

Review

Treating addiction with delicacy



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There are programmes that you run towards with the finger of anticipation poised eagerly over the remote, and others that can only be approached using some sort of complicated winching device. For obvious reasons, **Mum, Heroin and Me** (Thursday, Channel 4) fell into the latter category.

Jane Treays's documentary examined the relationship between a Brighton interior designer, Kate, and her 20-year-old daughter, Hannah. For the last three years, Hannah had been a heroin addict – before that she had been a binge drinker and before that an unusually angry child. Now she slept rough with her boyfriend, Ricky, who, inevitably, was a junkie himself. Kate lived not far away in a rather grand Regency house and spent much of her time trying to stop Hannah from sinking any further.

Normally, the spirits of the viewer go through an all-too-predictable trajectory while watching a film like this: down, down and down, often hastened by an unacknowledged glee on behalf of the director at being able to rub people's faces in such a brimming pot of human misery. But Treays's film wasn't like that at all. She didn't seek to diminish the grimness of Hannah's life, but this was less a portrayal of addiction, more a delicate, unusually penetrating portrait of a relationship in which the ties of devotion were being tested to their limits.

It was also about how we construct little piles of illusions to live by. Hannah clung to the idea that she would one day get off heroin, but did nothing constructive about it. At first, Kate appeared to have no illusions about Hannah's prospects, but as the film went on Treays showed how – despite herself – she kept pinning one imaginary target after another to the wall. Then, as disappointment swept in yet again, she struggled to readjust and start afresh.

Would the film have been less poignant if Kate had not been so conspicuously genteel? Very probably yes. Here was a woman who'd been forced to enter a world that nothing in her previous life had prepared her for. Starting out as an innocent, she'd had to trawl through the deepest troughs of experience. Only once did Treays put a foot wrong. Towards the end, we heard her offscreen voice tell Kate that this was 'a film about love'. It was – but I think we could have worked that out for ourselves.

While this won't come as any consolation to Kate, misery, as **Imagine... A Love Story** (Tuesday, BBC1) made plain, is a key ingredient in any great love story. Happy endings, unruffled accord, everlasting sexual bliss... None of that

nonsense. What we want is cruel fate, swinish behaviour and brine-sodden hankies.

During a richly enjoyable programme which analysed what makes love stories, from *Casablanca* to *Brief Encounter*, tick, Alan Yentob also talked to an American psychologist who had asked various couples about their experiences of falling in love. Without exception, they described it as some outside force that had magically struck them. Everyone was trying to shape their experience to a grand romantic ideal; they too wanted an illusion to live by.

As for the prospects of new great love stories coming along, these look pretty bleak. You need codes of behaviour to make the thing go with a lurch, and we live in a world where codes of



Mum, Heroin and Me Interior designer Kate and her heroin-addicted daughter Hannah

behaviour have laid down their weapons and mooched off into extinction. There are other factors too. Great love stories involve people stripping their feelings bare. Now, they strip both their feelings and their bodies bare.

In **Miss Naked Beauty** (Tuesday, Channel 4), Gok Wan was looking for 'a girl with real beauty, brains and courage to spearhead the real beauty revolution'. To begin with the contestants had to complete the sentence, 'The reason I think I'm beautiful is...' If they'd had to do it without bursting into tears, none of them would have got through the first round.

Stripped of their make-up, the women promptly dissolved into the biggest boo-hoo since Rachel wept for the Israelites in the book of Jeremiah. Meanwhile the judges attempted to soothe them with empowering blandishments – 'you look just like a goddess'. Then came the clincher: 'Girls, I'm going to ask you now to take out your piercings.' This was more than several could stand and they flung themselves clanking to the floor like the felled losers in a jousting contest.

'How tall are you?' one woman was asked. 'I'm four foot eight,' she chirruped. Not to be outdone, the next contestant said, 'I've just had a hysterectomy because of cervical cancer.' But then the inevitable happened: her eyes began to brim and she too was swept away on a tide of strident self-pity.