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Spies Who Were Cool and Very, Very Cold

By **TERRENCE RAFFERTY**

The best spy series in television history, "The Sandbaggers," is now available complete on DVD, 23 years after the last of its 20 episodes was broadcast in England. The show, which was produced by Yorkshire Television, is unknown to most American viewers; a few PBS stations picked it up in the late 80's, after its star, the brilliant minimalist Roy Marsden, had become a public-television sex symbol as P. D. James's brooding poet-detective, Adam Dalgliesh. But this series was clearly a tougher sell to Mr. Marsden's fans, because his "Sandbaggers" character — Neil Burnside, director of operations of the Secret Intelligence Service (a.k.a. MI6) — is, though an occasional brooder, no poet. He's a ruthless, driven cold warrior, contemptuous of his risk-averse supervisors, unshakable in his rectitude, and terrible in his wrath: Dirty Harry in a Savile Row suit.

It's particularly interesting to look at "The Sandbaggers" now, since there are currently more secret agents on American television than at any time since the golden age of the spy thriller genre, the Bondian 60's, when on a weekly basis the free world could be saved by suave men from U.N.C.L.E., cheeky Avengers, Secret Agent Patrick McGoochan, the jaunty tennis bums of "I Spy," or even — would you believe? — Maxwell Smart. Whatever that jolly crew of madcaps and bon vivants was fighting, it did not resemble the actual cold war, and I think it's safe to say that the clandestine derring-do performed by the earnest and muscular young protagonists of "Alias," "24,"

"MI-5" and "Threat Matrix" is just about as fanciful. The war they've all been engaged in is, at bottom, cultural. The 60's swingers preserved Western democracy by making it seem like nonstop sexy fun. But because we're no longer confident that being better looking, better dressed and more amusing than our enemies is sufficient to defeat them, our pop culture has had to tweak its romantic image of the spy; we've replaced fantasies of sophistication and insouciance with fantasies of athleticism, technological superiority and grim resolve. ("Alias" is the only one of the recent shows that has the wit to let the audience in on that covert cultural mission.)

Neil Burnside takes a back seat to no one in the grim-resolve department, but as a figure of fantasy he is, to say the least, problematic. He is a tall, thin, austere looking man, with a brutal haircut that suggests some of the less noble Romans of "I, Claudius." From his spartan London office, he directs the activities of the sandbaggers: covert operatives who are dispatched around the world on assignments of highly variable savoriness, from lifting imperiled agents out of hostile territory to assassinating captured colleagues before state secrets can be spilled. Burnside, an ex-sandbagger himself, is an impatient, sometimes impulsive sort, who has, in the grand tradition of English repression, managed by force of will to reduce his life to the bare necessities of duty. His only vices are coffee and cigarettes; he rarely sleeps, never drinks, eats only fast food, and, having jettisoned a wife, pretty much refuses even to think about sex. In fact, his only romance (unconsummated) in the series is with a female sandbagger, Laura Dickens (played by Diane Keen), who is, if anything, wound tighter than he is. The relationship ends very badly indeed: in the harrowing final episode of the first season (1978), Laura is taken prisoner by the Soviets in East Berlin, and Burnside, with the help of the C.I.A., arranges her murder.

Whose secret-agent fantasy would that be, I wonder? The seven episodes of that first "Sandbaggers" season build inexorably to the awful moment of Laura Dickens's death, and the great achievement of the show's creator and (until the third season) sole screenwriter, Ian Mackintosh, is that the hero's acquiescence

in the killing of the woman he loves doesn't come as a total shock. We don't doubt that Burnside is capable of this — and, disturbingly, we can't pretend that we didn't know that all along, even while we were marveling at his efficiency, enjoying his blunt style and rooting for the success of his operations.

Espionage, no matter which side you're on, is such a profoundly dubious human activity that it's amazing, really, that anyone has ever been tempted to romanticize it. Good spies are by nature secretive, devious and manipulative; they lie, cheat, steal, kill and, as we've learned from "Alias," make exceptionally difficult parents. Moral ambiguity is built into the profession, and the most persuasive espionage fiction — a short list that includes W. Somerset Maugham's Ashenden stories, the novels of John Le Carré and, yes, "The Sandbaggers" — tends to portray its heroes as sad, corrupted men, usually middle-aged and worn down by the strain of their endless dirty jobs.

But as "The Sandbaggers" vigorously demonstrates, there are guilty pleasures to be savored here, even in this perpetual night where, like Matthew Arnold's ignorant armies, the world's intelligence services clash. The chief pleasure is that of sheer gamesmanship, an area in which the Brits — with their documented fondness for crossword puzzles, mysteries, malicious gossip and the infinitely subtle parsing of class distinctions — have a big edge over us Yanks. The playing of games (and of games within games) is the true substance of every "Sandbaggers" episode, which is mighty convenient, since Yorkshire Television obviously lacked the budget for the sort of flamboyant Hong Kong-style action spectacle that "Alias" now treats us to each week.

The series was shot on videotape, like a soap opera, and the settings are as bleak as Neil Burnside's soul. There's nothing to hold our attention but faces and talk, talk, talk. In this case, that's more than enough.

The genius of "The Sandbaggers" is that Burnside's gamesmanship is not practiced exclusively on Britain's enemies; he also uses it — even, despite the vaunted "special

relationship," on the C.I.A. And since he is by temperament less a cautious civil servant than a mad global gunslinger, he is often forced to play headsplittingly intricate games with his superiors in the S.I.S. and the Foreign Office in order to get his way. In the series' last episode (the show stopped production abruptly after a small plane with Ian Mackintosh aboard was lost somewhere over the Aleutians), Burnside's game-playing reaches its dizzying apotheosis. Obsessed by the perfidy of the Soviets, he takes it upon himself to sabotage an international arms conference — which requires him to outfox his own government as well as the wily K.G.B. It's like watching Ahab play simultaneous chess matches on the deck of the Pequod. You're appalled, but you have to admire his ingenuity, his chilly composure, his bulldog tenacity.

The first two seasons of "The Sandbaggers" came out on DVD three years ago; the third volume, which completes the series, has just been released by BFS Entertainment. This is a good moment for audiences to discover the program, I think, because it's possible to see it not only in the context of other spy series, but also in the context of "The Sopranos," the show that finally made American TV audiences comfortable with a deeply flawed, even monstrous, series hero. Espionage, after all, is probably England's guiltiest pleasure, as violent crime is ours, so it's no stretch to think of Neil Burnside as his country's Tony Soprano. It's about time he came in from the cold.