

Jerry Springer - The Opera

1 Lead in

You are going to read a newspaper columnist's opinion of *Jerry Springer – The Opera*, a controversial musical which was recently broadcast on British TV.

What do you think about censorship? Which of these programmes would you object to, and why?

1. A soap opera that glamorises drug use.
2. A drama with a lot of nudity.
3. A programme with a lot of swearing.
4. A movie with a lot of violence, in which many people are shot and killed.
5. A comedy that makes fun of religion.

2 Reading 1

Read the article, and answer the questions.

1. Does Mary Kenny, the writer, think that *Jerry Springer – The Opera* should have been banned?
2. Does she think that it was a good decision to show the programme?

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We need more good sense, not censorship

Mary Kenny

Jerry Springer - the Opera, which was screened on BBC television recently despite, apparently, 45,000 protests from Christian groups, did not "offend" me, from a religious point of view. But then I take the attitude that God is big enough to look after Himself. I did, however, find it both lowering and snobbish.

Essentially the production is about smart folk sneering at the lives of trailer-park trash. In the original Jerry Springer television shows, although they can be ghastly, there is a certain poignancy about the complexities of people's lives. Despite the cringe-making confessions, there can be a certain sincerity. But the opera is without that: it is pitched in a register of smart-arsed "irony", and it laughs at the sort of people who appear on the TV shows.

And although I don't have strong feelings about blasphemy myself - Catholics are used to being scoffed at, and learn to be robust about it - I am glad that many Christians did make their feelings known about the transmission. Any complaint from a Christian group that does not care to see Jesus Christ mocked or criticised is immediately rebuffed as "censorship". Hundreds of mentions of the f-word and the c-word on the public airwaves are permitted, indeed celebrated. But what is "censorship" and what is judgment and

good manners?

Promiscuous swearing on the public airwaves should be penalised. Not because such words are inherently wicked, but because coarse language is lowering, and violent talk often feeds into violent actions: the constant description of women as "bitches" in some forms of rap music, for example, will have some spillover effect.

The Jerry Springer opera broadcast is over, but the questions it provokes will run and run. There is still a big debate to be had on how a society combines freedom of speech with respect for the values of others. An artist has to push boundaries and offend sometimes, but the artist also has to recognise that there will be consequences of his actions. One of the consequences of the freedoms that TV has enjoyed over the past few decades is a dismaying dumbing down of cultural standards.

In such a debate we should also stop throwing around the word "censorship" in an adolescent way. Censorship means that you absolutely cannot access a particular text or piece of material because the authorities withhold it. But choosing not to broadcast something coarse and foul-mouthed is not necessarily censorship; it may also be called exercising editorial judgment.

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3 Reading 2

Read the passage again and decide whether the statements are True or False.

1. Mary Kenny was offended by *Jerry Springer –The Opera*.
2. Mary likes the TV shows more than the opera.
3. Mary thinks the opera is blasphemous.
4. Mary is not worried about swearing on TV.
5. Mary thinks that the intellectual quality of TV programmes is improving.
6. Mary believes that TV editors should decide not to show TV programmes that are in poor taste.

4 Vocabulary in context

Match the words from the passage in A to words with similar meanings in B.

A

sneer/scoff
ghastly
poignancy
cringe-making

smart-arsed
rebuff
dumbing down

B

awful
refuse to listen to
getting more basic and simple
to speak in a way that shows you think you are superior
sadness
making you feel embarrassed
too clever

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5 Follow up

Imagine you are a TV executive, with powers to decide which programmes should be shown. Look at the programmes below, and decide which should be shown, and which should be censored. Discuss your opinions with classmates.

1. A realistic drama set on inner-city streets in which the characters swear all the time.
2. A comedy series in which the main character is a priest who is an idiot.
3. A detective series which shows a lot of gunfights, blood and death.
4. A musical show which makes fun of the prime minister and leading politicians.

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Teacher's notes – Jerry Springer – The Opera

Lead-in: It is a good idea to find pictures of types of TV programmes, particularly one of a Jerry Springer type show. You could put them on the board, ask the students what shows they are pictures of, whether they like them and how they would describe them.

If you have a monolingual class of students from the same country, you could ask them about TV programmes in their countries.

Cultural note: The *Jerry Springer Show* was an American day-time TV programme that ran throughout the 80s and 90s, in which people appeared on the show to admit to often very personal aspects of their lives. For example, women would admit to their husbands on air that they were having an affair with their best friend. Men would tell their wives that they were secretly transvestite. The result of such confessions was regularly verbal abuse or an actual fight in the studio. The sort of person who would appear on Jerry's show is rudely referred to as 'trailer-trash' in the USA. In other words, a stupid, poor person who lives in a 'trailer' or caravan.

Jerry Springer – The Opera is a spoof musical based on the TV series, which was performed on the London stage before being filmed for television.

Read through the introduction with the students, then ask them to discuss the questions with a partner. Have a brief class feedback.

Answers: Students' own ideas.

Reading 1: Ask students to read the article, and answer the questions.

Answers: 1 and 2 - Mary doesn't think it should be banned, but doesn't think it was a good decision to show the programme.

Reading 2: Ask students to read the passage again and decide whether the statements are true or false.

Answers: 1F, 2T, 3F, 4F, 5F, 6T

Vocabulary in context: Ask students to match the words from the passage in A to words with similar meanings in B.

Answers: A	B
sneer/scoff	to speak in a way that shows you think you are superior
ghastly	awful
poignancy	sadness
cringe-making	making you feel embarrassed
smart-arsed	too clever
rebuff	refuse to listen to
dumbing down	getting more basic and simple

Follow-up: Give the students a few minutes to decide which programmes they will support, and prepare things to say. When they are ready put the students in pairs or small groups to discuss their opinions.