



Jenny Cooper (Serinda Swan) and her partner Det. Donovan "Mac" McAvoy (Roger Cross) grapple with the new reality of crime-solving.

## CORONER

Wednesday, 8 p.m., CBC

The writers' room of *Coroner* was already a month into breaking its third season when life as we know it abruptly changed overnight. Realizing how much different the world was likely to look by the time they got into production five months later, series creator Morwyn Brebner felt they had no choice but to start over. "We were trying to figure out how to incorporate [COVID-19] into the show, without it being disruptive to the emotions between the characters, but reflecting how we were living," the writer explains. "It was really complex. Sometimes our minds were just exploding."

While intensive care units overflowed in New York and the capitals of Europe, it was unclear in the early days of COVID how the pandemic would affect Canada. "We were trying to figure out what the story was, as I kept revising the scripts," says Brebner. "Reading about care homes, it became clear that the story was there — that was the locus of death for Toronto."

In the season opener, Dr. Jenny Cooper (Serinda Swan) and Det. Donovan "Mac" McAvoy (Roger Cross) are tasked with solving the murder of a nurse at a care facility for the elderly. But the mystery is far from the greatest punch to the gut in this emotional hour of television. Within its storylines, the

Our hero faces her personal demons while trying to give the dead their due.



crime procedural takes on the novel coronavirus like few shows have, from its larger impact on society to the everyday modifications we've all had to make to get on with life.

Shooting the tragic opening scenes for the premiere left a lasting impression on its lead. "After a full hazard suit scene, I just came home and cried, like, 'Oh my god, we have another five months of this,'" says Swan. "I remember being overwhelmed that this is someone else's reality, and something they have to do every single day and not for TV. That was humbling." For anyone on the frontlines, coroner Jenny Cooper included, the height of the pandemic has left no time for anything but the

# SPEAKING FOR THE DEAD

In season three, Dr. Jenny Cooper unravels murder mysteries in a Toronto engulfed by COVID



Mac (Roger Cross) gets a non-COVID health scare of his own this year, which forces the stalwart cop to reevaluate his life choices.



Jenny Cooper shoulders the physical and emotional toll of being a frontline worker during the pandemic.

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task at hand. “Jenny has had to become so compartmentalized with her life that she’s not processing things,” says Swan. “It’s interesting to watch her fall back into her suppression.”

And indeed, says Brebner, past trauma will always be with our protagonist, who last season worked on coming to terms with causing the death of her sister, her father’s ailing health, her son’s struggle to find himself and her PTSD-suffering boyfriend, who has taken off to confront his own demons. All this, *and* her house was torched by a murder suspect. “It’s

like, ‘Who am I? My house has burned down and I’m going to move forward in this world with this uncertain future that we’re all facing,’” says Brebner. “But I think that Jenny, this season, is willing to allow more messiness into her life to see if she can handle it.”

In the midst of already difficult circumstances, Jenny’s work partner is faced with a health crisis not involving COVID. “Donovan gets a bit of a scare,” says Cross. “Whether he’s healthy or not, he gets a new perspective on life because any time you have scary news,

it changes how you perceive the world. Maybe you invest more fully in things.” For Donovan, this new realization may become the impetus for reassessing his past. “Did he not do things when he should have, did he take the easy way out of things?” muses Cross. “In season one, we touched on the fact that he’d left his old community because they treated him as an outsider. Maybe he will correct some of the wrongs in his past.”

The fact that the writers never shy away from their characters’ personal evolutions is something Swan has been grateful for throughout these three seasons. “Sometimes it’s easy for creators to get into the habit of solving a problem at the end of each season and then creating a new problem,” says Swan. “As an artist, I find it really important to try to find those through-lines, because nowadays with streaming services, the season finale and episode one of the next season might be two seconds apart. It has to feel congruent.”

In that vein, Swan and the writers have reached a point where the actress plumps the scripts with moments of recognition that hark back to issues far from “handled” for Jenny Cooper. “If we’re building a mirror for people to be able to see themselves in, we can’t suddenly just say, ‘Oh, the anxiety goes away,’ so I always challenge the writers to be really creative with how we evolve Jenny’s process and her trauma and be really honest with that human experience,” says Swan. “Building those long through-lines is a lot of work, but I’ve always wanted to be able to be involved in this way. It’s a lot of fun.” ■



Ehren Kassam as Dr. Cooper’s teenaged son, Ross.