

Sensing Nothing

Taking a look at a shabby and insulting TV show

It is night in the suburbs. A street-lamp pole bears a tattered poster with the photos of three girls, information wanted. Under the bright star-lit sky stands an eldritch Rebecca Gibney.

Many people are reticent to believe in psychic phenomena until there is scientific proof. What many people don't realise is that there already is.

At this, the stars in the sky coalesce into the Greek letter Ψ 'psi'...

Psychic phenomena or 'psi' has been shown to exist in thousands of scientific experiments. Virtually all the scientists who have studied the evidence, even the hard-nosed sceptics, now agree that psi merits serious attention. The question is now no longer 'What proof is there?' but rather 'What does the proof reveal about ourselves and the universe?'

(Accompanying photographs show tests being performed with the words "Princeton University")

Despite Channel Ten billing *Sensing Murder* as a show in which psychics work with police to solve murder cases, the police are not involved with the show, and the section with the psychics only lasts for about a third of the hour-and-a-half show. Just as current affairs shows lure you through the ad-breaks with the

promise of a particularly juicy story that turns out to be right at the end, with *Sensing Murder* you have to sit through interminable re-enactments of the murder. These dramatisations cover not only the murders, but also take a long time to "set the scene", giving the background of the victim and other people involved. Snippets of the re-enactments are shown over and over throughout the rest of the show. Some people report that they found watching these segments quite harrowing and upsetting.

The last third of the show is given over to the work of a team of private investigators. They pick over the bones of the case (which others have gone over many times before) and try to follow up on anything the psychics have said that sounds promising — never very much. To present that part of the show they have a clean-cut young man who sits at a desk and tries to appear suave and deep, yet professional. Unfortunately he comes across as rather stilted. It's hard to imagine him with a team of private investigators in the field, but easier as a wannabe actor.

In the psychic part of the show, middle-aged women with garish dyed hair (wigs?) murmur and gasp as they wander around crime scenes or are given evidence to hold.

Christopher Short is President of the Victorian Skeptics, a place where photographs do not work because of low light levels.

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To get the psychics for the show, the *Sensing Murder* team tested over one hundred psychics from around Australia by asking them to provide details from an obscure murder with only a photograph to guide them. They managed to whittle the numbers down to the top five psychics who are used, generally two at a time, on each episode.

Sensing Murder details the following rules:

- ◆ Psychics have been flown from interstate (to minimise exposure to the cases);
- ◆ Psychics have never met;
- ◆ Kept separate from each other at all times;
- ◆ Filmed non-stop in one day;
- ◆ Kept under constant supervision (so they can't research the case);
- ◆ No responses during the reading (from the crew).

Missing the point

So the psychics are shown photographs, pieces of evidence and taken to crime scenes to "pick up the vibes". Uncannily, despite being told nothing else, the psychics manage to relate all sorts of information that precisely matches the details of the case.

Wait a moment — the information matches the details of the case? The rules above and the business of not telling the psychics which case they are working on seem to be all part of a "game" where we see how many of the known facts the psychics can pick up. Surely this misses the whole point that the psychics are supposed to be providing new information and solving the cases?

In one episode both psychics are given a photograph of the victim. One looks at the photo and starts relating details, but the other declares that she can do the same without seeing the front of the photograph — so it's given to her face down. She starts stroking the photograph and is soon rattling off details as well. Later, she is "permitted" to turn the photo and gives more de-

tails. Assuming these psychics are real, what was the point of this downturned photo stunt?

It all makes it look like some kind of hokey carnival magician's act. If these psychics are really there to solve the case, and not play some game, they should be given all the known information about the case before the episode and then asked to provide new details. What's the point of getting the psychics to guess the victim's name? You wouldn't treat a detective like that! If all their psychic power enables these psychics to do is to relate known details, it's pretty useless, and not a little suspect.

Even though the psychics were flown from interstate, these were not obscure cases. They were reported in the media all over Australia and all of them have had books written about them. Upon being told she is to be flown to another state, a fake psychic would not find it at all difficult to pop down to the library to brush up on her knowledge of that state's infamous unsolved murders.

Inside information

A contact from the crew of *Sensing Murder* has revealed another part of the reason why the psychics did so well at sensing details from the murders. Apparently the psychics were filmed while they were picking up 'vibes' about the case and then their comments were matched up against the known facts. The show was subsequently 'improved' by editing out the mistakes. The correct statements were left in, as well as those mentioned by both psychics. The crew member was very unimpressed by the psychics' abilities and claimed to feel "morally bankrupt" for having worked on the show.

Perhaps a minute or two — out of such a long programme — has the psychics attempting to answer the big questions to which no-one knows the answers. Invariably their responses turn out to indicate answers that can never be verified. In one episode the missing body was said to be at the bottom of a waste disposal tip, which is so large that it will

never be turned over looking for this body. The psychics said there was a witness to one of the murders — but what can you do if that witness doesn't come forward? A murderer was alleged to work for a particular large hospital — but information about the staff there was unavailable due to privacy laws.

In the episode about the Phillip Island Murders, self-styled "Psychic Detective" Scott Russell-Hill is brought in. He's the only male psychic on the show and is presented in a different way from the others. He's more confident and definite about what's going on. He talks about building up 'psychic profiles' of people and 'vibrations'.

Bizarrely Scott does not employ his own psychic powers but instead turns to that most inconsistent of all New Age arts — numerology. He adds up numbers selected from the victim's birth-date as well as numbers in the death date and notes that they don't match! Despite the evidence being far from conclusive, police and coroner had decided that the murder probably occurred on the 23rd September. But Scott's numerology convinces him that the murder must have occurred on the 22nd — because on that date the victim's "personal vibration peaks".

One piece of evidence — already known to the police — seems to support this and is waved about as damning 'overlooked evidence' that is likely to solve the case. But even before the psychics came on the scene this was known to be a highly confusing case with witnesses and other evidence that didn't fit the official story. Neither the psychics nor *Sensing Murder* attempt to present a theory that links up the evidence, let alone give psychic revelations. Furthermore, why was Scott doing this calculation? We're supposed to believe he is a professional "psychic detective" so he wasn't just doodling around with numbers. He had deliberately set out to compare the accepted day of death with the magic number to see if it

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really was the death date. And lo-and-behold, it turns out that it wasn't! Since the murder was alleged to have taken place around 3am, the claim isn't particularly outrageous — if the accepted order of events was moved around a little the death could have taken place before midnight.

Insulting

Especially in the Phillip Island episode, there was real scorn for the police work that had gone before. For Scott Russell-Hill, it was blindingly obvious that the murder had occurred on a whole different day from that decided by the formal investigation. He went on to say that the crime scene had been so obviously 'set up' that evidence had been placed around as if it were on an episode of *Murder She Wrote*. Perhaps this scorn is in retaliation for the Victorian Police going on the record as saying they will not use psychic assistance.

The biggest insult is the show's suggestion that the police really should be using psychics. On cases where the police have worked for months, they bring in psychics who are supposed to crack the case in a single day. So all that police time was a waste? Could we have solved the matter in a day?

The sober truth

Unfortunately the truth is sobering. It's been many months since these shows were actually filmed. It's been over a year since the Phillip Island episode was filmed and at least two years since the Easey Street pilot episode. Despite the psychic revelations, no progress has been made on any of the cases. Perhaps the broadcast of the episodes will trigger someone's memory and they'll come forward with vital information — we can only hope. Despite the bold claims, the psychics haven't solved these cases — the psychics have helped no one.

