

= The Understudy ( Inside No. 9 ) =

" The Understudy " is the fifth episode of British dark comedy anthology series Inside No. 9 . It was first broadcast on 5 March 2014 on BBC Two . The episode was written by and starred Steve Pemberton and Reece Shearsmith , and guest @-@ starred Lyndsey Marshal , Julia Davis , Rosie Cavaliero , Roger Sloman , Di Botcher , Richard Cordery , Bruce Mackinnon and Jo Stone @-@ Fewings . Pemberton plays actor Tony , who is starring as Macbeth in a West End production of Shakespeare 's Macbeth , and Shearsmith plays Jim , Tony 's understudy . The plot of " The Understudy " partially mirrors the story of Macbeth , exploring the theme of power and the lives of actors .

The episode took longer to write than any other in the first series of Inside No. 9 , and was redrafted several times owing to the writers ' uncertainty as to whether the characters should be amateurs or professionals . It is presented in five separate acts , mirroring theatrical norms . Critics responded positively to " The Understudy " , praising it as an improvement upon the previous week 's episode " Last Gasp " . They stressed the links between " The Understudy " and Macbeth , but said that viewers would not need to be familiar with Shakespeare 's work in order to enjoy the episode . On its first showing , " The Understudy " was watched by 720 @,@ 000 viewers ( 4 @.@ 1 % of the market ) ; this was the lowest viewership of the series so far .

= = Production = =

Writers Steve Pemberton and Reece Shearsmith , who had previously worked together on The League of Gentlemen and Psychoville , took inspiration for Inside No. 9 from " David and Maureen " , episode 4 of the first series of Psychoville . This episode , in turn , was inspired by Alfred Hitchcock 's Rope . " David and Maureen " took place entirely in a single room , and was filmed in only two shots . At the same time , the concept of Inside No. 9 was a " reaction " to Psychoville , with Shearsmith saying that " We 'd been so involved with labyrinthine over @-@ arcing , we thought it would be nice to do six different stories with a complete new house of people each week . That 's appealing , because as a viewer you might not like this story , but you 've got a different one next week . " As an anthology series with horror themes , Inside No. 9 also pays homage to Tales of the Unexpected , The Twilight Zone , and Alfred Hitchcock Presents .

As the format of Inside No. 9 requires new characters each week , the writers were able to attract actors who may have been unwilling to commit to an entire series . In addition to Pemberton and Shearsmith , who played lead actor Tony and understudy Jim respectively , the episode starred Lyndsey Marshal as Laura , Julia Davis as Felicity , Rosie Cavaliero as Kirstie , Roger Sloman as Bill , Di Botcher as Jean , and Richard Cordery as Nick . In addition , Bruce Mackinnon provided the voice of an actor playing Malcolm in Macbeth , and Jo Stone @-@ Fewings provided the voice of an actor playing Macduff .

The episode was written and is presented in a five @-@ act structure to mirror theatrical norms . This allowed for jumps in time within the episode , as well as marking it out from others in the series . The plot is essentially based on Macbeth , leading Pemberton to suggest that the episode might be used " on an O Level syllabus " in the future . Unlike other episodes in the series , " The Understudy " did not take place in a family home , and for this reason , the writers were keen not to alienate viewers . After the initial idea of a group of characters backstage at a production of Macbeth , the writers re @-@ scripted several times , unsure of whether the characters should be amateurs , members of a touring company or professionals . This meant that the script @-@ writing took longer for " The Understudy " than for any other episode of the first series of Inside No. 9 . The script eventually settled on actors at a West End theatre . For Shearsmith , it mattered that the actors had a " real chance " and that there were high stakes . The episode , he suggested , reflected happenings in a real theatre , rather than a television version . Pemberton said that the West End setting allowed for the " agonising " scene of a post @-@ performance visit from audience members .

= = Plot = =

#### Act 1

Tony Warner is starring in the lead role of Macbeth at the Duke of Cambridge Theatre . Coming back to his dressing room after a performance , he is visited by his understudy Jim . When invited to attend the understudy rehearsal , Tony makes an excuse about having a voiceover job at that time ; and the pair are joined by Tony 's neighbours Jean and Bill , who have just watched Tony 's performance . Tony leaves with them , and Jim puts on Tony 's prop crown , imagining himself in the leading role .

#### Act 2

Before the understudy rehearsal , Jim 's fiancée Laura ( the understudy for Lady Macbeth ) helps him learn lines in Tony 's dressing room . Company manager Felicity arrives and scolds them for using the room . While Jim is absent , Felicity flirts with Laura . Laura asks Tony 's dresser , Kirstie , what he earns , before opening Tony 's payslip to see for herself . She is determined for Jim to appear as Macbeth , which would allow them to save for their wedding . Laura cuts herself on a pin that Kirstie left in the Lady Macbeth dress , and after she and Kirstie leave the room , Jim sees a drop of blood on the floor grow into a large puddle . When he looks again , it has gone .

#### Act 3

During a Friday night performance , Tony is drunk as he comes backstage during the interim between his part in Acts IV and V. Felicity is angry that Tony , a recovering alcoholic , got drunk again ; she has had to issue several refunds because of his drunken behaviour on stage . She sends him into the shower to sober up , and summons Jim . He is unsure whether he knows the lines well enough to go onstage in Tony 's place , but Laura encourages him to take the chance . As she hands him a prop dagger , he sees blood all over the dagger and her hands . Tony comes out of the shower and wants to finish the performance , so Jim allows him to go . Laura berates Jim for his lack of ambition . She is left alone in the dressing room and hears noises coming from the shower ; but when she goes to look , it is empty . A scream is then heard from the stage .

#### Act 4

Jim has taken over the role of Macbeth . It is mentioned that Tony fell off the battlements on stage , and is in hospital . Felicity has been sacked after she was accused of sexual harassment . Laura arrives to congratulate Jim , and he thanks her for encouraging him . He is distant , eventually asking her to leave him to prepare alone . As he puts on his crown in front of the mirror , he hears the sound of whispering , and sees blood pouring from both his eyes and the mirror .

#### Act 5

Nineteen months later , Jim is a famous actor playing the title role in Richard III at the theatre , using the same , now redecorated , dressing room . A paralysed Tony comes backstage to visit him and talks about how far Jim 's career has come . Jim broke up with Laura and has not seen her since his run in Macbeth . After Tony leaves , Kirstie arrives to see Jim . She is now Tony 's full @-@ time carer . She has watched Jim 's performance every day of the week , and says she knew that he just needed " a little push " to achieve greatness . She tells him that Laura committed suicide by slitting her wrists in the dressing room 's shower . Jim did not know about this , because he was overseas filming a role in Game of Thrones at the time . He believes that Laura pushed Tony off the battlements and could not live with her guilt . Kirstie reveals that she herself is the one who pushed Tony , and spiked his juice with alcohol backstage . She also got Felicity sacked because Felicity would not let Jim perform as Macbeth . Kirstie is wearing the engagement ring that she took from Laura 's corpse . She tells Jim that she is waiting for him " in the wings ... like an understudy " . She leaves , and as Jim prepares to go onstage , he sees bloody visions of Laura 's death .

= = Reception = =

Critics responded very positively to " The Understudy " , with several drawing attention to the improvement over " Last Gasp " , the previous week 's episode . Bruce Dessau called it a " striking return to form " on his website , and Gerard Gilbert , writing in The Independent , called it " a return

to form " after the previous week 's " misfire " . Writers in The Sunday Times called the episode " [ a ] nother exquisite short story " , Ben Lawrence , writing in the Daily Telegraph , called it a " gloriously OTT tale " , and John Robinson , writing for The Guardian , described it as an " excellent instalment " of the series . He identified the themes of the episode by calling it " a spooky and highly satirical take on actors , Shakespeare and power " .

Critics stressed that a knowledge of Macbeth was not necessary to enjoy the episode . " Knowing the text " , suggested Jack Seale of Radio Times , " will take you only halfway and , in any case , the clever plot is really just a vehicle for characters sketched fully in only a few lines , and a torrent of fruity luvvie gags about jealousy , superstition and stage @-@ hogging hams . " Dessau agreed , saying that " [ y ] ou don 't need to be a literary scholar to get the gags " . Critic Jane Simon , writing in the Daily Mirror , suggested that " even a hazy knowledge of the Scottish play will tip you the wink what might lie ahead " . David Chater in The Times and an anonymous reviewer in the Sunday Herald both praised the plot 's divergence from Shakespeare , with the latter saying that " the script cleverly offers parallels with The Scottish Play , just to whip them away again " . Dessau felt that the complex plot meant that the guest stars did " not get quite as much screen time as they deserve " , but that this was no complaint , as it was " very much Pemberton and Shearsmith 's instalment and they are both brilliant " .

On its first showing , " The Understudy " was watched by 720 @,@ 000 viewers ( 4 @.@ 1 % of the market ) . This was lower than " Last Gasp " , the previous episode , which in turn had had the lowest viewership of the series on its first airing , with 872 @,@ 000 viewers ( 4 @.@ 9 % of the audience ) . " The Understudy " was immediately preceded in most listings by Line of Duty , which was watched by a series high of 2 @.@ 3 million viewers ( 9 @.@ 9 % of the audience ) .