

**Mela Z.**

What makes Netflix's Bodyguard so successful? An intimate viewing

**Essay**

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## **What makes Netflix's Bodyguard so successful? An intimate viewing**

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## What makes *Bodyguard* so successful? —

### An intimate viewing

When, in due time after watching, *Bodyguard* simply didn't fade out of my mind, it made me a little uneasy. I felt compelled to try and find out what was so compelling in there. The investigation then became a bit of an obsession in itself, which no doubt ran away with me sometimes, turning into some dubious lanes here and there. Nonetheless it was enjoyable, as I hope it is for you, too, to read.

Without knowing the whole first season (six hours on Netflix), none of this will make sense to you. So watch first, then enjoy reading the thematic and psychological theories about it. For plot theories or discussion of realism/plausibility of the action parts: look elsewhere!

My purpose was to look for meaning (staying in the characters' points of view for a lot of the time) rather than to find fault. The meaning offered by a completed work is usually not identical with what was intended by its makers. And meaning doesn't always emerge by design; sometimes things just fall into place. Every interpretation that's well reasoned is justified (and can be challenged by further argument). This is just one viewer's view.

Summary:

#### **Part I: The main character**

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assumes that underneath the bodyguard's professional demeanor there is a very sensitive and even childlike soul, and it shows up in his body quite a lot if you know where to look. We delve into reading the bodyguard's mind and body, and end up being a bit unsure about who protects whom here but being a lot surer about our humanity.

#### **Part II: The relationship**

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tries to draw near to what gets this unlikely pair together at all—a theory being that for him it is a very bodily need (but not primarily a sexual one) associated with his stress disorder. This part further points out that their relationship is visually described by two (beautifully handled) guiding themes: the touch of their hands and their (partly only symbolic) embraces.

#### **Part III: The finale**

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describes a striking analogy between the bomb vest around David's body and his inner mental powder keg of trauma, hurt and the stress of covering it up. It deals with death, tombs and the underworld (a bit like in Greek drama); and after having been there: getting back to life.



## What makes *Bodyguard* so successful? —

### Part I: The main character

This piece does not want to join the debate about *Bodyguard*'s plot but aims to explore some thematic threads. Why?

Obviously the show is simply an exciting ride and many people have enjoyed it as such. But that doesn't fully explain the number of viewers, growing weekly at the show's first airing on British TV, peaking at a record in the finale; or the Netflix users stating to have binged the whole season not once but several times in a matter of days. Obviously people wanted to watch this, even if they had missed parts of the preliminary or already knew the story line. So it can't be all about suspense. Viewers must have been touched by something else in there.

I would state that it is the emotional truth in this drama. It is about matters we all have to settle concerning ourselves and our relationships, quite apart from the extraordinary goings-on in the action chapters: How can we bear being (emotionally) hurt?, for one. What are our means of protecting ourselves (socially, emotionally)? How does mistrust affect our relationships and what induces us to trust others? What are we prepared to risk (socially)?

Questions like these are negotiated on different levels throughout the show, triggered quite clearly by the writing (Jed Mercurio). The action parts deal with physical risk, hurt and protection, the social and emotional aspects are offered in various relationships and within characters. Let's look at the main character's torn disposition first.

### Reading the bodyguard's mind

We get to know the bodyguard David Budd (Richard Madden) off duty: at the train attack where he genuinely freaks out (he's one of us!) yet shows a great deal of moral courage and emotional intelligence (which goes beyond the professional courage to be expected of him; indeed you could argue he goes beyond professionalism itself, putting humanity before subordination).

We see him caring and gentle with his children, longing for intimacy with his estranged wife and intensely hurt by her rejection. But despite everything he has just gone through, he is considerate enough to shut the front door quietly.



Consequently, we don't buy into his habitual deadpan on the job. This guy looks callous and in control but he isn't. (His action under stress is usually competent but only just about, and he doesn't feel it—think of his panic attack in the elevator at Chanel's dismissal or his freezing in his seat at the sniper attack.)

That he works in a field where protocol dictates highly standardised, quasi-robotic movements and a dehumanised stare, is telling. On the job he barely has a name—he is a number (seven nine) and a "skipper". This setting (including the restricting yet reinforcing attire) seems to give him the stability he needs after returning from his unsettling war deployment.



David doesn't get to talk much, instead the camera (DP: John Lee) presents us with nuances of his facial or bodily expression all the time, inducing us to look there for his affliction, pride, amusement or contempt. Here, the striking contrast between his outwardly impeccable behaviour and our insights into David's various inner conflicts sets in.

Gradually we realise that he cuts himself off for three purposes: to protect his actual sensitivity, to hide his inner turmoil caused by the war trauma and to avoid facing it (the denial being an integral symptom and partly a trigger of his post traumatic stress disorder). If he *did* face it, he'd have to admit he is incapable of handling it by himself, and if he lets others see him at a loss, he fears he will lose respect and consequently self-respect.

Apart from these social fears, opening up is also a substantial threat to his livelihood because he senses that in truth he is unfit to work. (His wife talks about having covered for him repeatedly.) He simply cannot risk showing how he really feels.

Conveniently, his job provides a thick bullet proof vest for all these isolating functions. It seals his chest and hides his scars, shuts out the harsh world and shuts in his hurt and stress.

But this is more than a common gap between job and private life. With his wife and kids he shows more feeling, but he hasn't reached the emotional maturity to openly share unwelcome sensations like distress or helplessness. At the bottom of this is not primarily his war trauma but rather his traditional view of masculinity (which also makes him hug his daughter but toughen up his son): be strong for the family, solve their problems (the schooling dilemma), keep yourself to yourself, never show weakness, be the provider (which he can't if he's discharged as unfit; that's why he wouldn't even consider trying to make his wife's income suffice).

**With all his outstanding courage in action, David is terrified of crying on his wife's shoulder.**

That's why he has ended up in a dismal flat all alone, suffering even more. And on top of that, during the story he is harried again and again (learning of Vicky's boyfriend, being shot at, losing his principal etc.), which makes for a powerful narrative and a powerful basis for empathising with him.



**To watch this character constantly fighting back his profound hurt and his vulnerability itself is heartbreaking. His body giving him away all the time is very endearing.**

To understand what I mean by that, we have to be aware of yet another rift in David's disposition. Not only does he pretend to be tough outwardly while secretly feeling the opposite, there's also a cleft within his pretense.

There are aspects of his appearance he's in control of, like a good part of his behaviour and most of his body language, and these he fits into position. But then there are parts he forgets to align to toughness, there are slips in his behaviour, and above all there are those less changeable features of his body (representing his basic identity), which do not fit the image. They all give him away as not so tough.

Given the title of the show, I think I shall take the liberty of investigating how (well) the bodyguard's body is in fact guarded, and see where that takes us.

### Reading the bodyguard's body

Matching the image of toughness are David's posture and walk, which usually are quite poised (with a fitting deviation while in shock after the explosion).

#### Height

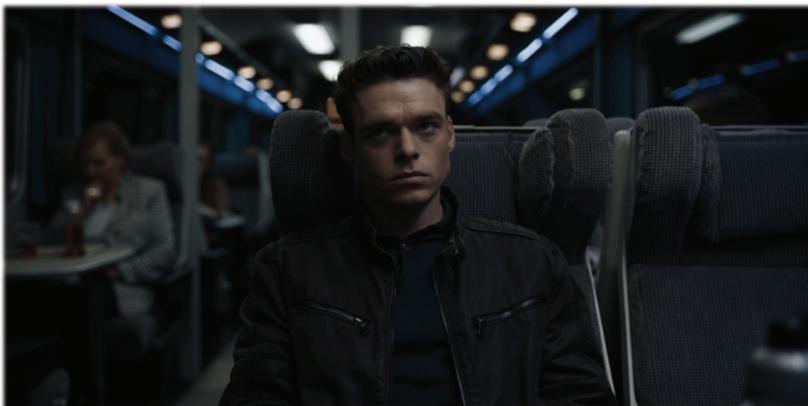
One rather unchangeable feature is his height (though he tries hard at first with his hairdo; designer: My Alehammar). The actor isn't short but David seems to be because camera angles make him look small whenever he's inferior or out of luck (which happens a lot); for example with Julia's ex-husband, who personifies the opposite of David in some respects—slim, sleek, snobbish, scheming, not so very much taller but oh-so-superior, looking down his nose at him. He is David's Goliath so to speak—or one of his Goliaths, next to terrorism, organised crime, the treacherous Secret Service, politicians, police officers and, of course, his war trauma.

So his being (shown) small (especially in Julia's world and with his bosses) indicates to the viewers that he isn't as much in control as he would like people to think. However, in storytelling a small hero usually makes a good hero (it heightens his achievements). And also for David, seeming insignificant carries advantages: sometimes people like Penhaligon talk thoughtlessly of important matters in his presence, thus enabling David to get the wider picture of Julia's machinations.



#### Facial proportions

David is frequently successful in controlling his facial expression (or at least concealing it, often by turning away or covering his mouth with his hand), with some striking exceptions coming up. But let's look at his (unchangeable) facial proportions first.



While his expressive forehead allows us to imagine that David, though rather young for a war veteran, has endured a lot, the ratio of this high forehead to the rest of the face, combined with the blue eyes, distinct nose and mouth add up to a scheme of rather childlike characteristics. In

moments of great distress there is in fact a desperate little boy showing up in his face. Look for it e.g. when David learns of Julia's death. We have never seen him so lost before, and without any thought of disguising it (which makes it such an poignant moment).



But we will later: in episode six on the square when the explosives officer walks away from him and he loses hope of being rescued, again there's a despaired eight-year-old (the age being supported by his (non-)hairstyle and his sobbing manner of speaking in the following exchange with Commander Sampson, whom he talks to like a scolded boy to a schoolmarm).



There is a very genuine and naive quality to those expressions, which runs contrary to David's earlier professional look of firmness and competence. Of course, these opposites are separated by the huge turning point—Julia's death. But there are lots of hints of the contrast earlier on.

### **Cloaking and revealing**

The costumes department (designer: Charlie Knight) highlights that, especially with his private outfits. On the job, his clothes are always proper and unobtrusive. The bullet proof vest not only shields him and forces him to keep upright but also deforms the whole shape of his torso, cloaking his actual, individual outline. Everything is about standardising here, body and behaviour.

In his time off, David usually wears a biker type jacket, rather robust and preformed (squaring his shoulders); thus extending his aims of appearing tough, cloaking his real shape (what he wants to hide, though, isn't his well-trained upper body but his bad mental shape) and providing himself with a sort of shelter for the softer inner layers of cloth and soul.

On closer look, however, the jacket appears to be made not of leather but of cloth, indicating that David himself isn't so water-proof on a rainy day (i.e. the bad things that happen really get to him).



In contrast to the carefully cloaked upper body, his rather tight jeans offer a truer image of his physique (as if further down, in childlike obliviousness, he forgets to camouflage). After all the standardisation, all the deforming, cloaking and reshaping, for once there's a truthful sight of his outline, showing us that this guy knows about effort but also about softness and fragility.

### Walk

It's a poignant contrast in itself and more so connected with David's walk. Assuming that the style of walk shows how a person intends to confront the world, David's succinct walk with his fists tightly stuck in the jacket's pockets (e. g. when he walks home the evening after the sniper attack) suggests that this puerile man, despite his inner struggles and sensitivity, is decided to take the outside world head-on. Such an ill-equipped but determined hero is predestined to be deeply touching.

(By the way, the only other notable tight trousers person is Louise Rayburn (Nina Toussaint-White), a stickler for honesty, who doesn't hide anything even when she should ("the bomb was not in the briefcase"). Only late in the game we see a pair on Chanel (underpinning her deception: she pretends to be honest here) and one on Vicky when she finally takes a stand (by her husband).



Let's stay at the costumes department for one more observation. The green hoodie sweater is a symbol of David's inner softness as well as its (partial) comfort. It is earmarked for particularly disconsolate occasions, as at the hospital when Julia's death is confirmed. Later, at his suicide attempt, the hood produces an outstanding impression when David, bent forward on his knees (with a fitting hairstyle) strongly resembles a penitent monk (trying to expiate Julia's death with his own. Having been appointed as her "bullet-stopper", shielding her with his body every day, the reasoning must be that his life is worth less than hers, that he was meant to die instead of her.)

The act itself, at first unimaginable (to me) to be envisaged by such a committed father of young children, became somewhat acceptable when I heard the actor's conception of it (stated in an interview for *Variety*): that David thinks the world (including his children) would be better off without his failing self.



### Eyes

But we are not finished with David’s face yet. There’s a wide and well-administered range of expression for him in Richard Madden’s eyes, of course. Note how they lose focus when he is extremely hurt or tripped up. He seems abstracted, almost numbed at times, which matches his PTSD.



### Mouth

David’s mouth is even more crucial to the character. To keep a stiff upper lip is a mind-set of his (apart from being a British national cliché), but it has not reached the structure of his face. (Here, at the latest, we need to reflect that all this arguing about unchangeable body features is a nod to the casting, in Madden’s case done by Jed Mercurio, who hired the actor straight out of their collaboration on *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, where he also plays a brooding young war veteran who, rather against his initial better judgement, gets involved with a woman far above him in social standing.)

But what about that mouth? — One finds it in photos sometimes, that during a person’s lifetime their lips become increasingly narrow, developing from the unguarded openness of a child expecting only good from the world, through accumulation of hurt and/or permanent emotional self-restraint, to finally look like they’re withholding their feelings completely, keeping all the inner things inside by compressing their lips.

David’s lips have stayed in the open, childlike mode. This unguardedness, again, speaks of his basic naivety (in its best sense), which runs contrary to the suspicious vigilance a bodyguard needs; so David’s lips form yet another part of his body’s conspiracy to give him away. Also, in showing so much willingness to let the inner (emotional) things out, they indicate what a huge struggle it must be to shut it in.

In the course of this struggle (and others) his mouth often assumes an expression of defiance—a very childlike emotion in itself. (Can you make yourself see it in the corner of his mouth?) His defiant part says, “It hurts, but I can manage, I don’t need help. If that makes my wife leave me, I will manage even without her, without intimacy”—whereas his lips’ striking kissability (Madden was nicknamed “fluffy pillow lips” following a remark by actor colleague Taron Egerton) gives him away again and surely didn’t escape Julia’s notice.

And consistently, the final and utmost betrayal David’s body commits, comes when Julia suggests intimacy. But let’s talk of that later.



Narrow lips are also (often unconsciously) associated with dishonesty because whatever we decide to reveal about ourselves in words, passes through the lips. So hiding your lips may symbolise hiding the truth. David's deceitful boss, played by Pippa Haywood, fits that stereotype. And Madden uses it in his first interview with Sharma and Rayburn by pulling in his lips (mostly the upper lip) several times while withholding the crucial information of his knowing the sniper. We rarely see him do that in other scenes (once more, notably, when Julia asks him about the identity of the gunman the evening after the attack; and once more very early on, when he is expected to look pleased about his assignment to Julia).



So David's lips tell us that he still wants to believe in the goodness of people (e.g. in Julia's honorable motives), that he really would like to share what's going on inside him, to share tenderness with someone, and that he is honest (about the script's setting him up as a potential assassin, see below).

### **Accent and voice**

With the issue of honesty, David's accent comes into play. Richard Madden chose to keep his authentic Scottish accent, which makes David feel authentic too (and an outsider in Julia's elite world), for apparently he isn't trying to disguise his modest background. That speaks of his straightforwardness as well as of his self-esteem.

The guttural nature of the idiom itself, intensified by David's resonant, raspy voice, suggests that whatever he says isn't sugarcoated and comes from deep inside him, i.e. is true.

The accent also works to further endear David to us because—contrary to Julia's pronunciation—it sides him with the less privileged (plus apparently a Scottish accent is widely considered charming, especially overseas).

So even his voice and accent give him away: they tell us (amongst other hints) that in truth he is honest—while the script stipulates he might secretly contemplate an assassination. I haven't mentioned any such darker sides of his character so far because I never could see it, mostly due to the conception of the character as a whole. Having established David's integrity so impressively in the first sequence on the train (and further on), there was no believing in such an irrational

slaughter scheme. The scenes of him looking menacing (not bad in themselves) are too isolated within the whole, mostly favourable picture (at least for my purpose of forming a consistent character of David; a goal, which in itself is questionable, but that's how the human brain works).

Volatile in his actions as David is seen to be, those actions are always guided by a strong moral compass, not so much of law (though he even cares about security protocol) but of humanity. One cannot paint such a striking picture of that humanity, of David's strong sense of personal and professional pride (not least in always doing the right thing), and then expect us to consider his more than faintly considering to resort to this kind of violence (involving abandoning his kids, most probably).

### **Stray thoughts on the conception of characters**

This is my main objection to the script in terms of psychology. Granted, none of us is really consistent—morally and otherwise (very credibly done with Julia, by the way!). And there's a wide, foggy, debatable zone between slightly overstepping a character's consistency (e.g. making them behave awkwardly to create a red herring and leave it hanging) and on the other hand suggesting something so far out of character that it interferes with the audience's ability to make out a character at all (a prerequisite for empathy). For my part, though delighted by Mercurio's picking holes in film conventions, I could only connect with David in shoving all the hints of actual violence away.

Realising this, however, sets off an important reflection: how very often we believe what we want (or need) to believe (in my case: characters are on the whole consistent and David is on the whole a good character). It's important because "we believe what we want to believe" is also a strong theme in the show, played out by a number of characters' trust or distrust in another (and often vice versa): David re Julia, Rayburn re David, Sharma re David, Sharma re Sampson, David/the audience re Nadia, and more.

### **Mum**

And finally, accentwise, there's the Mum thing. Even in British forums like [digitalspy.com](http://digitalspy.com), David's "Ma'am" was discussed to sound at least suggestively like "Mum" (while being understandable in its intended meaning). Everyone at work says it, but in David's accent it sounds still more like "Mum"; and the idea of this emotionally lost young man in need of guidance and comfort going about his job calling every one of his female superiors "Mum" is utterly comical and poignant at the same time. The same goes for his addressing Julia in this way, heightened by their affair, also including an age difference. Intended or (rather) not—the Mum thing happens to match David's needs and—though a cliché—would be plausible as part of his being attracted to Julia.

### **First conclusion —**

#### **A mutual protection society (and no chance of hiding who you are)**

Having explored David's contradictory traits and features minutely, we can now safely say in what way this character is torn. There's a wish for toughness (or at least the appearance of it) on one side; and on the other: just being human; which includes being sensitive and vulnerable, not always fully in control, desiring honest, open-hearted interchange and deep human connections. (Richard Madden's Golden Globe was well deserved for portraying this contrast and, more intricate, David's different layers of authenticity, for David does a lot of acting himself.)

Also, with all that's been said before about David's partly naive, childlike radiation, one could conclude that, complementary to what's in German called *Kindfrau* (child woman), David has the quality of a child man (that's avoiding to call him *Lolita* because there is nothing lascivious in his behaviour), thus potentially engaging a woman of let's say Julia Montague's age and disposition into finding him sexy as well as stir up a certain protective instinct.

And that would be the ultimate thematic twist: While he is (by profession) her protector, his very perceptible sensitivity underneath his tough demeanor, along with his age and struggle, awakens *her* protective instinct—which sort of gets a mutual protection society going (rather sweet, isn't it?). It is true at least in a more factual sense: as the Home Secretary it is her job to protect the country (including him) and it is literally his job to protect her.

On the theme of (self) protection, Richard Madden said in an interview (with the *Daily Beast*), he thought of David as having sort of a crooked reasoning going on—that as long as he could keep his family and his principal from harm, he himself would somehow remain intact. (That, of

course, he hasn't been in a long time.) But even that faulty concept is shattered by Julia's death, leaving him shattered and leading him to invert (self) protection to self destruction.

Vicky, as opposed to (this interpretation of) Julia, sees him not as someone to protect but rather expects to be looked after by him (correspondent to his own approach of his role). But in the end it is her who saves him—by the simple act of standing by him, like a partner. (She has come from being unable “to stand back and watch” his health deteriorating to actively standing by him.) This protection officer seems to need a lot of protection ...



**And what about that emotional truth? (heightened language alert!)**

Now, what answers does the depiction of David's personality provide to the questions we started out with? — Firstly, that there's little use in trying to cover up your hurt and who you are altogether. It doesn't work anyway, and it doesn't help. David tries to camouflage, but his body is telling another story (whenever he is unalert and wherever he can't influence his looks). In truth, he really wants to be open and share emotions unreservedly.

It takes a leap of faith, but to let down your guard and risk showing yourself is your only chance of well-being and indeed survival (read more on that in part three of this discussion). It is the only way of having meaningful relationships and maintaining your sensitivity, which is not to be oppressed but to be tended as a part of our humanity.

Speaking of which, if you want to follow David's body betraying him into his affair with Julia, you can do that in part two.

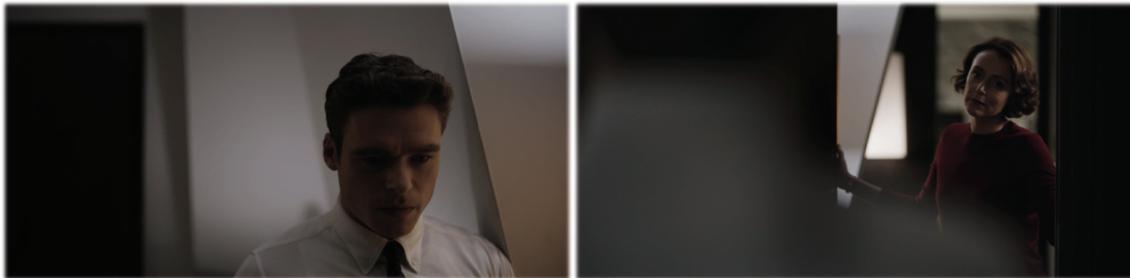


## What makes *Bodyguard* so successful? —

### Part II: The relationship

In the tense and pulsating relationship between Julia (Keeley Hawes) and David, the issue of trust is negotiated ceaselessly, but I won't enter that maze (watch for yourself), only peek inside. Instead I'd like to assess why this unlikely pair came to be together at all and point out two beautiful guiding themes that symbolise the relationship's progression. Both matters, again, deal heavily with the body, very well befitting the show's title.

In the relationship, there is one crucial moment, that seems particularly intriguing. It's when they first have to negotiate the terms of their being together; or, more accurately: who is in charge of these terms, after Julia (he thinks) orders him to have sex "like I'm room service". When she suggests, "We are not handling this very well, are we?" he agrees and reconsiders the whole thing.



The pause in his following statement isn't scripted, but the performance highlights it. After one of his usual apologies ("It's me, it's my fault, I ...") he stops and (in my view) realises he has to tell her a milder version of the truth, saying "I never expected ..." (then breaks off again but probably means: "this affair to happen").

So what was he about to say (in the director's or actor's mind)? — What struck me, was "I never should have let this affair happen at all. You being my client makes this difficult as hell, and in truth I want to be with my wife."

### So why *did* he get involved in the affair at all?

After all, a good part of him loathes her for her political beliefs and actions, and also personally, there have been fewer ups than downs. Loneliness—on both sides—definitely played a part, but if it was only that—what a poor narrative! Let's see if we can find something more behind it. (As for the affair's justification within the plot, Jed Mercurio said in an interview for *Thrillist*, if both were scheming, then both would profit from the other's implicit trust, which an affair could promote. But I'm inclined to look elsewhere.)

At the beginning of their acquaintance (and pretty much all along it for that matter) both of them are torn by a multitude of conflicting impressions of each other, resulting in a strong mixture of sympathy and aversion, interest/gratitude and haughtiness, trust and suspicion, respect and unfairness/disdain. Their arguments and talks in Julia's flat deserve a minute study, but it wouldn't do to spell out every detail here; again, watch for yourself, it's carefully built.

Just one example: David/Dave. Many viewers have picked up on this small piece of conversation and some connected it to PS Budd's (suggested) double nature of protector/assassin. So when she asks whether to call him David or Dave, she is trying to build rapport with him, yes, but in the subtext (maintained by the writer for the audience) you could read it as her asking him, "Are you a goodie or a baddie?"

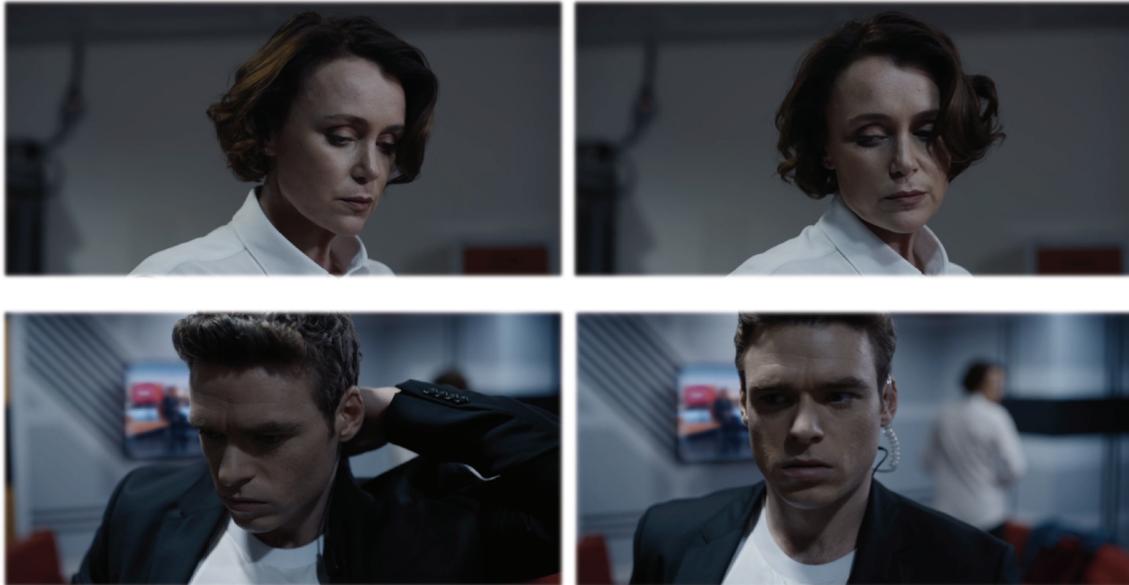
His evasive "I answer to both, Ma'am" keeps us on our toes (maybe even leads us to reflect that we all are good *and* bad, as mentioned earlier) and pleases *her* still less, as she betrays by her snide use of "David slash Dave" in replying to his provocative question about the Middle East (by which he has turned from goodie to baddie in her eyes). Eventually, however, she chooses to call him David (the goodie), i.e. to trust him (and so do I).

For the rest of it, suffice to say there's a lot of bouncing off each other, with her trying to get him closer time and again. Roughly spoken, the first evening goes from bad (being her fault) to goodish, the second from good to bad (his fault, the nagging question) and the third seems just harmonic (she has swapped dates, having chips with David at home instead of a fancy dinner with her flunky).

### **An ephemeral embrace**

One moment stands out in terms of eroticism. It is when he gives her the shirt off his back to save her face on TV (protecting her socially). The deed itself speaks of his general humanity and resourcefulness (thus confirming her first notice of these qualities in the 1/10 report and in his outwitting her ex-husband). It is performed gracefully (which was indeed tricky) and she respects him for all that, grateful for his innate loyalty (after just one day in which she had treated him quite badly). But then, there's a leap in quality when she feels his shirt around her, with the warmth of his body still in it (and maybe a whiff of his adrenaline). Obviously, this is a very sensual experience for her.

This first moment of closeness is beautifully devised—like a very ephemeral embrace of his across all the distance and reservation between them. The camera, by staying on his slightly worried face just a bit longer than usual, suggests that *his* primal instincts are roused as well—as if he could sense her (sensing him) through the back of his head. For both of them, this sudden connection seems fairly unexpected.



The motif of the embrace (here only symbolic) will appear again to signpost certain stages of their relationship.

### **Crossing the fence**

In general, at the beginning he was well aware of keeping his distance (e.g. when she aimed for an informal mode of address (David/Dave), or when she first asked (indirectly) about the happiness of his marriage). He saw her very much on the other side of a fence from people like himself or Nadia (whom he called a victim of collateral damage like himself). At the veteran's meeting, he hears how little politicians understand about the motives of underprivileged people. Julia, he probably thinks, would have readily authorised the shot against Nadia, just like she approved the war operations he was in.

Before the sniper attack, she was little more than a bossy client with possibly a more human side to her (solving his son's schooling dilemma).

But after the attack, she is traumatised like him, exiled from her home like him and like his family. She has crossed the fence to his side and joins the club of the damaged. From his own experience, he knows exactly how shaken she feels, and this excites his compassion (we have seen with Nadia what a compassionate heart he has).

When Julia is practically begging to be hugged though, even expressly allowing him to touch her, he—though swallowing (with temptation, not unease, I assume)—is still hesitant to let

the distance crumble; possible reasons being his general sense of professionalism, his feelings for his wife, remaining reservations against Julia and/or simply not wanting to jeopardise the job he depends on).

But, notably, just like Nadia, she caught him in his own time in which he isn't so much guarded and girded, and more sympathetic. When we see him enter the hotel, he has dressed up to his half formal mode (off duty but not private): sports jacket, shirt (the light blue one he wore when assigned to her and will wear later when their affair gets busted) and jeans (I've mentioned them before).

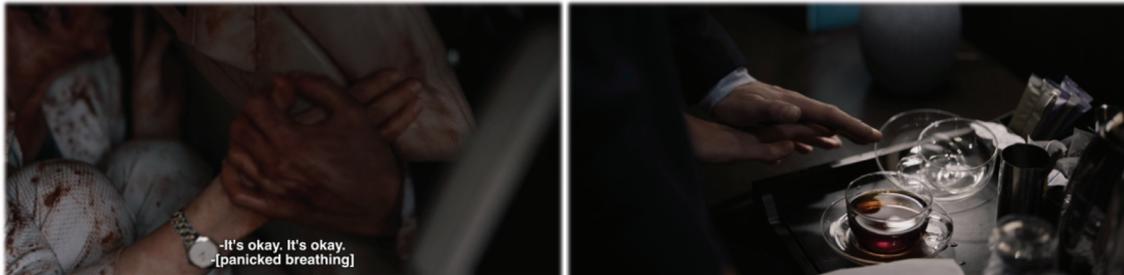
He obviously wants to keep this half-private meeting formal, but he's not as buttoned-up (literally) as on duty and, of course, doesn't wear his ballistic vest. This seems to make his heart more susceptible.

### A touch of hands

What finally brings him round to respond to the hug, though, (in my view) is the touch of her hand on his palm; this very sensitive, inward-looking part of the body he usually shields closely and has done so only a minute earlier, standing in his professional manner.



With that touch, she refers to a moment during the attack when he took her hand to calm her, also with his palm on the back of her hand.



In just turning towards him for a hug, she had asked solely for his pity, which he suppressed to stay professional. The touch of her hand reminds him in a very sensual manner that earlier today he has considered it part of his job to soothe her. Now she asks him to extend his duty just a tiny bit beyond its call. She appeals to his conscientiousness as well as to his heart.

That's when he allows himself (hesitantly) to let his compassion and his own yearning for comfort get the better of him. After all, he nearly died today, too. His little exhale may indicate that he is letting go of his shock now (as when Nadia was taken away) and how touched he is by this strong and also very self-restrained woman leaning on his shoulder. They finally embrace as a man and woman having survived together.

But, of course, it doesn't stop there. This is the fulfillment of the promise at the TV studio: After feeling only his shirt enveloping her gently, here he is in the flesh and a lot more tangible. The erotic potential has risen accordingly.

This takes the motif of embraces a substantial step forward. The motif of their hands touching is the other guiding theme I've mentioned. It started with a very cool handshake at their first meeting and (after what's described here) continues with two more significant instances.

### But why does she feel attracted to him?

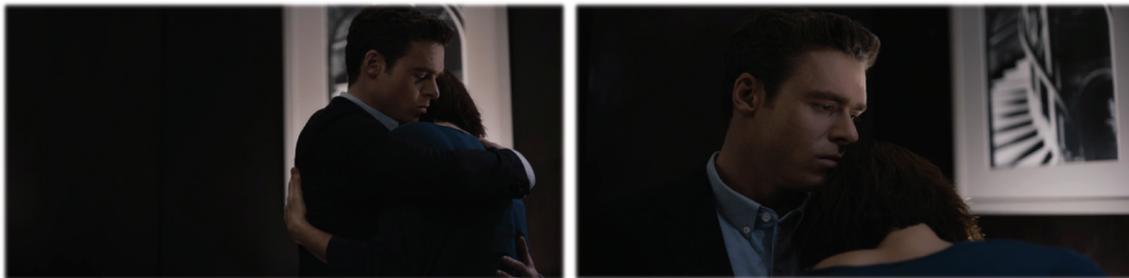
I haven't fully answered the question concerning *his* involvement yet (pausing between hug and kiss), but let's change to her view briefly in between. Considering how lonely she must be in her personal life when in the evening after such an attack she is quite alone, there is much grounds to understand her. Also, he has won her respect from day one by his unwavering professional demeanor even in the face of insult, by his self-esteem and sense of pride (e.g. in not forgiving her instantly at the end of their bad first day; she had to call herself a "total cow" before he was inclined to) and even by his not shying away from questioning her politics.

With all of that, David's character is specifically built up as an opposite to that spineless lickspittle of a flunky of hers (Rob Macdonald, played by Paul Ready), who would have gladly jumped into bed with her. This alleged alternative is needed to point out that, despite her loneliness, she wouldn't just take any reasonably good-looking man around her (plus Macdonald's displeasure provides some of the few funny moments in the show).

David, on the contrary, has impressed her by his doggedness, his wits, his loyalty and, of course, by his determined action during the sniper attack. She has perceived his warm concern for his children and witnessed his indulgent reaction to his upset and rather unreasonably offensive wife (whom he (still) called "love" in front of his client, which makes an endearing little slip of behaviour of the sort I've mentioned in part one). This must be a very loving man (if you can get his love). And Julia needs someone to have a private (preferably intimate) relationship with (while her job allows no time for a separate private life), someone to trust (he's the only one, she says later) and make her feel more human. With David she has been to hell, and he has saved her. I rest my case (for now).

### Stray observations on the set design

But again, what about his side? — An obvious answer is hinted at by the background framing his head during the hug (production design: James Lapsley; set decoration: Annalisa Andriani). A moment earlier, it was visible as a picture of a bright spiral staircase, leading from a very gloomy place up into the unknown. That's what this potential connection promises to him: he doesn't know what will come of it in the end, but in between it would be a bright spot, compared to where he sets off from.



### The bodyguard's body's need of another's body

Now for my actual interpretation, why he gets into the affair: in the later scene, when they are lying nakedly under the sheets together, her legs wrapped around him, it is the only time ever we see David completely relaxed and comfortable. You can sense how soothing this intimacy and extensive contact with the skin is for him. (It is daylight, so most probably they've spent the whole night together.) The bundle of nerves that he usually is, he must be constantly aching for that sort of comfort. (This is probably what's behind his frequent wish of calling his wife at night.) It makes sense that these caresses beneath the sheets are able to counterbalance (to a certain degree) the harshness of the world outside and the cruelty man is capable of in war.

So I would state that what he succumbs to at their first kiss, is a mixture of compassion for her, his own yearning for affection (missing his wife), but foremost his distraught soul's craving for alleviation by feeling another human body skin to skin.

David isn't much of a talker, unconvinced that discussing problems will help much, but he instinctively pursues another way of reducing stress; a very archaic one—through contact with another's body. The embrace has given him a taste of it, her showing herself needy (very much so in asking for the hug) has probably encouraged him to yield to his own longing, and now he is willing to let it happen.

Only in hindsight we realise that up to now we have seen him go through life with very little physical contact. The noteworthy exceptions he has earned only by the most torturous ordeals, like the kids' hug after his suicide attempt. Before that, there is his close, shielding hug of Nadia, fearing his imminent death. (By the way, their little dance in the face of the gun barrels draws an exceptionally poetic image of a humane act; and what a beautiful notion: that a hug and a dance can save a life.)

That night, Vicky anxiously hugs him, and when they are alone shortly afterwards he takes her hand (the touch-of-hands motif branched out) as a prelude to an intended kiss and the intimacy he needs to let go of his stress.

That he isn't craving particularly the genital satisfaction of it (neither here nor with Julia that evening), is pointed out by a shot from episode one: the camera is gliding down from the ceiling of his twilight bedroom, first reaching his hand in hectic movement. Some may have thought of masturbation, but this is not the sort of need that primarily drives him at this stage. What we witness are his symptoms of PTSD: hypervigilance, sleep disorder, trembling. That's what he needs to soothe (by the most intimate human connection possible, which sex can be) and therefore he can't resist the offer—even if it comes from an inappropriate quarter.



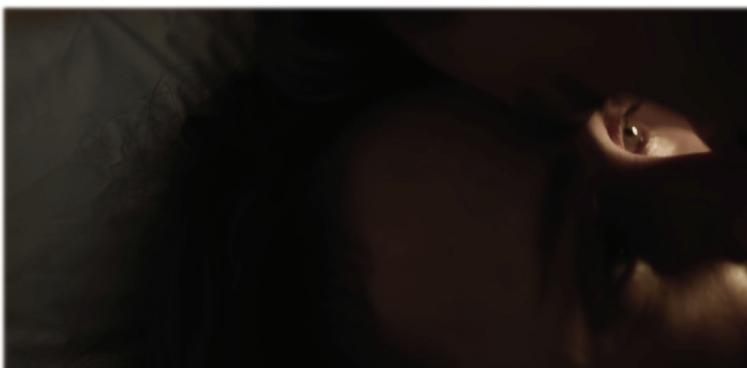
#### **At a loss with the sex scene**

After this very careful and coherent build-up, the following sex scene is a bit of a riddle to me. While consistent in a lot of ways (coming up), I couldn't break through seeing the montage as awkwardly jumbled together (as if there hadn't been enough (varied) material for the editor to create a convincing arc).

The shots don't seem to connect properly; they rather alternate in intensity, some seem way too casual, even trivial, some repetitive. The couple seems to be seeking a connection again and again—which in a way would even make sense (their tentative manner as a means for showing their mutual respect, so that it can be read as the beginning of a love affair rather than a sex affair), but somehow it doesn't look right; probably because it diminishes the impact of their finding each other in the first kiss (after which you'd expect the connection to be made). Or maybe it's just me asking for it to be more clichéd.

It could be meant to assist what I deem the greatest strength of the scene: that it avoids the impression of being just that typical, hectic clinging-to-life sex act following a near-death experience, with whomever is at hand: passionate but impersonal.

The fact that it is happening at all points to such an instinct, but not the way it is shown. These two take their time, and they do not act blindly. There's a look between them, showing that this happens consciously and deliberately with one another.



The stringy-shivery soundtrack just nails the atmosphere, and so do the absence of make up (or so it looks), of natural sound and of nudity. The slow motion gives it an appropriate look of gentleness and strenghtens the impression that especially he seems to sink into a very deep and almost otherworldly sensation (while she is harder to read but seems more rational).

Also remarkable: the strong clasp of their hands, palm on palm now, which suitably continues the story of their hands to maximum connection.

To finish the hand thread here and now: there is one more strong clasp later, just before her speech. It is part of her declaration of love as well as (unknowingly) their parting handshake. It couldn't be more affectionate in itself and thus couldn't be in stronger contrast to their first one on the street. — But back to bed!



When they surface from feeling to cerebation (she seems faster at it), unable to talk about what they have done or experienced, reserve kicks in again. At first, this seems hard to believe, having seen the said look, and overall, her initiating it (plus feeling drawn to him since well before that evening, yanking him back into her service) and him so intense. Also, after taking their encounter slowly, they also might surface slowly and thus be able to handle the transition. It made me think (exiting the emotional journey here once more) this drawback was conceived only to protract the tension between them (which it does).

But remembering the slightly ambiguous impression she gave, and that she is generally rather a rational type, we may believe she had second thoughts towards the end. (The post production script says she's embarrassed.) Of course, regarding their outward lives this is a total mess. Both must be very confused—with themselves and with each other.

### **The aftermath**

In regard to *his* feelings we are quite at a loss now as well (which keeps us intrigued). Is he regretting it? Does he feel used? Does he want more of it?—Probably he doesn't know himself at that stage. And on top of that confusion his bosses try to alienate him from her, ordering him to listen in on her. Commander Sampson cannot know it, but she probably makes him feel like a gigolo by calling him Julia's "blue-eyed boy" (thus continuing a thread of belittling him, after the ex-husband's monkey comparison and the flunky's calling him "Johnny-on-the-spot", referring to a deed way beyond his own cowardice).

Also, it must feel pretty grotesque to David, how they are forcing him—again unknowingly—into quasi state-sanctioned sex with his client, depriving him of any chance to rebuild the distance (if that was something he contemplated). With the allegation about the school's name, Sampson touches his sorest spot. Julia wasn't able to lull his suspicions on that one. (The sniper attack had interrupted her appeasement.) This time his face distinctly shows how strongly he feels the plausibility of Julia's knowing in advance, and how upset he is about it.

The family is his Achilles' heel, and always has been. Julia uses it several times to get him to open up to her more. Craddock uses it later on to blackmail him. And now, Sampson seems to have won with the family as a trump card.

### **He: conflicted, she: unsuspecting**

This mistrust, in addition to their unresolved parting, heats up their next one-on-one encounter (a powerful image: the symmetry of their standing on each side of the threshold.) With yesterday's experience within reach, he probably leads himself to doubt again that she can be so calculating (we believe what we want to believe!). So instead of confronting her with the charges, in dubio, he gives in to sex again, though with a look allowing to be interpreted as (self-)contemptuous.

And he takes his grudge with him; it seems almost like a (weird kind of) punishment: quick, vehement and rather impersonal—the very opposite of yesterday (again with a congenial and very different sound to it, being all breath). Then he had kept his shirt on (as a last bit of self protection, covering his scars), now it is even the bullet proof vest (so his heart cannot be touched this time).

For her, this (also) seems primarily lust-driven at first, but her talk of their respective jobs indicates that she is already thinking about a serious relationship, not noticing his being multiply conflicted. This time she's into it more than him. They are together physically but couldn't be more out of sync in every other respect.



### Bliss at last

The story now passes over the rim of the next episode, and we have missed something substantial that must have happened in between: his deciding to trust and/or forgive her. Because, as mentioned, for once they seem completely at ease with each other—as long as the world is shut out and they are hidden. (Or has he managed to shut out his suspicions as well?)

Indeed it seems after that very strange beast of their second sexual encounter they spent the night together, and the ample skin contact has worked its wonders on his psyche.

The white sheet drawn all over their bodies and heads is not a new means of symbolising such a lovers' den, but it works beautifully, forming the high point of the embrace thread and mirroring its start, with her in his (equally thin white) shirt at the TV studio. Now the sheet enwraps both their naked bodies together, providing a tiny space for this relationship, only flimsily protected. This cover is as thin as an egg hide (and as the cover of their affair, with the guards right outside the door) and in fact very revealing of their intertwined position. But they readily accept this little breathing space.

Now they are in cahoots. This is the time to really get to know each other (the daylight enhances that), to be intimate beyond the body. Until now, she knew very little of him. This is the first time we hear them talk about his war deployment and witness her noticing his scars, which, emblematising his mental damage, is probably a very delicate matter to him and apparently requires more intimacy than just sex.

(And this is what finally acquaints her with the consequences of sending people off to war. David has finished the sniper's job in rather a different way than Andy had thought of; a way that is much more likely to "stop her" (by changing her view). She was never enabled to decipher the sniper's actual message. He wanted her to feel the shock, fear and pain of war, the acute panic of being about to die, and she'll get to feel that through David, too, when being throttled.)



So it doesn't stay blissful (thankfully for the drama). There's only a short glimpse of them enjoying their secret, playing charades in front of the sentinels. Julia, having no grievances left, is even playful, plotting to trap him for a kiss at the toilet (when of course she has had her good morning kiss. They have separated only for dressing).

That she contrives such a thing at all, further hints at her wish to connect the two halves of their double-life, considering him seriously as a partner. But this scene is double-edged and doesn't

end well. (It's a pattern of theirs: after a promising start, it ends in a serious setback.) Very well done, how she suddenly looks designing and vain.



### [Geek excursus

Interestingly, the three intimate encounters I've just described mirror the three one-on-one encounters we've seen earlier on in her flat, thus forming two parallel threads:

| No. | <i>Talk in her flat</i>   | <i>Intimate encounter</i>  |
|-----|---|--|
| 1   | Begin: She behaves like a cow. (bad)<br>End: She apologises, he relents. (good) | Begin: They find each other. (good)<br>End: She sneaks off, leaving him hanging in midair. (bad) |
| 2   | Begin: They chat amicably. (good)<br>End: He asks critical questions. (bad)     | Begin: He is conflicted but says nothing. (bad)<br>End: They take themselves off to bed. (good)  |
| 3   | They have chips and a tea afterwards.   | They chat under the sheets in harmony.   |

There's a pattern of how the first two meetings of each thread contain a change of mood within their respective courses, while the third meeting of each thread is harmonic—which makes a veritable dialectic composition in this Sunday night TV show ...

On closer look, the bad vibes in scenes No. 1 of either thread are predominantly her fault, in No. 2 his fault. Of course, only geeks draw charts, but I would state (and many a crew member has said it on various shows) that it transpires; that the audience in some subconscious way picks up how balanced and coherent those deeper structures are, often strengthened by the contributions of various production departments.

End of geek excursus (or maybe the elevator scenes deserve a closer look ...?)

### Endings

I won't follow all their ups and downs any further, just tie up two loose ends: Firstly, how is the "room service" scene mentioned at the beginning resolved? — Similar to the "total cow" she accommodates him by humbling herself; this time to perform a seductive act instead of making a businesslike appointment. Either this does the trick (as it did with the "cow" quite passably), or he already plans to rummage through her things at night (doing a bit of scheming himself), and this is his entrance ticket. (But, no, he wouldn't ...)

And secondly, how does the embrace thread end? — Shortly after the hand thread projects a promising new start (their affectionate clasp just before her speech, denoting a real partnership), the embrace thread provides the obligatory setback and a poignant coda, as we see him after the explosion, hunkering over her fatally injured body.



## Second conclusion — A Shakespearian bluff, innocence lost & masculinity failed

Perhaps the strongest suit of this relationship's depiction is that the old movie cliché of an unlikely couple that first fights a little, then falls in love and all is well, is broken. Their relationship is extremely intricate, and secrets as well as doubts hardly ever leave on both sides (with her being significantly more ignorant and unsuspecting than him). He never confesses to his initial hostility towards her, his knowing the sniper or his spying on her. And even after *her* biggest secret, the ever-looming school matter, is resolved shortly before her speech (her death-bed confession, so to speak) and she has made her emotional sincerity clear, there is still the question of his feelings for her.

We see how moved he is by her commitment (maybe because he wants to be with her, too, (having developed feelings for her) but definitely because it proves that his PTSD symptoms don't *have* to be relation killers—he has throttled her only the night before). But, however, she is in job mode and forgets to ask if her vision for their future was actually okay with him. (We never get to know how she envisages his exact role “right beside” her, but it seems nearly impossible to think of a position suiting them both and also the public eye.)

It doesn't get put to the test, anyway. We should have minded that Julia's green room isn't green (hope) but black-and-white. She (in a red blouse) looks at the red roses (i. e. contemplates her love), but the colors are pale and they both appear small at the edge of the frame. Dominating it, looming behind her, is the black-and-white picture of a bleak wintery forest. It may point to her impending fate (winter being a symbol of death; “winter is coming”, one is tempted to say for the *Game of Thrones* people) and also foreshadow their prospects, had it gone otherwise: their love was probably doomed to get lost and freeze in the cold, treacherous and merciless political world she operates in.

Needless to say, this is a counterpart of the picture in the hotel, one marking the start of their love affair, the other its end.



### Julia's name

Here's the place to discuss Julia's name because in my view it is a reference to the relationship—though, at first sight, the hard-bitten Home Secretary ambitiously pursuing her career seems anything but to wait and sigh for her Romeo (by the way, a nice off-screen correlation to Richard Madden's having played Romeo on stage twice, recently only in 2016).

I think the Shakespearian reference served Jed Mercurio to outfox the audience because the play features Juliet being only seemingly dead: her lover finds her lying lifeless (in a tomb on the stage in Shakespeare, on a stage turned into a tomb here), and as soon as he is convinced of her being actually dead, he wants to take his own life.

In Shakespeare, the audience knows she is still hanging between life and death when he despairs. So why can't we assume the same here? And indeed, the rumor mill (in social and other media) was immediately set in motion about Julia perhaps being not really dead. It hasn't even stopped with the season's finale, speculating she might be brought back for season two.

Her last name, I think, carries additional significance: Juliet is a Montague only for the short time between their secret marriage and her death (a forum member at Digital Spy pointed that out; I'd have overlooked it), which may indicate that Julia's whole existence (emblematised by her name) is fulfilled only in her short time with David, i.e. she sees him as the love of her life (though she certainly wouldn't use these words)—which would prove the viewers who called her a scheming bitch quite wrong (or well, ok, we all are good *and* bad).

### Living together—really?

Therefore, to me, her name signifies a great love that's not meant to be. She dies when it is little more than budding.

Which leads us to David's last name (the roses in the green room encouraged me to readopt this notion I had already discarded as too corny). What's budding here, promises a new start to her, after an emotionally draining divorce and the moral decay accompanying her political rise. (Keeley Hawes portrays this extremely contrary woman with seemingly effortless credibility; and there's no knowing *how* she does it either.)

Contrary to the permanent weighing of cost and benefit, to the frequent moral compromises made in politics, David is pretty much value-driven (he looks distinctly uneasy about his spying—a fix he got into because of her shady schemes!). He is streetwise but not an intrigant and (as far as she knows) has kept his integrity.

In that moral respect he's a sheet anchor to her, a link to what she has lost on her road to blackmail: her former idealism, uprightness, innocence and happiness (remember "Rosebud" from *Citizen Kane*?). And that *would* be worth trying to overcome all obstacles regarding a partnership; that would indeed be something to longingly sigh for.

(And would it have been such a utopia when, in May 2019, Thailand's king Maha Vajiralongkorn married the woman he had hired as his bodyguard five years earlier and made her queen?)

### Two meaningful body threads and an overwhelming bodily need

Both threads accompanying their relationship (embraces and hands) are quite subtle. Some parts of them were certainly scripted from the beginning. But at least the touch of hands in the car during the sniper attack was said to have been devised only there (Mercurio in an interview for *Vulture*). It's little short of a marvel that, in the collaboration of so many during production and post production, such pivotal links are achieved. There's a lot of emotional truth and a lot of beauty in their bodily interaction; and bodily contact is also at the centre of David's need for soothing.

So next to the main character's portrayal, as discussed in part one, the depiction of the story's main relationship also does the title credit: we find out a lot about it regarding bodily issues closely.

### Gender roles and David's other relationship

Not only are certain gender stereotypes broken here, like a woman being more a creature of instinct vs. a man being more rational (with David and Julia it's the other way around), but a whole traditional take on gender roles is proved wrong.

In part one, I have mentioned how David is stuck in those views of how to be a (family) man. More than the war experience itself, the inability to open up, show weakness and accept help (which was there before and worsened or even triggered the PTSD), is what destroys his marriage (with his wife, of course, playing her part in a very realistic dynamic of the unhealthy, immature aspects of their partnership).

The gender (combined with a cultural) bias also makes him misjudge Nadia because it simply doesn't enter his mind that she could be anything other than a victim.

When he finally tackles therapy, things get better in the marriage accordingly, not least because it will (hopefully) change his views of masculinity as well (though in the last scene his daughter is still a princess, the son a monster).

Does meeting Julia change his gender concept? — Well, she as a woman certainly radiates determination and confidence, the very things he strives for. He'd probably say that she, very much like himself (though in different circumstances), can't afford to admit to any weaknesses either, holding the office she does and aiming for an even higher one. But contrary to him, when traumatised, she is not afraid to show her anxiety and need of comfort. That must have made a substantial impression on him. It encouraged him to engage in the affair but didn't suffice to start a therapy.

For that he needed the ultimate threat presented to him in the season's finale. How that one can be read as densely stuffed with symbolism and the eternal myths, and how contemporary Gods get to be in organised crime, you'll find in part three.



## What makes *Bodyguard* so successful? —

### Part III: The finale

It has to get worse before it gets better: in episode six, the torn and traumatised PS Budd, on top of all his suffering, gets turned inside out.

Through the risks he has taken in trying to solve the case single-handedly, David finds himself in an explosive vest all alone underground. (He has gone to the underworld in every sense of the word, trying to track down the sniper's gun via an illegal arms deal, and had been taken by the thugs from a downstairs bar room to this dungeon-like place below a sewer grid.) It is a shocking moment for the viewer, remembering the very first sequence of the show with Nadia in a similar vest and knowing how the wearer will be treated. The story has come full circle.

To make it worse, his bomb has got a dead man's switch: It goes off, not when he *presses* the button, but when he loosens his grip. The thugs have taped his thumb on to the switch. "Hold on tight, don't ever let go", is the maxime.



It was David's maxime all along in (not) dealing with his war trauma. All the time we saw him trying, sometimes desperately, *not to let go* and show his emotions, not to reveal his distraught mind, not to go nuts. In one nightly phone call to his wife he affirms, "I've put a lid on this."

He had tried to put a lid on (and shut in) these horrors—the memories, the panic, the desperation and the pressure of disguising it all. Over time they have formed sort of a powder keg of their own inside him. (A "ticking time bomb" is what Richard Madden called David's disposition in his interview for *Awards Chatter*.) And now all those covered up aspects of his psyche appear (symbolically) on the outside, neatly arranged in their separate wrappings around his body.



The stress had made him shaky and sleepless at night in his bed, where no one could see it. Now he is out in public, shaking all over with fear. Fear of letting go of the trigger and getting blown apart (in which case his carefully hidden interior would be brought to light very violently).

He had, with enormous willpower, always tried to contain himself, to keep his mental powder keg from exploding. But we have gotten a glimpse of what happens when the lid shifts/the grip is loosened: it is when Julia catches her bodyguard off guard at night, and he throttles his attacker, who's gotten on top of him in his sleep, for a considerable time, before he realises who she

is. (It is his primal instinct at work when he is sitting ape-like over her—the other (the dark) half of the primal instinct that led him into the affair, craving physical comfort. The latter was beneficial because Julia is better prepared than Vicky to face this dark side, as is proved by her commitment.)

All along he had tried to hide that something is wrong with him (like the scars are hidden on his back). Now, as his mental powder keg is turned outside to visibility, as he stands on the street with the deadly contraption strapped tightly around his body, just as inescapable as the one within, it simply cannot be overlooked any more that something is very wrong with him. And finally he has to face it.

#### **But how does one get out of it?**

The thugs have left him helpless. In the case of the bomb it is clear to him from the moment he comes round in that grave-like spot beneath the gully: he has to get help. He has to risk going out, has to show himself in his despair and ask for support. Just what he has always been avoiding. He has been in pretty extreme situations before but always denied needing help with the powder keg. It took this ultimate threat to do it.

But dealing with the problem in a purely rational way (like “I was set up, put me out of it”) doesn’t help. People are not paying attention (passers-by), they mistrust him (Louise Rayburn) or follow their own ruthless agenda (his boss Craddock). In the end, what saves him, is to open the lid, to loosen the grip. The very thing to be afraid of with your finger on a dead man’s switch. The very thing he was so afraid of all the time because he is convinced it would destroy him (in everything but his physical life): PTSD means no chance of a job, therefore no livelihood for him and his family, i.e. social death.



Now is the time to painfully come clean; a notion, which is introduced gradually: firstly he has to ask for help on the street but still covers up the bomb with a rag. Then he is forced to raise his hands, which means revealing the bomb. And he has to keep his hands in the air all along, which leaves his face exposed throughout his agony.

In the end, the thugs, who wanted him dead with the vest, did him a favour and brought him back to life (and not once but twice, having swapped his bullets for blanks earlier); because the ultimate threat of actually being blown apart physically (his social and emotional life is in pieces already), the shock and stress of the situation, the prolonged frustration of not being understood and trusted finally makes him cry (just the thing he forbade his son).

As tears are in themselves a part of letting go, this finally helps him to open up and address his wife (in what he thinks might be the last moments of his life) very affectionately, self-assessingly and honestly. For the first time he is able to say that “part of me never wanted to explain what the war did to me”.





In this speech, he very publicly displays utter weakness, expresses his feelings of love, regret and desperation; and this saves his life, for it awakens compassion and trust in the explosives officer, who steps forward and volunteers to risk approaching David.

Eventually he opens the lid of the control unit, like David has just opened his heart. This is an existential, utterly threatening moment for David (in both ways), and the picture gets blurred accordingly (as it did at his suicide attempt and as it will later, when he defuses the bomb). Now the control unit (heart) lies bare on David's chest.

His making a clean breast of his troubles also kindles hope in his wife that she might get back the man she married. And it convinces her that, concerning his honorable motives, he has always been that man. So she finally takes the chance to prove that she herself is worthy of being gotten back (after repeatedly letting him take the blame for mishaps beyond his control) by the said brave act of standing by him (literally), thus putting him out of immediate danger.

This turn also debunks the motif of the lonesome hero saving the world—as hard as he has tried, here in the vest and before in solving the case. He is at his wit's end now and needs others to help him.

### Defusing by therapy

After having bargained the chance to survive, there is still the technical problem of getting this vest off. (By the way, he isn't wearing the vest—the vest is wearing him; shutting him in like he has shut in his trauma.) Again, in this case he willingly accepts the guidance he obviously needs. It's an open-heart operation on the control unit, but no other person can do it on him or for him. In the end, he has to do it himself, taking active responsibility in the process—very much like the process of therapy. Neutralising the bomb can be read as an analogy to going through therapy.



In both processes, he cannot know what he will encounter. Hidden booby traps might be waiting for him somewhere in the vest and blow him up; with the powder keg he fears the same: that once he opens the lid, it might explode (i.e. he might be going nuts). But he isn't a booby and his awareness takes him through it.

The analogy works all the way down to a very detailed level. Notably, it isn't enough to simply cut a wire to neutralise the threat. In dealing with the trauma, just trying to cut off his memories and anxiety hasn't worked either. This is even dangerous. The first and savious act must be to bridge two parts, to make a connection in the control unit. He has to go back, connect with what has traumatised him and relate to what happened all along emotionally.

Emotionally he has been numbed, almost dead already. Now, as you could say in a very heightened language (alert again!), he has to go through death properly (the underworld, tomb under gully, *dead man's switch*, flight via graveyard, revisiting horrors in therapy) to come back to life. Or you could just call it catharsis.

In many contemporary stories that seem remarkably powerful, there is a streak of the great old stories of humankind. The hero going to the underworld and coming back from it is such a streak, in Greek drama as well as in the Christian narrative of resurrection (citing only western tradition here).

Another such streak matches David's salvation from suicide. That he was prepared to sacrifice himself (in exchange for what he sees as his failure to protect Julia) is enough of an expiation, one could say. He is saved from actual death, like Isaac or Iphigenia are saved by God/the Gods; only here the Gods operate in organised crime.

Anyway, after going through death back to life, he may cut the ties (cables), free himself, and all those powder pouches may be opened with care and dealt with appropriately.



Taking a last look on the explosive vest, lying on the ground of the cemetery (which may remind us that the powder keg has led many traumatised people into suicide), one point of criticism of the analogy might be added. The powder keg is not so quickly and probably never totally shaken off as the vest is seen to be. But, like the scars on David's back, it may stop hurting after a while.

### **Third conclusion — It's the humanity, stupid!**

So I would state that what holds us enthralled in *Bodyguard* at the first viewing is its stunning action, extreme tension, hypnotising sound design and all that. The intriguing plot may make us watch it again to check out our theories. But what affects us deeply (if it does), is the (subconsciously felt) coherence of what is said on a deeper level, about human interaction and the human psyche.

Mela Z. started out interpreting literature, then went on to film analysis, reviews and other texts (usually in German). She is based in Austria.

Discuss this interpretation on <https://forums.digitalspy.com/discussion/2294119/bodyguard-bbc-one/p131> or tweet to @melaZwords

### Now, once and for all, what makes *Bodyguard* so successful?

1. Gripping storytelling (including the action scenes; with a hot current topic like terrorism, set in modern day Europe, with a lot of red herrings in the plot)
2. Emotional truth and relevance for us as human beings in the themes underlying the story, the characters and relationships (conveyed by impressive acting)
3. An endearing main character in a heartbreaking predicament
4. Carefully built relationships with a lot of attention to detail in all quarters to make them look beautiful and ring true
5. Strong symbolism and immanent references to some of the great myths of mankind
6. High production quality with great jobs in various departments (especially the sound design, which I have said hardly anything about because it still keeps slipping under my radar to do its subliminal work there; but also set decoration, camera, costumes etc.), which allows you to find new meaningful detail at every viewing

So go back and watch *Bodyguard* again!

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