

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

National Treasure reminds us you can be family man and monster at same time

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Robbie Coltrane as Paul Finchley. Channel 4

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They think I'm Jimmy fucking Savile.

So says veteran TV comic Paul Finchley, played by Robbie Coltrane, not once but twice in the first part of Channel 4's Yewtree-inspired drama *National Treasure*. Just like all the real-life cases that went before this story of a well-loved star accused of rape, Savile casts a long shadow over everything that takes place.

Some of the household names implicated in the UK's Yewtree investigations – Stuart Hall, Rolf Harris – were subsequently convicted of sexual offences. Others were publicly named but never charged. What does it mean for a man like this to be arrested in the full glare of publicity? That's one of *National Treasure's* central concerns.

Finchley – played by a superb Coltrane – is not an entirely sympathetic character. His wife (Julie Walters) vows to stand by him, despite repeated infidelities which extend to spending the night with a woman in prostitution after he is accused of rape. His uncomfortable relationship with his daughter Dee (Andrea Riseborough) also raises the possibility of further revelations to come.

Camera angles

Finchley is introduced as a surprisingly small figure smoking in an alleyway, dwarfed by his surroundings. He is attending an awards ceremony to honour his comedy partner (Tim McInnerny), and we are privy to his nervousness before he takes the stage. He transforms under the spotlight. But when he returns home he fears he has made a fool of himself. He senses he is being replaced by a new generation of comedians overseen by extremely young TV execs (notably all men).

Positioning the viewer with Finchley is a smart move in a drama about celebrity sex abuse allegations. It recreates on a small scale the conditions in which such allegations become public. The accusers are, so far, anonymous women. The accused is someone the audience already has some investment in.

The UK soap Eastenders chose to do the opposite when it revealed in the early 2000s that Kat Slater, one of its best loved characters, had been sexually abused by her Uncle Harry, who was not a regular in the show. Around that time I took part in a panel discussion about the programme with then executive producer John Yorke, who revealed that the original intention had been to make victim and perpetrator existing characters: Janine Butcher and her stepfather Roy.

They abandoned the idea because they felt that it would be too traumatic for the audience if such a well established and sympathetic character was accused of child sexual abuse. Compared to some of the celebrity abuse revelations in recent years, of course, this seems almost quaint.

Since Savile's **unmasking** as a prolific sex abuser in 2012, he is now so synonymous with these allegations that it is difficult to remember that he was ever the "national treasure" whose death prompted tributes from far and wide. Finchley, like so many others, now claims "everybody knew he was dodgy".

Claims against Savile **did** exist in his lifetime. Savile himself was somewhat candid about his sexual interest in girls under the legal age of consent. His every interaction with women seemed to be peppered with sexual innuendo and unsolicited (and often unwanted) touching and kissing. This public everyday sexism – witnessed, and implicitly tolerated, by literally millions – became a kind of alibi for more serious forms of abuse.

National Treasure hints at a similar trajectory. Finchley is married with a daughter and grandchildren. But as he walks into the awards ceremony the camera lingers just a little too long on the female production assistant and only picks out women in his audience. As well as leaving an uncomfortable meeting with his daughter to pay for sex, his lawyer reveals that "quite violent porn" has been found on his phone. Finchley appears to be someone with a clear sense of sexual entitlement.

Making headlines

Another way in which National Treasure gets the echoes of real life horribly right is the way the press reports this as a story chiefly about sex rather than abuse. The headlines confronting Finchley the day after his arrest – "TV Star's Sex Shame" – could almost be lifted straight from the initial reports of the Savile allegations.

The claims against Savile following his death were neither immediately believed, nor initially recognised as abuse. They largely were lumped together with stories about a secret lover and a woman claiming to be his lovechild. The press first saw sex. They only saw abuse once the number of victims

multiplied, their ages dropped and the institutional cover-up angle gained traction.

And as Savile morphed into the nation's most despised paedophile, the gendered dimension to his crimes and the contexts which facilitated them was sidelined. The Savile case is now routinely referred to as child sexual abuse **although** a significant proportion of his victims were 16 or over.

Similarly, the revelation which rocks the Finchleys at the end of episode one is that one of his accusers is 15. "They think you're a paedophile," his wife gasps. Feminists have **long argued** that media representations of "paedophiles" are hugely problematic. Media "paedophiles" are a breed apart – monsters, not family men. Their crimes are also a breed apart, so that links are infrequently made between men's sexual abuse of adults, particularly women, and their sexual abuse of children. As Savile became Paedophile No 1, his adult victims were once again marginalised.

But what of Finchley: Legend. Father. Monster?

National Treasure so far looks like it might be able to reconcile these labels, to show that one man can be all of these things and that "monsters" are not immediately visible as such. But we are still missing part of the puzzle. Finchley's alleged victims have yet to make it to screen. Whether they fare better in a post-Savile world remains to be seen. It's certainly worth watching to find out.



Savile in 2005. EPA



BBC Jimmy Savile Rolf Harris Channel 4 Stuart Hall