

## Review of “Tell Me You Love Me”

We have to acknowledge the elephant first: There are wholly naked people having sex in the new HBO series “Tell Me You Love Me.” Of the four couples, three of them have sex often during the hour-long show. Sex is the theme, the pulse, the flesh of this series. It is the lead player. In 2007, Americans continue to have a duplicitous perception of sexuality on display. We want to see it (find out how other people deal with it, compare what we do in bed), but we are ashamed of our desires. This leaves us to be voyeurs, the perfect audience for shows that can be watched in darkened houses behind closed doors.

“Tell Me You Love Me” explores the lives of three couples ranging in age from 20’s to 40’s. The bonus relationship is that of a sixty-something couple married over forty years. Each duo has an active sex life, with the exception of the fortyish husband and wife with young children. The sex is spontaneous, not posed. There are no romantic set ups, breasts stuffed into corsets, or size tens squashed into size six stilettos. What occurs is raw, passionate and believable. In its lead role, sex enters and departs without applause; but its essence never leaves the set.

Jaime and Hugo are a young couple planning their wedding. Disparate opinions about commitment and fidelity surface when Hugo asks, “Do you really think you’re never going to be attracted to anyone else for the rest of your life?” The relationship breaks down, even though sex makes a cameo appearance more than once as they struggle to communicate individual beliefs and concerns. The thirty-something couple, Carolyn and Palek, are professionals with money, the showy house, and an abiding love. Their problem is infertility. Sex appears frequently with this

couple, always hitting its mark, and causing strain and confusion in its dual role: The expression of genuine intimacy and the deliberate method for achieving a goal. With the forty-something pair, sex does not take the lead. Instead, it silently supports Dave and Katie’s growing anxiety over their individual and collective lives. There *is* intimacy here. It is tangible. And it exists without sex as a participant. But sex is needed here. The couple just can’t remember how to ask it to come out and play.

The show boasts an ensemble cast of prolific actors, writers and directors. Cynthia Mort is an executive producer and writer for the series. She has written for film (“The Brave One,” “The Valley of the Dolls”) and television (“Will and Grace,” “Roseanne”). Patricia Rozema (“I’ve Heard the Mermaids Singing” and “Mansfield Park”) directs several of the episodes combining her feminist eye with Mort’s raw vision to take the series beyond the focus of sex. The issues that are revealed about each couple show a willingness to bare all, to dramatize the secrets that people spend lifetimes hiding.

“Tell Me You Love Me” marks a departure from the stimulation of voyeurism that seeks a glance at unfamiliar sexual relationships. In recent years, shows like “Queer as Folk,” “The L Word,” and “Big Love” have targeted homosexual and polygamous relationships with sex as one of the stars. Mort’s creation turns the analytical spotlight on heterosexuals. The show questions the feasibility of monogamy, whether or not a marriage can survive without sex, and how a couple accepts the failure of sex to live up to its promise.

“I should be pregnant and I’m not.” Carolyn, played by Sonya Walger who has appeared in “The Mind of a Married Man” and “Lost,” is obsessed with getting pregnant. She demands sex from Palek (Adam Scott, “Knocked Up” and “Monster-In-Law”) causing a strain in the otherwise happy marriage that may be irreparable if a baby is not produced. Hugo and Jaime,

played by Luke Kirby (“Halloween 8: Resurrection”) and Michelle Borth (“Supernatural”) represent an unsettled alliance: They are impulsive and unsure about their union even with the furious sex in which they frequently engage. The desperation expressed in their love-making is not only on the surface. What lies deeper are problems that require attention and resolution before a marriage can take place.

The writers take an unexpected approach with Dave (Tim DeKay of “Swordfish” and “If These Walls Could Talk”), the husband and father of two who is reluctant to initiate or even discuss sex with his wife, Katie (Alley Walker, “While You Were Sleeping”). It is Katie’s decision to enter therapy that sparks a reaction in her husband.

Therapy is where the couples are connected. Dr. May Foster (Jane Alexander of “Testament” and “Kramer vs. Kramer”) is in her sixties and has been married for forty-three years. She has a distinctive therapeutic style that makes use of the silences frustrated couples create. “What’s your sex like?” It’s a question that the therapist knows will cause her subjects to rumble internally and she soaks in their physical and, when they come, verbal reactions. Her experience with marriage and sex goes beyond her practice, it is her life. The most interesting part of the program’s composition is that May and her husband, Arthur (actor David Selby “Mind of the Married Man” and “Ally McBeal”), the oldest members of this cast of couples, have the best sex in the show. It is intense, creative, and satisfying. May would do no harm to her clients if she shared the secrets of her marriage with them.

While sex does good work in this 10-episode series, it is not as effective as HBO’s promotional department believes it to be. Yes, sex is the draw, the big name that everyone knows. But love is the true star. It is present in the uncertainty each couple wrestles with and also evident in the genuine attempts they make to figure out problems and work things out. Even

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when sex is present, love shows itself in the spontaneity, the frustration and fear. It is refreshing to see creators of fantasy tackle real life with sincerity and grace.

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