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TELEVISION REVIEW

Skimp on the Champagne? Not This Cancer Patient

By [GINIA BELLAFANTE](#)

The premise of “Terminal City” — a cancer patient is hounded by the producers of a reality TV show — sounds as though it were something out of bad experimental theater. Right away you suspect an agenda. An award-winning Canadian mini-series being shown Thursdays on the Sundance Channel, “Terminal City” leads you to wonder if it might be trying to right the wrongs of so many years of “Survivor” and its culturally malignant offspring. I feared the worst: something that sought to tell us just how misplaced our priorities are.

“Terminal City” is instead an imaginative dramatization of illness that doesn’t indict or wallow or submit to the clichés it teases us with. Katie Sampson, played by the sensual Maria Del Mar, is a 40-ish mother of three who reacts to a diagnosis of breast cancer by submitting to entreaties that she star in “Post Op!,” a failing reality television show set in a hospital. Maria turns out to be beguiling on camera; she is beautiful and blithe, talking about her tumor as if she were dealing with nothing more than a poor credit rating. Before long she gets her own talk show, and soon she isn’t merely sick; she’s famous and sick.

Since the 1970s, cancer-themed television movies have followed a familiar pattern: tracking a sufferer’s trajectory from anger to courageous response. After the glasses are smashed and the vases are thrown, the lead, almost always a woman, arrives at a kind of emboldened self-understanding that makes us wish we were all held together with the same powerful glue.

Cancer is too ubiquitous to think about in purely ennobling terms, and what’s remarkable about “Terminal City,” and also about “Breaking Bad,” the AMC series about a middle-aged man whose lung cancer drives him to drug dealing, is the denial of all that optimism. From adversity, heroism does not always derive. Sometimes when people get very sick, they blunder about, distracting themselves as giddily or grimly as they always have.

“Terminal City” is at its most interesting as a study of avoidance. Katie is comfortable in the world of reality TV because she swerves from reality. When she learns that her prognosis isn’t good, she responds not by spending the nocturnal hours on [WebMD.com](#), researching every prospective mutation of her disease, every avenue of treatment. She drinks Champagne and refuses to answer the phone on the theory that it can only bring unwelcome news. Cancer has simply solidified her

bad habits. She seems like the sort of person who just lets the mail pile up — so few invitations, so many electric bills.

Katie is married to a handsome architect (Gil Bellows of “Ally McBeal”). They have a Modernist masterpiece of a house full of Platner tables and Jacobsen chairs. “Breaking Bad” is awash in the ugliness of surfaces: the brittle New Mexico terrain where the show is set, the vile and dirty bathrooms to which constant nausea necessitates emergency visits. “Terminal City” lacks that feeling of desperation; by virtue of the way it looks, the show reminds us that there is no point in denying just what a potent tranquilizer wealth really is. When Katie’s world is horrible, it still looks good; there are countless comforts to be derived from fine bedding.

Victimhood, in this series, is not merely a philosophical idea or a psychological identity, but also a condition open to variations of aesthetic style. By appearing on “Post Op!” Katie plays the role of victim — fashionably, cheekily — so that on some level she doesn’t have to feel like one. Her father-in-law is a Holocaust survivor and sees everything solely through the lens of that experience, refusing to eat *salade niçoise* because the French, he says, “were never friends to the Jews.” Katie is going to die, and she is going to eat and drink whatever she wants. If there’s a downside to “Terminal City,” it’s that it too will end prematurely.

TERMINAL CITY

Sundance Channel, Thursday nights at 9, Eastern and Pacific times; 8, Central time.

Created and written by Angus Fraser.

WITH: Maria Del Mar (Katie Sampson), Gil Bellows (Ari Sampson), Paul Soles (Saul Sampson), Katie Boland (Sarah Sampson), Adam Butcher (Nicky Sampson), Nico McEown (Eli Sampson) and Jane McLean (Jane Richards).

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