

Freud: The BBC Series

Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Freud. Produced by John Purdie. Directed by Moira Armstrong. Written by Carey Harrison. Music by Iлона Sekacz. Production Design: Peter Blacker and Susan Spence. Series camera and electrical department by John Barclay.

Length: Six Hours and 26 minutes. Shown in six episodes. A BBC 2 Feature. Television release 14th September 1984. DVD release 2011. M rated for sexual themes, mature themes and drug use.

Rating ***** 85%.

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CAST

Sigmund Freud: David Suchet

Martha Bernays: Helen Bourne

Anna Freud: Alison Key

Joseph Breuer: David Swift

Wilhelm Fleiss: Anton Lesser

Alexander Freud: Frank Baker

Jacob Freud: Howard Goorney

Amalie Freud: Eliza Hunt

Minna Bernays: Suzanne Bertish

Ernest von Fleischil-Marxow: Michael Kitchen

Professor Meynart: Glyn Houston

Baroness von Lieben: Miriam Margoyles

Carl Jung: Michael Pennington

Charcot: Dinsdale Landen

Oscar Rie: Allan Corduner

Teresa: Claire Davenport

Ignaz Schoenberg: Teddy Kempner

Mathilde Freud: Amber-Jane Raab

Victor Adler: Peter Birrel

Koenigstein: Gordon Reid

Doctor Schur: Christopher Sandford

Note: many other cast members have not been mentioned as they only appear briefly in a single episode or two.

Review

Few people living in the twentieth century aroused more controversy than Sigmund Freud, an unassuming, modest and staid man. A film review about his life is not the right place for a detailed discussion about his theories or even about the ongoing debates they caused, but being so central to his life and work, they also cannot be ignored. Even over six hours of screen time that this film takes cannot do full justice to all his life and to all of his theories.

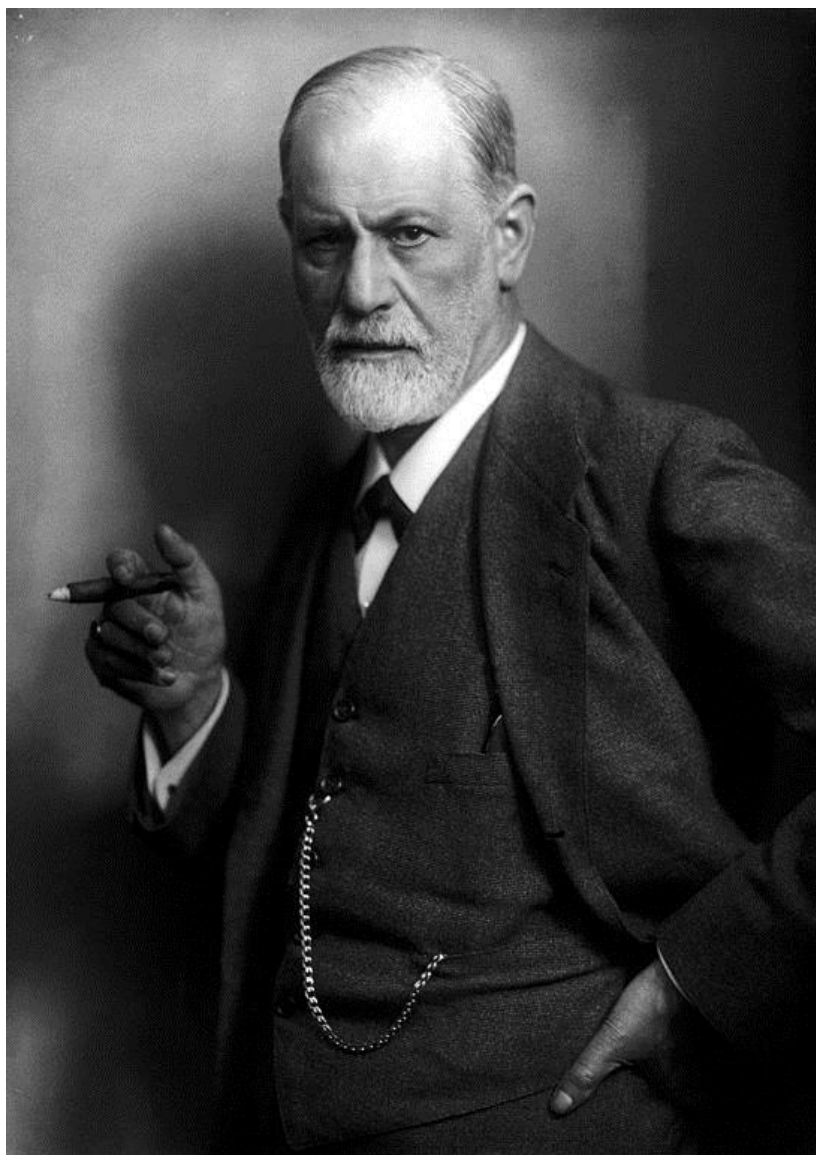
In the first five of six episodes the filmmakers resolve this problem by focusing on his life between the middle 1880s and 1910, when many of his theories were developed. This was also the period between the beginning of his work with the disturbed and his trip to America, which was the beginning of his great fame. In the 1880s we see Freud as a young doctor worried about finding permanency in a well-paying job so that he can marry. At the same time his work leads him into an increasing interest in the mentally disturbed, particularly those suffering psychosomatic symptoms and neuroses. His need for prognoses starts with observations, and these also lead to his developing theories. The philistine fallacy that he dreamed up psychoanalytic theories out of his personal neurotic daydreams has no place in reality and gets none here. However as he explains and then expounds his ideas, they also lead him into controversy with others in the medical profession, a controversy that over a hundred years on has never died. Interestingly the series does not show him as infallible. His disastrous early enthusiasm for cocaine as a cure and some misdiagnoses are shown. The criticism that he was generalising about the human mentality based primarily on evidence from middle class or rich Viennese women also gets voiced, but how his Italian visits shaped some of his theories is also depicted. Jung's famous criticisms are voiced in a tirade from a literal standover position to which a tearful Freud responds with "Why do you hate me?"

Interestingly and accurately the series avoids depicting Freud as some type of Columbus of psychology, opening up and explaining unknown new lands of the mind through only his own brilliant efforts. This attitude can be found in many other works, but not here. This series spends a good deal of its time showing him from the 1880s onwards sharing research and considering the ideas of others. He incorporates their information and reassesses his views due to their work. Although the series shows him as usually modest and calm, it also shows him discussing the mistakes of others - and by doing so he makes enemies in the emergent world of psychology.

In the sixth and last episode much of his life outside those previously depicted years does get coverage. The series makers do this in almost a filmic collage style of flashbacks. In this last episode his early childhood gets several of these flashbacks, as does his years of work and home life from the period 1885 to 1910. They bypass the period of his global fame, but frequently show the twilight of his life, when the Freud family lived in England from 1938 until his death from

cancer in September 1939. With the early sections interposed, we can see how Freud the elderly man developed from childhood onwards.

Freud successfully avoids the usual faults in so many BBC productions. Over the top stagey acting by drama queens in love with their roles comes first in the wise avoidance policy. Name dropping and didactic scripts about historical personages come second. A sense of being filmed on a cheap stage with obvious props placed just so comes third. This series flows and the exteriors scenes and shots are used wisely, being not too obvious a contrast to the interiors and not just for display, but they happen to be where the story unfolds. The interiors have a real feel to them, amazingly because they are often real.



The famous image of the real Sigmund Freud 1856-1939

The Freud Museum. The world's most famous couch. Courtesy Wikiwand



Freud's waiting room. Mar del Sur Wikimedia Creative Commons

The acting is of that type that goes by underrated because it is not showy, mannered or over-emphasised. Instead it makes the characters believable so that the story flows. Even so, when considered in retrospect, Suchet gives a towering performance in the difficult role of Freud. As in so much of his work, his ability to making his acting seem natural, to be the character, goes beyond exaggeration. When he appeared as the aged Freud of 1939 I was initially left wondering who was the brilliant elderly actor they had found to play Freud, then aged eighty-three? I had to check the credits to be sure it was still Suchet in the role.

There are three criticisms to be made of the series. One concerns the interior of the Freud's Viennese home. While visiting it in 1989 I read cards saying that the Freud family fled the Nazis so quickly in 1938 that the house was left as they had lived in it. As it was boarded up and banned to public entry when American forces entered it in 1946 they found it perfectly preserved. That is why the curators could offer such an unspoiled museum. Even his walking sticks, carpets and nic-nacs are still there. It was as if Freud had just gone for a walk to get a paper and would be back soon. One wonders if he ever walked past and noticed a sallow-faced, intense street person named Hitler, an energetic, intense young journalist named Trotsky a refugee called Stalin, Gustav Klimt, Mahler, the architect Otto Wagner or long term visitor Mark Twain with his mane of white hair matched by a white suit. Vienna was in a cultural and political ferment in those Edwardian years; Freud was part of that, but this point is lost. In the series a Nazi is shown in the bare empty flat, virtually forcing the Freud family to sign over their cash before they can leave. Which depiction is correct, the museum documents which said that they fled or the series? The way the museum exists suggests the boarding up, not the clearance.

A second criticism is more of a reservation. This is a fine series for those interested in Freud or curious about him. People starting studies on the man and his work will find it to be a fine introduction. Achieving this means that the film had to be slow, detailed and without the suspense, violence, sensationalism, humour or sexuality the profit minded media feed into most stories. Too many audiences now expect those ingredients to appear in anything. This interesting and thoughtful series cannot be public entertainment, so will it be ignored by most of the public?

A third criticism is that since this series was made in 1984 feminists have made Freud unfashionable. Others within psychology have also ensured that his influence and that of psychoanalysis itself is generally waning. We have come along way from his pioneering work. Some of these criticism are generally valid,

not so much of Freud as to what has become of his methods. Many psychoanalytic patients seem to spend much of their subsequent decades after the first two reliving those first two. The doctor's couch is almost as familiar as their bed at home. That was not what Freud intended, nor did he see his work as the last word in the developing world of psychology, as this series shows.

