

## Review: Taboo

In an age of cookie cutter and boringly generic TV, creatively risky *Taboo* should be appreciated warts and all

By [Michael Maitland-Jones](#)

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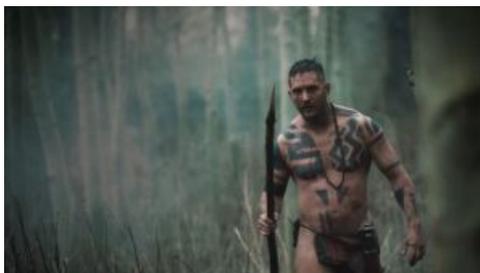


Image: BBC

★★★★☆

What a strange thrill it is to see Tom Hardy taking on the role of the psychotic, mumbling, frequently terrifying James Delaney in *Taboo*; the most fascinating, messy, ultra-violent show to be aired on the BBC for quite some time. Penned by Steven Knight along with Tom and Chips Hardy, the show feels gloriously unrestrained in a way that only a pet project can and, for all its faults, is clearly the show that its creators set out to make; something that should be cherished in an age where the viability of a project rests on the shoulders of numerous, overly-risk adverse studio heads. Perhaps emboldened by the success of Knight's most recent TV outing: *Peaky Blinders*, the BBC seemed to have thrown caution to the winds and aired *Taboo* in all its gory glory.

The plot is deliberately vague to allow for the kind of murkiness the show revels in: the presumed-dead heir to the Delaney family (Hardy) returns from a mysterious voyage to Africa to his London home, bringing him into conflict with former associates, family and the diabolical East-Indian Trading company (headed by a delightfully profane Jonathan Pryce). The shoestring plot does however allow for a near master-class in the writing of memorable characters; almost every one of the supporting characters leaves a grimy impression on the viewer, from Tom Hollander's enjoyably sleazy Alchemist to Stephen Graham's tattooed first-mate. Among this entourage of Chaucerian caricatures, it is the previously mentioned Hardy who really stands out though; balancing his performance somewhere between Charles Bronson and a more eloquent *Bane*, Hardy masks the near-insanity of Delaney with a dangerously calm, almost well-mannered voice that only occasionally slips to reveal the cauldron of weirdness simmering beneath.

It is Hardy's performance that is the show's greatest strength and perhaps also what diverts attention from some of the show's weaker elements. The plot is ultimately too thin to carry the show through all eight hour-long episodes and there are significant stretches of the runtime which seem to function only as an opportunity to showcase the excellent production design or camerawork. Delaney's clash with the East-India company only really reaches its dramatic potential in the last few episodes of the series and the prior episodes seem somewhat hollow in comparison. This towering central performance by Hardy means

some characters are left somewhat underused; Oona Chaplin puts in a full throttle, enjoyably crazy performance as Delaney's sister but is left frustratingly underdeveloped by the series' close. Jonathan Pryce's Sir Stuart Strange could likewise have done with considerably more screen-time. The underused nature of some of these characters makes you wonder whether if *Taboo* had been given just a few more months in the writing room we could have got something approaching a classic.

In an age of cookie cutter, boringly generic TV however; *Taboo* should be appreciated, warts and all. It deals with dark, uncomfortable themes that would be too hot to handle for most showrunners, and it's creatively risky in the best possible way. The flaws are certainly apparent and some of the more violent content will be a turn-off for some (if you're a regular *Peaky Blinders* viewer then you'll have a good idea of what you're in for) but it's ultimately an eerily compelling, beautifully crafted slice of TV. Without spoiling anything it would seem that a second series of *Taboo* is a near certainty and with a plethora of great characters to draw from, the showrunners will likely produce something just as brilliantly bonkers as the first time around.



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