

sexual offending and positions itself as an essential resource for forensic evaluators.

John Bonetti, DO
Hartford, CT

Disclosures of financial or other potential conflicts of interest: None.

DOI:10.29158/JAAPL.003822-19

Review of Showtime's *The Affair*

Created and executive produced by Sarah Treem and Hagai Levi, Directed by Jeffrey Reiner and others. Network name: Showtime. First episode of four seasons aired October 12, 2014.

Despite the title, Showtime's *The Affair* is more about telling a story from different viewpoints than dramatizing an affair. *The Affair* portrays various themes encountered by both forensic and clinical psychiatrists, including grief, trauma, relationship struggles, self-injurious and self-defeating behaviors, and alcohol and drug addiction. Interactions with the law and the criminal and family court system occur across the seasons, including homicides and child custody disputes.

The Affair tells the story of Noah, a restless, disenchanted English teacher, writer, husband, and father of four, who takes his family away from their Brooklyn brownstone to the Hamptons town of Montauk, New York, for the summer, so that he can write his novel. Before arriving at his in-laws' beach house, Noah, his wife Helen, and their children stop at the Lobster Roll restaurant. Alison, a Montauk local, works as a waitress there. We later learn that Alison is also a nurse and is married to Cole, another Montauk local whose family is prominent in the town as they operate several businesses, not all of which are legal. Cole, although brooding, is fiercely in love with Alison. The viewer learns that, prior to the start of the series, Alison and Cole lost their young son due to secondary drowning. Alison blames herself for not recognizing this rare condition and not having taken him to the hospital. Social class issues abound. Narcissistic Noah has a midlife crisis, while Alison mourns her drowned son. The two embark on an affair.

Noah and Alison's tumultuous love story affects everyone around them. Alison is escaping her grief,

her financial problems, and her past. Noah relies on Alison to feel good about himself when he is feeling inadequate regarding his status as a husband, father, and writer.

Their stories are told from memory while being questioned after a vehicular homicide. Scottie, Cole's brother, was the victim of the vehicular homicide, and the ongoing investigation of Scottie's death is a central component of the first two seasons. As a further example of the intertwined lives that populate the series, Noah's teenage daughter, Whitney, previously had a fling with Scottie. Each episode is divided into two parts, telling the same story from Noah's perspective and then from Alison's point of view. In the second season, Helen's and Cole's points of view are added. In each episode, the subjective nature of recall is apparent.

The Rashomon Effect is the anthropological term for the narrative device used in *The Affair*. Each character's unique perspective reveals their own subjective truth, but none is the objective truth. *Rashomon* was a 1950 Japanese film that won a prize at the Venice Film Festival and an Academy Award.¹ The film told the story of a samurai's death and a sexual encounter from the perspectives of various people. The narratives are subjective but based on each narrator's own interests. Each story is plausible. Anderson¹ noted that the Rashomon Effect particularly occurs when there are different perspectives, a lack of evidence of which is more likely, and pressure for closure to answer the puzzle or question (e.g., a legal case). All three of these elements are present in *The Affair*.

In the first scene at the Lobster Roll, Noah's youngest daughter chokes on her food. In Noah's version of events, he saves her by performing the Heimlich maneuver while Alison and others witness the event. In Alison's version of her first encounter with Noah, she is the one who saves Noah's daughter. Sometimes the two characters' memories are in line, but other times they conflict slightly to significantly. At first one is not sure who the more credible historian is. However, it gradually dawns on the viewer that neither character's story can be fully trusted, rather that both are likely telling the truth as they believe it. The show illustrates beautifully the inaccuracy of recall for past events, especially when the events are emotionally charged. And the viewer recognizes that neither character is lying because they

are telling the story as they perceived it having happened to them.

As forensic psychiatrists, we know that the story we obtain from an evaluatee is only one piece of the puzzle. Like the detectives in *The Affair*, we obtain history from collateral sources in addition to the evaluatee. We require medical records, police records, and other data to help understand what actually happened during a particular, often traumatic, incident to answer the questions posed to us.

The Affair also illustrates the long-term destruction that can result when life is unexamined and people act out, instead of processing their feelings and their responses to difficult situations. Noah would like to believe that Alison is the love of his life and that their passion pulls him away from his family, but from the outside, Alison could be anyone. He was restless and unhappy, and it was easier to blame others for his unhappiness than to look inside for answers. Alison needed to get away from the pain of her son's death, which she associated with her marriage, but Noah, too, could have been anyone. They met when they both needed someone to help them escape from themselves. Alison seems happy with Noah at first, but it is not sustainable. Her grief and depression eventually isolate her from Noah as well.

Eventually Noah serves time in prison for Scottie's death, develops an addiction to painkillers, and reveals that he killed his mother as a teenager. In a couples' therapy session to which Alison did not show up, Noah divulges that his father was an alcoholic truck driver who left Noah to care for his mother who had multiple sclerosis. He angrily said that his father would brag that he was a good husband because he never cheated on his wife. Noah's act of matricide resonates with real matricide cases.² Noah had been taking care of his mother and alleges that he killed her with an altruistic motive. He was to go off to college and claims that she wanted to kill herself so as not to be a burden on him, but was unable physically to do so. So, he put crushed medication in her food. Noah and his mother had a very close relationship and Noah's father was absent, which is a common feature in matricides.² In altru-

istic cases, the murder occurs out of love or as an act of mercy, e.g., due to severe maternal illness.

Season four opens with past enemies, Noah and Cole, uniting in a search for Alison. Cole has since remarried but has never stopped loving Alison. Alison has been a devoted mother to their second child and has become successful in her new career as grief counselor. Cole is convinced her disappearance is a result of foul play and not due to Alison's mental state, but others disagree. In the penultimate episode of the season, for the first time, in a single scene on the last night of her life, a single character (Alison) is shown from two different Alison points of view. Through this episode, the show veers away from showing different characters' perceptions of the same reality to showing one character's hopes and dreams versus the reality that she made in part due to her various life choices. The format of this episode leaves the viewer confused, troubled, intrigued, and wanting to understand more.

The creators, Sarah Treem and Hagai Levi, both worked on *In Treatment*. Unlike many other shows that touch on forensic or psychological issues, *The Affair* does not resort to sensationalism, gratuitous sex, or violence. It is generally tasteful in its approach to provocative content. The courtroom scenes are not as overdramatized as in many other shows. There are many plot twists, and the show is suspenseful and compelling.

References

1. Anderson R: The Rashoman effect and communication. *Can J Communication* 41:249–69, 2016
2. Friedman SH, Hall RCW: Deadly and dysfunctional family dynamics: when fiction mirrors fact, in *Arkham Asylum and Psychiatry*. Edited by Packer S. McFarland Press, in press, 2018

Karen B. Rosenbaum, MD
New York, NY

Susan Hatters Friedman, MD
Cleveland, Ohio

Disclosures of financial or other potential conflicts of interest: None.

DOI:10.29158/JAAPL.003829-19