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John Doyle: CBC's *Bellevue* is much stranger than advertised

By John Doyle

The new CBC drama is a gripping mystery with a 'distinct Canadian gothic sensibility'

The new CBC drama *Bellevue* (Monday, CBC, 9 p.m.) is a whodunit with a lot going on. That is, an awful, awful lot going on.

It's very good, an atmospheric, well-acted drama. In its favour, it has a distinct Canadian gothic sensibility – it's about decay, a mining town gone to seed, and it's about hockey, religion, revenge, death, loss, the mystery held by the reservation outside of town, the mystery held by a closed mental-health treatment centre outside of town and the mystery held in the dense woods around town. Also, it's about transgender teens.

See what I mean about a lot going on?

A caveat, too, if you're interested in *Bellevue*. The phrase "edgy and eerie" has been used repeatedly by CBC to describe the series, but that doesn't do it justice.

It is set in the enclosed world of the town of Bellevue, a dying mining town where logic doesn't always operate. You might find some of the drama abstruse, remote from reality.

Bellevue the town is not exactly *Twin Peaks*, but it's not your average Canadian town, either. Thus, events have an unsettling tone and unfold in a style that has elements of surrealism, the supernatural and, occasionally, absurdity. CBC could have advertised its particular acute style more scrupulously.

At its centre is detective Annie Ryder (Anna Paquin), a cop whom we meet when she's a drunken, drugged-out mess. But for a reason. Then, as we get to know her, we discover she is in fact a truly messed-up figure struggling daily to cope.

Often, she does it with aplomb. Annie's dad was a cop working in a missing-person case in the town years ago and later committed suicide. As a child, she was taunted and taken to the edge of despair by a mysterious unknown figure who left notes and riddles for her to solve, while claiming to be her dad reaching out to her. Now, that figure seems to have returned.

And the return coincides with another missing-person case – a transgender teenage boy who is also the star of the local hockey team. A kid who seemed headed for the NHL who had declared he was gay and began wearing makeup and dressing as a woman.

It takes a while before the muddle of complex colliding atmospheric turns begins to take shape into a strong plotline. (It's Episode 2 before the series settles down.) Religion plays a role and there's a suggestion that the missing teen might have tried some sort of conversion therapy. Or been forced into it. At that point, the drama pokes around in the weird subculture of teenagers in a confined, remote small town. And, all the while, Annie is being tormented by this sinister figure from her past.

"Evil looks like you and me," a character says at one point. True enough, in any drama, but there is a hallucinatory quality to *Bellevue* that defies description. At times, everybody seems high on drugs or booze and, throw in religion and sex, you have a staggeringly heady concoction.

Bellevue, especially in its opening episode, can seem to teeter on the brink of overindulgence in balefully ominous visuals, but it holds back. On the evidence of the first two episodes only, it pulls back from its obsession with anxiety, loneliness, despair – both in Annie and the missing teenage hockey star – to focus on the whodunit mystery.

It can seem a grim place, this Bellevue, a town littered with the wreckage of lives un-lived and the mess of constant disappointment. It's unconventional, in the context of Canadian drama, a dark fantasia that's a daisy chain of disturbing allusions and it's made with great visual imagination.

Paquin is gloriously good as the pragmatic but messed-up Annie, a woman determined to rise above the misery in her life no matter how haunted she feels at times. She plays Annie with a fierce purpose that sometimes keeps the overheated engine of the convoluted drama on track.

Created by Jane Maggs and Adrienne Mitchell, *Bellevue* is a very welcome addition to CBC's content slate. It's original, ambitious and it stands apart. Sure, it seems to fall short of being exceptionally great – portions of the first two episodes are too overcooked for that – but it has an energy and, yes, it gets gripping as a mystery.

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