grissom in "C.S.I.," above, and Tony Shalhoub as the neurotic Adrian Monk in "Monk," below. (Robert Voets/CBS); (USA Network)

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