



HBO’s “The Mortician” features an interview with David Sconce, who was at the center of a scandal involving his family’s now-infamous Pasadena mortuary.

REVIEW

‘The Mortician’ revisits Pasadena funeral home — and family’s ghoulish crimes

BY LORRAINE ALI
Los Angeles Times

LOS ANGELES

It was the early 1980s when residents of a Pasadena neighborhood noticed something amiss at the nearby crematorium. The facility was suddenly operating round the clock, smoke billowing from its chimney well after business hours.

Fellow morticians were also alarmed at the uptick

in the number of bodies cremated by the Lamb Funeral Home, a respected, family-run establishment and pillar of the Southern California mortuary business for generations. It wasn’t long before allegations of organ harvesting, mass incineration of bodies and murder made the local and national news. A new L.A. crime noir story was born.

Premiering Sunday and airing weekly, HBO’s three-part docuseries “The

Mortician” chronicles the ghoulish offenses of David Sconce, great-grandson of the mortuary’s founder and son of owners Jerry W. Sconce and Laurieanne Lamb Sconce. He was the picture of Southern California affluence and privilege: a blond-haired, blue-eyed high school quarterback with professional football aspirations until his hopes were dashed by a torn ligament.

Sconce found his calling running the family’s cre-

matorium, where he maximized profits by incinerating multiple bodies in the same chamber. Unsuspecting survivors of the deceased were none the wiser when they scattered the ashes of a loved one at sea, but in fact the cremains were of several different people.

And that’s just the tip of the macabre in this docuseries from director and producer Joshua Rofé (“Lorena”).

Sconce also harvested

organs and body parts for profit, pulled teeth to extract the gold from fillings, and was investigated for allegedly contracting a hit on a rival and poisoning another competitor who was trying to expose the crimes at the Lamb funeral home.

Sconce eventually pleaded guilty to 21 criminal counts - including for mutilating corpses, holding mass cremations and hiring hit men - and was sentenced in 1989 to five years in prison. However, he was released in 1991 after serving two and a half years, then sentenced to 25 years to life in 2013 after violating probation. He was released on parole in 2023.

“The Mortician” reveals fresh angles into the decades-old case via a bevy of interviews with those who were there. But it’s Sconce himself who provides the most insight into his crimes when he alternately denies

and then brags about his transgressions (he appears proud of his ability to stuff as many bodies as possible into a crematory chamber, sometimes by breaking bones or cutting off limbs). Now 68, he’s speaks at length in the documentary about the events that landed him in jail, appearing more aggrieved than remorseful.

“I don’t put any value on anybody after they’re gone and dead,” he said of mixing remains. “As they shouldn’t when I’m gone and dead. Love ’em when they’re here.” He then justifies his actions as a practical business decision: “I could cremate one guy in two hours, or you could put 10 of them in there and take two and a half hours. So what would be the difference? There is none.”

Also interviewed are former funeral home employees, former L.A. Times journalist Ashley Dunn and former Pasadena Star-News reporter David Geary. Several victims who were duped by Sconce also offer testimonials about the deception. Former law enforcement officials who busted Sconce’s second crematory facility in Hesperia - an old ceramics factory replete with kilns - recall the canals installed below the repurposed kiln doors that were used to catch the human fat drippings coming from the packed chambers.

“The Mortician” is not the cable network’s first series about a family of undertakers operating a Pasadena funeral home. The dark dramedy “Six Feet Under” also revolved around a dysfunctional family generations in the embalming business. But all similarities stop there. There is nothing remotely funny about the twisted world of the Lambs, but in “The Jinx” fashion, Sconce’s own words at the end of this docuseries may come back to burn him.

REVIEW

Surly police detective is banished to the basement to work on cold cases in ‘Dept. Q’

BY NINA METZ
Chicago Tribune

Early in the British series “Dept. Q” on Netflix, the bad judgment and smug overconfidence of Detective Chief Inspector Carl Morck results in three people getting shot, including him and his partner. That turn of events, in addition to his already surly personality, has left him with few friends when he returns to work with the Edinburgh police. The calamity happened, it’s pointed out, because he didn’t wait for backup and was instead yammering away and making jokes at a crime scene. Carl is unmoved: “What you call yammering, we call coping.” Well, comes the reply, whatever you call it, you missed the guy with the gun. That’s the sort of thing that gets filed under “you had one job ...” so Carl is banished to the basement, out of his boss’s line of sight, and informed that he’s meant to work on cold cases from now on.

His new subterranean digs are in an abandoned portion of the building. There’s discarded furniture strewn about, the lighting is bad and there’s the perpetual sound of water dripping in concert with the building’s groaning pipes. It’s a mildewy place forgotten by time and he resents being exiled, but it also suits his mood. “I heard you were dead,” someone says glibly in passing. “Only on the inside,” comes Carl’s retort.

Nobody can stand the guy - he can barely stand himself - but slowly he builds a small team that



Matthew Goode, left, and Alexej Manvelov in “Dept. Q.”

consists of Akram (Alexej Manvelov), a member of the IT department and a former Syrian police officer who is thoughtful and watchful. He can also be an unexpectedly formidable physical presence when the moment calls for it. He and Carl are joined by Rose (Leah Byrne), a junior officer looking to do something that matters instead of the drudgery of paperwork. Then there’s Carl’s old partner, Hardy (Jamie Sives), who is laid up in the hospital after the shooting. With nothing else to do between rehab sessions, he becomes an unofficial member of the team, working remotely.

Together, they try to find out what happened to

a prosecutor who disappeared four years prior. The case takes up the entirety of the nine-episode season, which weaves in sardonic humor and well-worn cop show tropes to focus on a grisly case.

It’s an intriguing setup (from show creator Scott Frank, based on the book series by Jussi Adler-Olsen) that doesn’t always follow through on its promise. Some of that comes down to the casting of Matthew Goode as the miserable, perpetually sarcastic Carl. Goode is a talented but not especially versatile actor who tends to read as somewhat posh on screen. Carl is down-market and rough around

the edges, so there are attempts to give Goode a vaguely more grizzled look, with a beard and a rumpled sheepskin coat, but it’s not enough to help him convincingly disappear into the role. He’s a strong actor despite being miscast, but it’s distracting to the point where you start wondering who might have been a better choice.

Carl’s mood is antically morose, verging on self-pitying, and he would be content to stew in that basement, getting nothing done. But it’s Akram who digs through the files and finds the case of the missing prosecutor. He thinks there’s a chance she’s still alive and goads Carl into

getting off his duff and earning his keep. Meanwhile, we learn that Akram’s hunch is right and the woman (played by Chloe Pirrie) is being held hostage in a hyperbaric chamber that resembles a small submarine. Her captors keep asking her to confess to the mysterious transgression that has left her to this terrible fate. She racks her brain and comes up with names, and each time she’s wrong. So she remains in that tiny chamber. Sometimes they turn up the pressure - the structure was originally intended to help deep sea divers avoid decompression sickness; now it’s used for uglier purposes - just to torture her some

more. These scenes are interspersed throughout the investigation. Will Carl, Akram, Rose and Hardy find her before she finally succumbs to her tormentors?

Carl is a bull in a china shop, whereas Akram is so much more interesting. He’s a refugee and maybe that’s why he’s so quiet and respectful. Too respectful, perhaps, but he’s also confident in his own talents and intelligence. It’s an entrancing performance from Manvelov and I wish the show were built around his character rather than the same old clichés embodied by Carl, who has also been assigned to mandatory therapy sessions after the shooting and - surprise! - he doesn’t want to be there or talk about any of it. His therapist (Kelly Macdonald) doesn’t want to be there either; it’s a bad job talking to you lot, she tells him. She means cops. “Doesn’t sound like you like your job very much,” he says. “Would you like talking to you?” Fair point, he concedes.

The story is pulpy in ways that are sometimes unexpectedly dull, but I appreciate that one ongoing theme concerns the idea that police work is often corrupt. Of cops looking the other way when it’s convenient, or someone else benefits.

That basement office where Dept. Q is headquartered may be dank, but it’s atmospheric and cozy in its own way. Ultimately, the combination of Carl, Akram, Rose and Hardy makes for a compelling crime-solving foursome.

‘DEPT. Q’

★1/2 stars (out of 4)

Rating: TV-MA

How to watch: Netflix