

## Why Shortland Street is tackling a deadly new virus – and how the plot could help viewers process the Covid pandemic



**Mitchell Hageman**

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**Our nation's most popular soap has been hit with a potentially deadly airborne illness. But this time it's not coronavirus. Mitchell Hageman looks into the 'cinema of contagion', the story and the psychological impact behind Shortland Street's latest post-Covid-19 scare.**

Full PPE, isolation wards and masks. It's a familiar sight in real life and on-screen in various forms, and now it's made its way to Shortland Street Hospital.

And while Ferndale residents were not immune to Covid-19 (it's been mentioned several times in *Shortland Street* scripts), producers made a conscious choice not to dramatise the pandemic while audiences were living through it.

"But now we're interested in what comes after," producer Oliver Driver says, discussing the latest storyline chronicling a deadly new threat.

"[We're interested in] how a medical community shaped by the last few years responds to a new, airborne threat."

A recent episode showed Dr Chris Warner stumped after Dr Esther Samuels became the latest victim of a virus that produces debilitating Covid-like symptoms and a rash, severely impacting people with comorbidities and leading normally healthy people to isolate.

But this isn't just a replay of recent pandemics – Driver frames it as "a contained hospital thriller that tests preparedness, ethics, and relationships as we head toward the Christmas cliff[hanger]".

But why decide to fully flesh out the contagion topic now, nearly three years on from the worst of it? Driver says it was because "we all needed some respite" from it while we lived through it, and they wanted to explore things in a deeper, more personal way.

### What matters is how stories are told

Sophia Dawson, a senior psychologist with WHOLEistic Psychology, says the psychological impact of pandemic film and TV depends less on what is being portrayed on-screen and more on how the viewer interprets what they are watching.

"For some, I imagine, it could take them back to what they experienced for themselves during the pandemic – fear, grief, uncertainty. And for others, it may not register so strongly on their radar and instead prompt less emotive memories of the experience. The difference will be in the meaning each individual made of the event at the time and how they have processed the experience since."

**She says it's important to talk about difficult things, such as the pandemic, because it helps to make us more resilient.**

"As a society, we need to be mindful not to slip into avoidance through tiptoeing around difficult topics in the hope of never stirring strong emotions. While completely well-intentioned, that approach doesn't build resilience. Instead, over time, it can reduce our tolerance for emotional discomfort, making it harder to face life's inevitable challenges."

When it comes to conveying TV storylines that deal with pandemic trauma, Dawson says it's important they are told compassionately, and with context.

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"And perhaps accompanied by a content note or warning, so viewers are given the chance to reflect: 'Is this something I want to engage with right now?' This approach empowers choice, without censoring or avoiding certain topics and conversations," she says.

Dawson believes that when handled with sensitivity, storylines such as *Shortland Street*'s can help people process grief associated with the subject.

"But they can just as easily touch on less healed wounds if they are handled less compassionately, or if the [viewer] isn't ready to engage with those feelings yet."

At *Shortland Street*, Driver knows the impact the show has, and says they thought carefully about the way they produced the contagion storyline.

"We are very aware that our audiences will have experienced some aspect of these stories in their own lives, which is why we approach all stories with care and humanity, making sure they resonate without feeling exploitative," he says.

"As a hospital-based show, trauma is part of our storytelling DNA. Our characters and patients face disease, accident, injury and death every week. But those events are never the end in themselves, they're the springboard for our characters, how people respond, care for one another and grow through adversity."

The show also has a team of medical experts permanently on staff and within the writing team who advise on every medical story.

"The spectacle creates the stage, but it's always the characters' humanity and heroism that carry the story," Driver says.

Dawson says people who may be hesitant about the virus storyline should watch it with intention, be mindful of their "internal thermometer" or feelings and perhaps view the show with a close family member or friend.

"If it's feeling too heavy it's okay to switch it off and come back to those sensations curiously later."

## A good way to make sense of things

University of Canterbury's [Dr Erin Harrington](#) has run a course called The Cinema of Contagion, which looks at the impacts of these types of stories on-screen.

She says research indicates media representations of disaster can help people figure out how to understand challenging things or make their own meaning.

"In the first weeks of the Covid pandemic, the Steven Soderbergh film *Pandemic* went right to the top of the iTunes movie chart, so there was an obvious sense that people had a morbid fascination with the topic and were looking to film to help understand what was going on," she says.

"Storytelling, be it books, movies, or TV, can help us think through things or experience them in different ways. It can also help us learn things about ourselves, develop emotional resilience and emotional regulation, or help us feel like we've overcome something."

At the same time, she says fictional representations already have a buffer around them and having an "extra bit of distance" can, in some cases, be helpful when managing difficult responses.

"There's this paradox, where telling a story in a fictional manner can bring us closer to the truth than just watching straight footage. We know the patterns and story beats of things like a fiction film, or a soap opera, so we recognise that what we are seeing is going to eventually resolve in some way, unlike real life," Harrington says.

"The way stories are constructed can also help us think about wider connections [such as] top-level responses to disaster alongside personal narratives, each of which puts a different lens on events that are often really difficult to process."

But Harrington, like Dawson, says there isn't a "one-size-fits-all" approach when dealing with these kinds of topics.

"Everyone experiences things and deals with things in different ways. For some people, overt representations can be comforting and a way of processing feelings and events. For others, it can be really triggering," she says.

She points to research out of Denmark that studied the appeal and benefit of horror films and experiences like haunted houses.

"They found people tended towards three camps – adrenaline junkies, white knucklers and dark copers, [who] might use horror to help deal with feelings of anxiety and experience them in a safe way."

Harrington is "surprised" at how little New Zealand has reflected on the acute phase of the pandemic, and that perhaps addressing it through things such as

Shortland Street is a good way to start.

"It feels a bit out of sight, out of mind, like we don't want to think about that right now," she says.

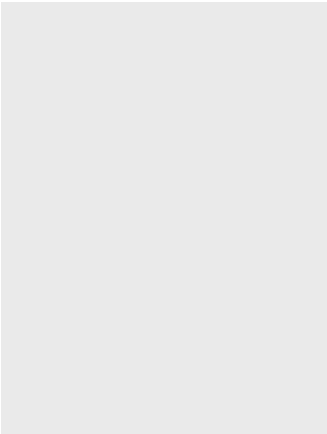
"Maybe it's time to start reflecting on this a bit more? Fiction is a good way of making sense of things that feel too big to make sense of."

New episodes of Shortland Street air Mondays-Wednesdays on TVNZ 2 and on TVNZ+.

Mitchell Hageman joined the Herald's entertainment and lifestyle team in 2024. He previously worked as a multimedia journalist for Hawke's Bay Today.

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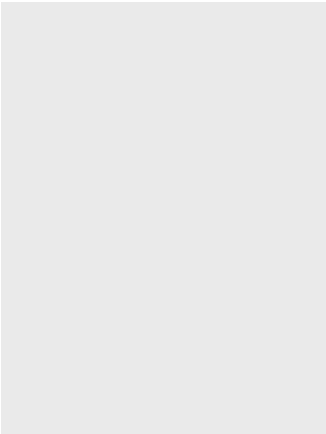
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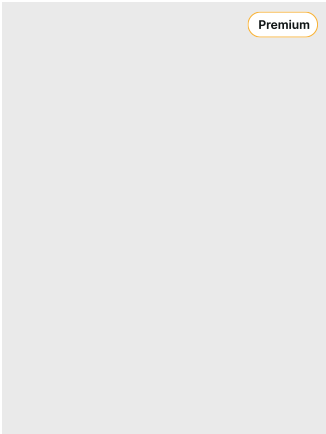
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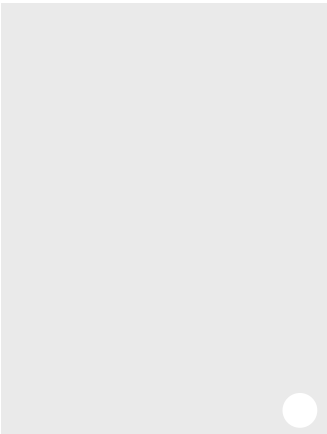
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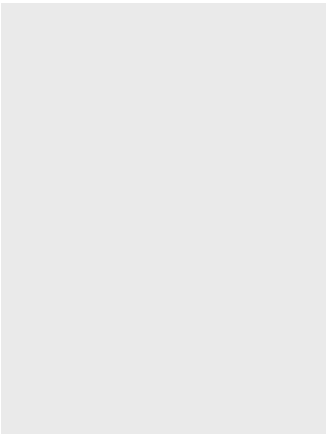
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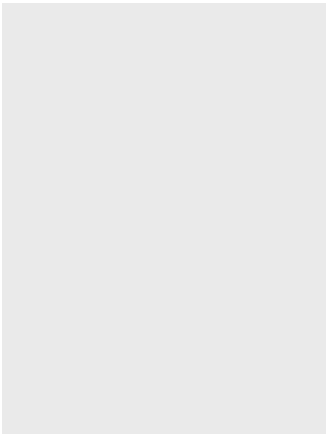
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