

cover feature.



'AS A **SOCIETY**
WE HAVE TO FIND WAYS
OF **PROVIDING**
RESOURCES
TO **HELP**
PEOPLE'

David Tennant is about to play the darkest character of his career. Looking deep into serial killer Dennis Nilsen has made him think about the growing number of people in crisis today.

Adrian Lobb fires up Zoom.

"It's a worrying time on so many levels and in so many areas of society, isn't it?"

David Tennant is one of the finest actors of his generation. But the 49-year-old, whose career went stratospheric with *Doctor Who*, is also smart, engaged and very happy to talk politics.

We are speaking via Zoom. Tennant has spent much of lockdown perfecting his videocall manner – no fiddling with his laptop or technological mishaps for him.

Tennant's (how to describe it... short, scripted, heightened-reality comedy drama series?) *Staged*, made with Michael Sheen and co-produced and co-starring his wife Georgia, is perhaps the best made-under-lockdown-and-about-lockdown TV.

"We're all learning how to live through our computer screens aren't we?" says Tennant, who is who is unfazed by technological advances. He can fly a TARDIS, after all. "Making a whole TV show, well most of it, this way, from this room was not something I could have predicted, even in early April.

"I'm not in an industry that knows what to do when it can't be in busy rooms. It's hard to make TV shows socially distanced. It's impossible to go to the theatre. So I feel blessed to have been able to work at all. But I'm alarmed that our industry, which is one of the industries our country's still good at, is struggling. And a lot of my colleagues will be struggling. Most actors don't make a lot of money."

For new ITV three-part drama *Des*, the actor faced a new challenge. The audience will watch, there is no worry about that. Tennant puts bums on seats. And just as our admiration for Tennant shows little sign of abating, so our fascination with true crime endures.

But to play serial murderer Dennis Nilsen, who killed at least 12 young men in London between 1978 and 1983, Tennant had to strip himself of all the natural charm and easy likeability he exhibited from his TV breakthrough in *Takin' Over The Asylum* back in 1994, in *Doctor Who*, his whip-smart Hamlet, *Broadchurch* and beyond.

The transformation is unnerving. To see Tennant as Nilsen talking so matter-of-factly about these crimes is as disturbing as it is impressive. But, unlike so many true crime documentaries, there is no hint of titillation nor any fetishising of the perpetrator. "It was something that we talked about every day on set," says Tennant. "You don't want to give him control of the narrative. And you don't want to be celebrating the horror – you want to be memorialising the victims. That's the important difference.

"This is about actual people who lost their lives, and this is about a failure of society."

No murders are shown. Instead, writer Luke Neal chose to start the story, which he bases on the book *Killing*

'THIS TOOK PLACE UNDER THATCHER, WHO SAID THERE WAS NO SUCH THING AS SOCIETY. AND THAT'S THE PROBLEM'

Killer role
Tennant (right) as Dennis Nilsen alongside Daniel Mays as DCI Peter Jay

For Company by Brian Masters (played in *Des* by Jason Watkins) on the day the police (Daniel Mays as DCI Peter Jay) first talk to Nilsen. This was a decision, Tennant says, that was taken to avoid the trap of telling a story based only on Nilsen's recollections.

"It would disingenuous to believe everything he told us because he's an unreliable witness at best," says Tennant.

"But you want to try to understand Nilsen because it's important that we understand the darkest corners of what a human being can be. It seems unknowable to us yet we're all slightly wondering how far away any one of us are from it. We may all have peeked into an abyss now and again. All these questions that in your darkest moments you wonder about – what are you capable of? And what happened to Nilsen that meant he didn't have that filter, that he stepped into the abyss? I don't think we should shy away from these stories.

"It's important we understand that he was one of us. We are all the same animal that Dennis Nilsen was. So therefore it's not a sort of horror movie where Freddy Krueger is something from another dark dimension. Nilsen walked among us and therefore we as a society are responsible for him."

Actors talking about society is not always widely welcomed. But *not* speaking out about the state of the nation or the state of the world is a political act as well.

Of course, it is easier to speak out once you are as established as David Tennant. Nevertheless, it is refreshing when he speaks so candidly about some of the failings that led to Nilsen being able to kill young men, many of them homeless, over the course of five years with no one even investigating – and the risk of a return to a less caring society.

"*Des* is about a London that was riven with homelessness and poverty and joblessness, and people falling through the cracks in society, which feels increasingly like the society we're back in," he says.

"This took place under Thatcher, who said there was no such thing as society, didn't she? And that's the problem. As long as there's no such thing as society, then we don't have a collective responsibility for each other. I'm not saying we will ever be able to protect everyone, but there have to be safety nets. There have to be.

"Nilsen shouldn't have been able to get away with it for as long as he did. And we have to wonder why that happened. And that's got something to do with the fact that he was preying on people that society had, to a greater or lesser extent, turned its back on. And I don't know that we offer any solutions in this but we do perhaps offer a warning."

Tennant is not sure the warnings will be heeded. We talk about communities pulling together during the lockdown and rough sleepers



being temporarily housed by the government (showing what can happen with the political will).

He nods along enthusiastically as I describe how RORA – the Ride Out Recession Alliance led by The Big Issue and Shelter – is campaigning to prevent Covid homelessness. But Tennant sees a storm coming.

"If we're about to plunge into this recession, the likes of which we've never known, then that will expose all the flaws in our society," he says.

"And I don't feel comforted by the fact that we've got, just like in 1979, a rather alarming right-wing government again. The echoes are pretty worrying. The world through which Dennis Nilsen walked and wreaked havoc – I think we're closer to it now than we have been for a long time.

"We've got to be alert to that as a society. We've got to be very aware that there are dangers and that there are people who are going to be more vulnerable than they should be in the coming months. We all have to take part in being aware of that. And as a society, we have to find ways of providing resources for helping people."

Tennant, who is after all a former Doctor, prescribes a blend of kindness and public spending to combat the threat of more people ending up vulnerable and to prevent a sharp rise in homelessness.

"We've all got to proceed with maximum kindness, haven't we, in the months to come?" he says.

"This lockdown has been a great leveller. Suddenly everyone's been in the same boat because you can't escape a virus by being well off. It brings us all together. And hopefully that allows us all to have a better understanding of the equality of the individual, which in turn allows us to just think with a bit more kindness and understanding than we've been famous for as a society up to now.

"If that means we spend a bit more public money now to avoid having to spend much, much more public money in the future, then fine. It seems that economic arguments are what wins it with this particular government, so let's make them."

Des airs on September 14, 15 and 16 on ITV @adey70

A SAFE HAVEN

Steven McIntyre, chief executive of the charity Stonewall Housing, says Des highlights how vulnerable LGBTQ youngsters are to homelessness and why this puts them at risk

Stonewall Housing was set up in 1983, around the time these horrific crimes were taking place. Kids were getting kicked out of home after coming out and ending up on the streets of London, while young people were also arriving from across the UK where being gay just wasn't an option back then. A group of 'elders' in the community knew they could be really vulnerable and wanted to do something about it. So they set up this collective to find somewhere safe for young LGBTQ+ people to go. And that's exactly what they did. They found safe homes for them, they took them off the streets, they made sure there were good, positive adult LGBTQ+ role models for them.

The alternative for some of the young people was to sleep on the streets or exchange sex in return for somewhere to sleep or food to eat. We call that transactional sex – putting yourself into a vulnerable position to make sure you have somewhere to stay.

Since then, we've worked with about 30,000 people. Over the years, LGBTQ+ people have always been overrepresented in the homelessness population. We estimate that of all homeless young people, 24 per cent are LGBTQ+ and the estimate is that only around four per cent of young people are LGBTQ+. Why do so many end up homeless?

I want to tell you a story: Here we are in 2020, in London, one of the most cosmopolitan, accepting cities in the world. But last Friday, a young man came out to his mum and she kicked him out of home right away without any discussion. He spent the weekend sleeping rough. Someone found him sleeping in Hyde Park, took him in and put him in contact with us. We found them somewhere to go that same night.

We work with 1,200 people every year, which is far too many, but it's only the tip of the iceberg. We ask our service users why it is important to them to have specific services for LGBTQ+ people. And without exception they talk about how they're not able to be authentically themselves when they access 'mainstream' support services, and how they experience homophobia on a daily basis.

One young man told me recently that in his hostel, somebody scraped a homophobic word into his bedroom door. He would listen to see if anyone was outside before leaving his room every morning.

All our staff are LGBTQ+, some have experience of homelessness, so when people talk to us, they don't have to explain what it's like being gay or lesbian or a trans woman on the streets and living with this additional vulnerability. We understand already.

We've seen a big increase in calls since lockdown started. I worry that young people who've been living in situations where they're not accepted, where they had to hide their identity, or where they've been living with abuse are getting to the point where they can't take it any more. And sofa-surfing is the other thing – people are losing patience with lockdown, never mind having someone sleeping on your sofa for months. I'm also hugely worried about the end of this eviction ban. We are already seeing more young people who are street homeless.

Young people who are vulnerable are being abused by people who take advantage of that vulnerability – *Des* does a good job of highlighting that. And I want people to know that it still happens.

So if you're one of those family members who's going to kick someone out of home because they're gay, this is one of the issues they might have to deal with.

The message I want to give it is that it's quite simple, really. To fix this, all you have to do is be accepting of your loved ones, celebrate who they are and celebrate their identity. Provide them with unconditional love.

I'm not necessarily worried about people falling into the hands of serial killers. But I do worry about young people going home with adults who aren't safe because they don't have anywhere else to go. We are there to tell them there is an alternative. And just because your past has been dark, that doesn't mean your future has to be. It can be really bright.

stonewallhousing.org