PART SEVEN

Written by JILL HYEM
Directed by DAVID ASKEY

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Viewing figure: 15 million

Synopsis: June 1942. Sally is due to give birth in less than two months and Yamauchi is keen that the baby is born healthy for propaganda reasons. The women are competing in a general knowledge quiz when Sally goes into labour. Marion pools meagre equipment for the delivery while Beatrice is plagued by fears about the birth. The baby is eventually delivered stillborn. Marion suggests that Nellie moves into the same hut as Sally to help her get over it. Sally confides in Nellie that she didn't want the baby and the pair gradually grow closer and come to depend on each other. Dorothy spreads rumours that Sally and Nellie's relationship is unnatural. Judith contracts another bout of malaria. Beatrice volunteers to have a word with Nellie and later encourages her to put her nursing before other activities. Sally discovers some graffiti describing her and Nellie as 'filthy perverts' and is shocked and sickened by the implication. Nellie moves back to her old hut. Blanche confides in Rose that she'd prefer to be shot risking escape than slowly rot inside the camp.

REVIEW

Due to its groundbreaking depiction of a potentially homosexual relationship, this is one of the most memorable, and certainly most frequently cited, episodes of *Tenko*. Despite the absence of a kiss – in fact, we see little more than hand-holding – the content was still considered risqué by the television audiences of 1981. Looking back now, from our far more permissive and accepting society of 2012, it is difficult to imagine just how pioneering this plotline was; however, the fact that this was still some 13 years off the media storm which surrounded the portrayal of lesbianism in *Brookside* (in 1994) puts it in some perspective. *Tenko* was not portraying here the first lesbian relationship on television, in fact the first lesbian kiss was broadcast back in 1974 (between Alison Steadman and Myra Frances in the drama *Girl*). However, because this was a depiction of homosexuality back in World War II, perhaps this *Tenko* episode seemed more provocative than it otherwise might (even though such relationships were known to have existed in the camps).

The relationship between Nellie and Sally is virtually the sole focus of the episode and is handled sympathetically and, importantly, without any sort of sensationalism. Both Jeananne Crowley and Joanna Hole offer sensitive performances throughout, with Nellie's fiercely held love and Sally's hopeless naivety coming across as equally believable. Crowley manages an electric screen

presence for the first time in the series, befitting her National Theatre pedigree, most notably in her delivery of the line in which she refutes Beatrice's assertion that she must remember that first and foremost she is a nurse: 'No I'm not; first and foremost I'm a person.' Hole meanwhile makes Sally engaging and loveable as we witness how her superficially jolly exterior is offset by her deep-seated fears. The dynamics between Nellie and Sally are particularly interesting because of their complexity. While on the one hand Nellie has recognised her own sexuality and is seeking a full-on relationship, Sally is merely looking for affection and comfort due to Peter's absence and the horrendous experience of having a stillborn child. Sally fails to register the depth of Nellie's love, despite the clear signs: her jealousy as Sally dances with Blanche at the night of her birthday party; her precious gifts of chocolate and sugar; and her protective 'Peter-like' concern for Sally's safety when around the guards. For Sally, the friendship is exactly as Marion describes: natural and not unlike the hand-holding that goes on between girls in school. So much so, that when she eventually sees the graffiti which reads: 'Nellie and Sally are filthy perverts,' she is in a complete state of shock, breathlessly asking: 'Is that what people really think?' This moment of revelation inevitably uncovers Nellie's alternative take on their relationship, as she answers: 'Does it matter?' Sally's incredulous reply: 'Of course it matters! Do you want people thinking we're like *that*?' serves to underline the complete disparity between Nellie's and Sally's outlook and intentions and, moreover, the fact that, as a result, their relationship can never be as close again. The fact that Sally's complicity was unwitting, due to her innocence and immaturity, makes it clear that their relationship could never have gone anywhere anyway. Whether Nellie knew this to be the case or not is unclear; either way is it apparent that she must have hoped against hope that her feelings might be reciprocated.

Despite the graffiti and Dorothy's decidedly negative take on the relationship, it is appropriate and interesting that many of the characters are able to see its positive side given the straits they are currently in. Rose comments: 'At least they care about each other'; Blanche, inevitably more earthily, states: 'What if they were, what are we supposed to do for sex in this bloody place?'; while Marion simply asks: 'Since when was feeling a crime?' Thankfully these interjections never feel as though the episode's writer, Jill Hyem, is forwarding an agenda, instead they are absolutely in keeping with both the narrative and the characters given these lines, although it is somewhat inevitable that a more forward-thinking 'right on' Eighties stance on these issues is represented in the narrative rather than a narrow-minded Forties one.

However, it seems likely that with one particular line in the episode, delivered by Madge Pritchard at the discipline committee – 'One wouldn't wish to put a name to it' – Jill Hyem is poking fun at her producer's insistence that the

storyline could only go ahead as long as the word 'lesbian' was not mentioned.

Although Nellie's homosexual persuasion is made definitively clear, that of another regular character, Beatrice, is obliquely called into question. That Beatrice is an unmarried spinster can only hint at such a possibility, but her uncomfortable reaction to the discussion during the discipline committee, at which her obvious distress even causes her to rock, suggests that this particular subject matter also has a personal significance for her. Furthermore, Beatrice's later description of Nellie's relationship with Sally as being one that 'can't lead anywhere' could be read as something she herself has discovered in the unenlightened pre-war years. As the series progresses, Beatrice's affection for Nellie, whose future she is keen to guide here, has definite overtones of unrequited love.

That Yamauchi seizes on the opportunity to use Sally's as yet unborn child for propaganda purposes ('When it is born we will celebrate, prisoners and soldiers both. I will also arrange for many photographs of baby so all the world can see pictures of healthy baby in a prison camp') emphasises a much less palatable facet of the Captain's personality. What it makes clear is that Yamauchi's capacity for humanity is always going to be tempered by his overriding commitment and loyalty to the Imperial Japanese Army. It is a truism that is destined to be played out throughout the series. In addition to this insight, we gain a better understanding of Yamauchi by virtue of Marion's astute observation that he is as much a 'victim of circumstance' as they are. His reply to this assertion: 'You are right. I did not desire to be sent to this post. Were it not for poor health I would be fighting now, fighting beside soldiers with whom I am proud to die,' once again confirms his unerring patriotism to Japan above everything else in his life, which cannot bode well for his prisoners.

Sally's labour is grittily realised, underlining the impossible task that Beatrice and her nurses face in these terrible conditions. In a wonderfully authentic moment, Marion gratefully receives a slim bar of soap, some string and a small bowl from Sister Ulrica as if they were impossible riches, before catching herself and re-evaluating them as the meagre resources they actually represent. Her subsequent sighting of a rat during the labour further emphasises the deeply unsanitary nature of the environment. Beatrice is certainly under no illusion as to the inappropriateness of the tools at her disposal and we have no difficulty in appreciating the fears she details to Ulrica. Beatrice tells the nun that her medical skills are irrelevant if she doesn't have suitable equipment, with her predicament being best emphasised by an anxious reference to a makeshift bamboo foetal stethoscope: 'I don't know if it's a heartbeat I'm hearing or the sound of my own wishful thinking!' The award for the understatement of the episode, if not the series, is Sister Ulrica's observation to Beatrice: 'Your job is not easy.' One aspect

of the labour which emphasises how much the medical profession has changed since the Forties is Beatrice's insistence that Sally need not know what is going to happen, stating that there's: 'No need to bother her with the details.' When Sally protests quite reasonably: 'But I want to know,' Beatrice firmly replies: 'You leave it to us, that's what we're here for,' prompting Sally to remind her: 'It's my body.' Nellie's preference for giving her patient a blow-by-blow account of the forthcoming experience and Sally's grateful acceptance of this information is more in keeping with modern medicine – an approach that was by no means prevalent in 1981 never mind 1942! Further insight into Beatrice's approach to medicine is provided through an exchange between her and Marion after the stillbirth. When Beatrice states that they will 'have to keep an eye on her,' Marion assumes she is referring to Sally's mental health; however, Beatrice is instead referring to possible medical complications. Although this scene and others in previous episodes suggest Beatrice has a solely clinical and fact-based perspective on medicine with no room for emotion, during her heart-to-heart with Nellie she reveals a more holistic approach, stating that their patients need both her dedication and her love.

Almost more of an arresting sight than Sally's labour is the sudden state of Kate's hair. Her new mop-top wig draws attention when the viewer should be concentrating on her dialogue instead. Thankfully it is ditched before the second series due to Oberman's understandable decision to cut her hair rather than wear the wig any longer! Alongside Christina, Kate is arguably one of the series' most underused characters at this point.

The 'organised jollity' which Blanche complains about to Rose, aside from the women's rounders match and Sally's birthday party, is best exemplified by the dreadfully proper and rather absurd – given their surroundings – general knowledge quiz. The quiz, which is introduced by Marion and has Rose as question-master, is deliberately corny, terribly British and therefore horribly real, with its OTT introduction of the contestants and very specifically outlined rules: 'The first question is for you, Sylvia. If you fail to answer it, I shall pass it over to Beatrice for a bonus point.'

This episode gives us the first of two appearances by the deeply unpleasant Madge, played by Athene Fielding. Madge's sudden presence is a bit of a mystery given that such an opinionated character would have surely come to our attention before now. The most likely explanation is that Jill Hyem felt that she couldn't use any of the existing regular characters to condemn Nellie and Sally via the discipline committee as it would not have been believable, therefore Madge suddenly had to be invented. Bizarrely, Madge's next appearance in the series would be some eighteen episodes later, after the war, at which point none but the most committed viewer would remember her.

Dorothy's role in this narrative is principally to spit poison in others' ears about Nellie and Sally, although it is strongly suggested that this has more to do with her jealousy of the closeness and affection they share rather than any latent homophobia. However, the most significant scene to feature Dorothy takes place before she has begun this activity. The scene in question, which is superbly played by Veronica Roberts, sees Dorothy attempt to make a connection with Sally due to the fact that they have now both lost their babies. By offering her the hand of friendship, and specifically a cigarette, Dorothy is putting herself out there for someone for the first time since Violet's death. That Dorothy's attempts are effectively rejected is a crushing blow for her, which prompts her to close off once more and perhaps even to decide to begin her whispering campaign about the pair. By now, Dorothy's fraternising with the guards is common knowledge, so much so that it is a subject that is not even on the agenda of the discipline committee. However, this isn't to say that the women aren't concerned or appalled by her behaviour. Dorothy is all too aware of the fact that her activities warrant more attention than Blanche's engagement in the same, simply because, unlike Blanche, she used to be a 'nice little housewife from Edgware.' Nellie's assertion that 'she's still there underneath' suggests a lack of awareness on her part, as Dorothy's insistence that she 'was another person' back then underlines the unmistakable fact that her recent experiences have changed Dorothy's character permanently.

That Blanche, like Dorothy, is now openly consorting with the guards is a little surprising given that this was not clearly spelled out in the previous episode. In contrast to Dorothy, there is the suggestion in Blanche's case that one of the reasons she does this is quite simply because she is sexually frustrated, as evidenced by her fiery exclamation during logging detail about the absence of sex in camp and her previous complaints to Rose that she 'misses it.' Blanche previously made a living from her looks and, as a result, with the possible exception of Rose (who comments here that: 'They've finally succeeded in de-feminising us altogether'), is arguably the most concerned about the physical effect upon them of their imprisonment. Her question: 'Do we look like women anymore?' is certainly heartfelt. Although this clearly troubles Blanche, it is obvious that her continued internment commands even more of her attention, as she is presented as one of two characters least able to cope with having her freedom curtailed (the other being Kate, who longs for the open country of her native Australia). When the rounders ball goes over the barbed wire fence, while Rose amusingly observes: 'What a shame,' Blanche longingly states: 'I wish it was me.' By the time the episode ends, it seems that Blanche's claustrophobic reaction to camp life, and the added fact that many of them, like Judith, are likely to 'cop it' sooner or later, has prompted her to come to a startling conclusion: 'I'd sooner

risk getting shot out there, rather than rot slowly here.'

Although Blanche's declaration makes for a reasonable ending to the episode (especially as Louise Jameson delivers the line with the necessary conviction), the cut to the end credits is very abrupt and, what is more, it seems a shame that in an episode that has primarily focused on the relationship between Nellie and Sally, neither of them are given the closing moments as a way of signing off on their storyline. The bereft Nellie as she watches the unobtainable woman she loves playing rounders, seemingly without a care in the world, would have made for a much more effective final scene. Despite this small niggle, this episode still stands as an exemplary piece of drama, boasting some of the best moments of the series so far.