

MATADOR

THE LEGACY OF MATADOR

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Given the succession of iconic series that have swept across the international broadcast landscape in the last three years, an innocent bystander could be forgiven for assuming that Danish television drama sprang into the world, fully fledged, in January 2011.

That's when a BBC executive took a punt on a dark murder story with a complex female lead character, slipped it into BBC4's Saturday night schedule. And the rest is history.

The Killing had actually aired in its home country four years earlier. But suddenly, it was launched on a global trajectory: Nordic Noir went mainstream as a genre, Sarah Lund's jumper went viral and the way was paved for **Borgen**, **The Bridge**, along with Sweden's **Wallander** and **Arne Dahl**, to enjoy all-conquering success as wider audiences woke up to the creative depth of Scandinavia's TV talent.

The tide now seems unstoppable as **The Legacy** and **1864** take their place in the winter schedules, promising new, Danish twists on psychological and historical drama, respectively.

The sense that it all began with **The Killing** has been reinforced by the occasionally self-congratulatory delight of foreign programme buyers at 'discovering' this rich cultural seam and bringing it to our attention.

In fact, as studies such as Patrick Kingsley's entertaining *How to be Danish* make clear, **The Killing** was in many ways just another staging post in a revolution in Danish television drama production which had long been underway – a revolution inspired to a great extent by the success of the Dogme cinema movement during the mid-1990s, which gave more clout to directors and screenwriters. Programme makers had also started looking for ways to exploit the multi-layered narrative techniques and psychological complexities of successful long-running US drama series in their own ideas and concepts.

This might sound like a reaction to the conventions and parochialism of more traditional Danish television drama which had gone before. But ask a Dane to name the programme which nails the national character most accurately, and it is quite likely that they will bypass the modernism of cult

crime drama and the stylish economy of 21st-century family sagas, and wax lyrical about a series that dominated television viewing between 1978 and 1981: **Matador**.

At first glance, the psychological depth and realism of the inter-generational relationships which unravel in **The Legacy** – or indeed the sense of profound emotional damage that defines Sarah Lund’s character – might seem light years away from the more generic tropes explored in **Matador**, the story of a provincial town between the Depression and the slow post-war years of recovery. But the fact that the nation still heaves a huge, nostalgic sigh whenever it is reshown suggests that its own legacy is still too potent to be disregarded.

Matador, too, was revolutionary in its time. Translated as ‘Monopoly’, it tells the story of Mads Andersen Skjern, a puritanical entrepreneur, who arrives in the fictional regional town of Korsbæk, upsetting a host of apple carts and undermining the town’s clearly defined social, commercial and financial order. This one-man capitalist invasion is overtaken by the German occupation as the Second World War advances, heralding a period of rapid change and mixed fortunes for a rich cast of characters. Created by the distinguished journalist Lise Nørgaard, who also wrote many of the 24 episodes, and directed by filmmaker Erik Balling, **Matador** was a ground-breaking co-production between national broadcaster DR’s entertainment department and Nordisk Film. DR’s drama department took a superior view of serial drama at the time, considering single plays to be a more legitimate creative focus. But while some of the nation’s broadsheet critics shared that disdain, **Matador** was an instant popular hit.

“It was the first real thing that brought Danes together in front of a television screen,” says Professor Ib Bondebjerg, from the University of Copenhagen’s Department of Media, Cognition and Communication. “It has been broadcast seven times and each time has been almost as popular as the first time round. It seems that **Matador** resonates with an older audience but it also picks up a new audience whenever it is shown again. People know the scenes and characters so well, and some of the most famous lines have passed into the language. Today, it’s a monument. You can’t touch it and everybody agrees that it has a unique place in Danish culture.”

If the producers of **1864** were hoping that a historical drama focusing on an equally important period in Danish history, when the modern nation began to emerge from the wreckage of the Second Schleswig War, would enjoy a similarly affectionate reception, they must be disappointed by the heated debate that has greeted the series. The jury is still firmly out on its status as a landmark production. As Bondebjerg says, **1864** treats its subject with seriousness – some have suggested earnestness – which lacks **Matador**’s lightness of touch.

Matador’s use of gently comic moments to leaven individual social and financial conflicts, themselves often metaphors for more universal threats to traditional Danish ways of life – the quintessential clash between old-fashioned attitudes and modern ideas - is one of the keys to its longevity; it was made at a time when many people still remembered the age in which it was set. And Nørgaard’s Korsbæk, a thinly disguised version of Roskilde, her childhood home, was the perfect setting for essentially domestic events to reflect the national tensions caused by the German occupation and the ongoing modernisation of society.

Film historian Peter Schepele, who is also an Associate Professor at the University of Copenhagen, says it was clearly inspired by the popularity of British serial dramas **Upstairs Downstairs** and **A Family at War** when they were first shown on Danish television.

“I’m sure these were also in the perspective of Lise Nørgaard and Erik Baller, just as Lars Trier was later influenced by **Twin Peaks** when he made **The Kingdom**,” says Schepele. “In the 1970s and 1980s, we didn’t see very much US television in Denmark because the programme buyers thought it was vulgar. So **Matador** was certainly a result of the idea of trying to do with our history what the British had done with theirs, in terms of television drama.”

If that is the case, the parallel between **Matador**’s role as a prism for new dramatic influences, and the way current successes such as **The Killing** and **The Legacy** reflect the influence of cutting edge US television drama, is easy to see. In some respects, **Matador** is a time capsule which keeps on giving up its treasure even when, as Schepele says, the nation has been filled to the neck with it.

It has been released in every format, even given away with magazines, but a million people will still sit down and watch the reruns in their living rooms.

“Matador was the last really successful piece of national identity fiction,” he says. “When it was first shown, some people criticised the way new ideas were depicted. But today, it seems somehow to trigger a simple picture of the past that arises in our minds. The same is true of *Krøniken* [Better Times], which Stig Thorsbøe created ten years ago and picks up the story of how modern Denmark evolved.

As Schepelern explains, the idea was not to make a continuation of **Matador**, but to connect a fictional family saga with the bigger picture of Danish society, using the early days of the DR television network as a narrative vehicle. “It was a brilliant concept which worked very well, revealing how the country developed in the post-war years up to the time it joined the Common Market,” he says.

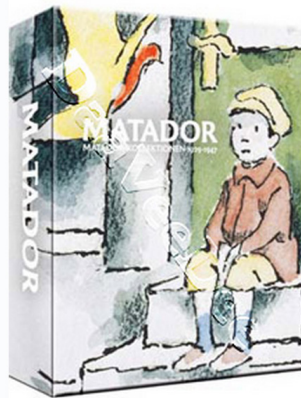
Matador had strong elements of folk comedy, and a simplicity that contrasts strongly with contemporary Danish dramas. “The most obvious difference is that we now have much more complexity in the psychology of the characters,” says Schepelern.

“In **The Legacy**, you have a kind person who does wrong things – in line with the American style typified by **Breaking Bad**, **The Wire** and **The Sopranos**. This allows the writers to be more sophisticated and there is no need to have simplified stories any more. But the danger is that you end up with a menu of clichés that are used over and over again. Every series has a defective character, and sometimes you do feel that there is an overwhelming range of problems! What else can we do, once we’ve run out of affairs, potential suicides and so on?”

If audiences do eventually tire of these complicated pile-ups, the next revolution will surely deliver yet another twist in the development of Danish television drama, in which simplicity could be a keyword. For the time being, however, it is thriving on its status as a fashionable and important commodity on the world stage, and its expertise in delivering what Ib Bondebjerg calls the “double story”.

“You can’t make a shallow product anymore,” he says “There has to be an underlying ethical or political dimension, so personal stories are always connected in some way with big social institutions and enterprises – as in **Borgen** and **The Legacy**.”

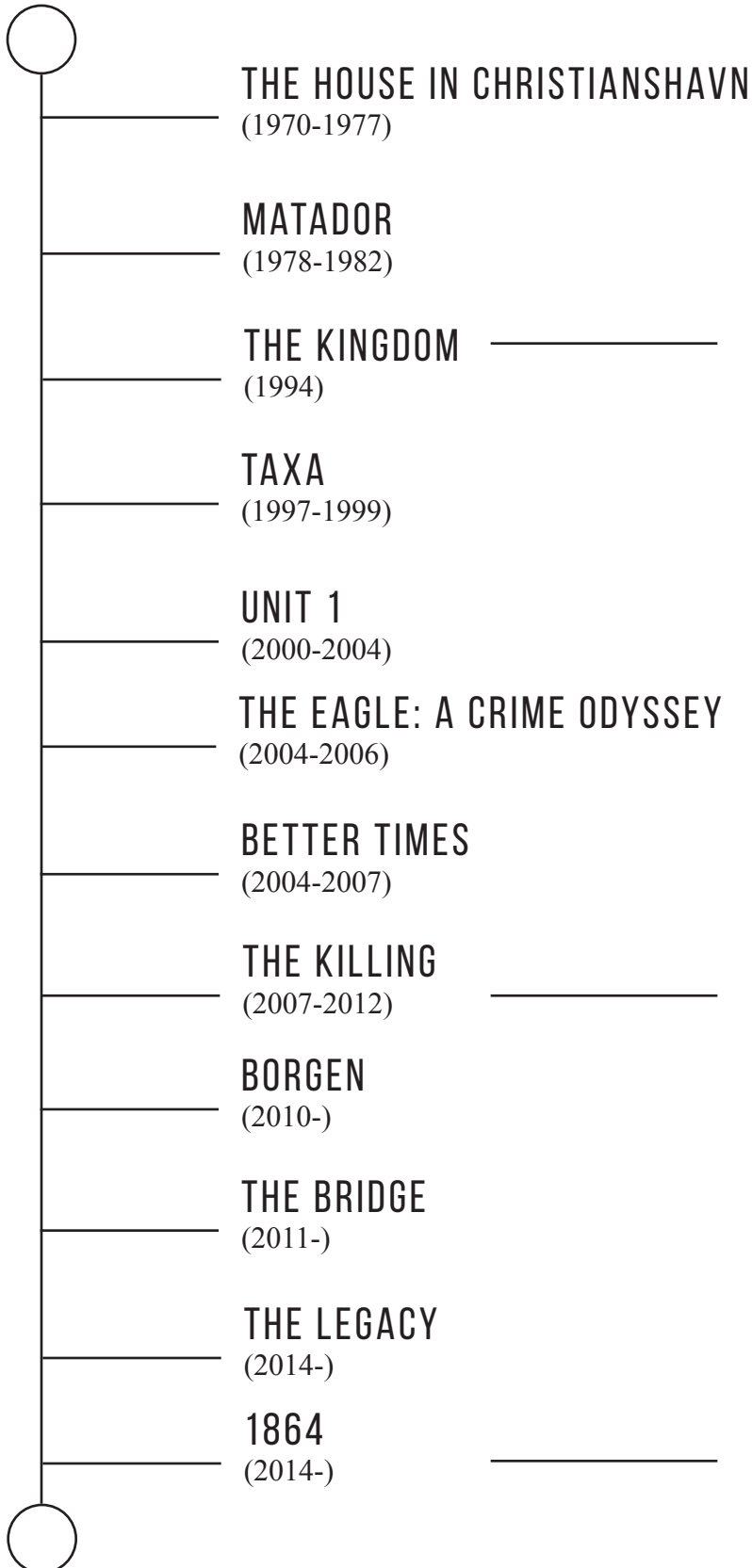
Those connections were also there in **Matador**, albeit on an embryonic scale represented by the town’s increasingly troubled private bank and department store. Despite the gulf between production styles and techniques then and now, perhaps Danish programme makers have always had an instinctive understanding of how to use the personal/social/national dynamic to make compelling drama. The fact that their approach is currently chiming in tune with international tastes is simply a bonus. “Many of us travelling to international research conferences are very aware of this new interest in Danish drama and we have to acknowledge that something exciting – not rotten – is going on in the state of Denmark,” he says. For the rest of us caught in its spell, taking some time out for a nostalgic feast on a **Matador** box set might be the best way to understand that the success of modern Danish television drama is firmly rooted in a tradition of quality and attention to detail. Equally, today’s successes reflect an ability to absorb new ideas and influences, and exploit them in productions that define and present a thoroughly modern cultural identity for a global audience.



Matador is available in DVD boxset online with English subtitles (with a bit of searching)

The Legacy is currently screening on British television, and DVD rights have been signed, meaning an announcement is due soon.

THE BEST IN DANISH TELEVISION



This series was made by Lars von Trier, and has recently been voted one of the scariest television programs of all time. Lars von Trier stated on the DVD that it is intended to be an up-to-date version of *Matador*.



The Killing was possibly the first Danish television series to launch to large international success, becoming one of the biggest series in the UK and one of the major names behind the 'Nordic Noir' genre.



1864 has been named the next big Danish television drama, also being the most expensive Danish series ever, costing an estimated DKK 173,000,000. The series premiered to mixed reviews.