

BURKE AND HARE

Treatment

Format: 4 x 60' Limited Series

Genre: Period Crime Drama / Historical Thriller

Written by: Stephen Hall

Logline

In 1828 Edinburgh, two impoverished Irish immigrants discover that the city's booming medical establishment will pay handsomely for corpses. What begins as an opportunistic bargain with the dead spirals into a campaign of murder, dragging in their lovers, a celebrated anatomist, and a determined journalist who risks everything to expose the trade in human bodies.

Series Overview

Burke and Hare is a dark, character-driven historical thriller set in the shadowed closes, taverns and lecture theatres of 1828 Edinburgh. At its core, it is the story of four desperate people who convince themselves that survival justifies anything — until the logic of profit turns them into predators. Running parallel is the story of a city congratulating itself on progress while quietly feeding on the poor. In the underworld, bodies are currency. In the academy, they are opportunity. In the press, they are scandal. In the churchyard, they are no longer safe.

The series follows William Burke and William Hare, unemployed Irish labourers living on the edge of destitution in the West Port, alongside Helen McDougal and Margaret Hare, two women whose own survival is tied to the men's choices. When a lodger dies and they learn that surgeons will pay well for a fresh cadaver, they step across a line that first feels practical, then profitable, then horrifyingly easy. At Surgeon's Hall, the charismatic Dr Robert Knox needs a constant supply of bodies to sustain his lectures and his growing reputation. Though he keeps his hands clean, the system that feeds him is rotten, and men like David Paterson ensure the machinery keeps moving. Meanwhile, journalist Archibald Johnson begins to sense that Edinburgh's grave-robbing epidemic masks something darker — a suspicion that leads him into taverns, slums, graveyards and the orbit of the city's most dangerous men.

Across four episodes, the series charts the rise and collapse of Burke and Hare's scheme: from accidental profit, to serial murder, to public exposure, and finally to courtroom reckoning. The story is not simply about two killers. It is about complicity at every level: domestic, criminal, civic, scientific and institutional. The question at the heart of the series is not only how these murders happened, but how a whole city made them possible.

Tone and World

Edinburgh is the fifth lead of the series: a city of smoke, filth, ambition and hypocrisy. In the Old Town, poverty is crowded, damp and immediate; lodging houses and taverns are full of noise, hunger and the intimacy of desperation. Just streets away, the medical and intellectual elite speak of progress, enlightenment and scientific destiny while depending on an illicit supply chain of human remains. The tension between those two worlds gives the series its charge.

The tone balances **gallows humour, dread and social realism**. Burke and Hare are often vulgar, funny and alive with hustler energy; that vitality makes what they become all the more disturbing. The series leans into the irony that the men are not born as mythic monsters. They become monstrous through repetition, rationalisation and reward. Their banter, appetites and swagger exist alongside fear, superstition and moral collapse. Running against that is Johnson's increasingly dangerous investigation, which gives the series urgency, propulsion and a widening sense of public scandal.

Treatment

Episode One

Edinburgh, March 1828. William Burke and William Hare are broke, jobless and unwelcome. Irish immigrants in a hostile city, they are turned away from labouring work and return to Hare's lodging house with nothing but bruises, drink and frustration. There, Burke's partner Helen McDougal and Hare's lover Margaret are already living hand-to-mouth,

sustained by little more than whisky, resentment and the thin fantasy that things might improve. The household's only lodger, Old Donald, is frail and dying. Their poverty is immediate and humiliating.

Across the city, Dr Robert Knox is in his element: adored by students, impatient with critics, and fully aware that his fame rests on a steady stream of bodies for dissection. Journalist Archibald Johnson interviews Knox and immediately senses the contradiction at the centre of the man — a celebrated anatomist claiming innocence while the city's graveyards are being stripped to keep anatomy theatres full. Johnson's interest is not abstract; his own family has been touched by body-snatching, and he has begun to suspect that Edinburgh's resurrection trade is bigger, darker and more organised than anyone will admit.

That same night, Old Donald dies in Hare's lodgings. At first, the group sees only a practical problem: the loss of rent. Then Hare voices a possibility he has heard whispered before — the University will pay for a body. Helen is appalled, but desperation weakens resistance. They summon a priest to keep up appearances, hide the corpse, and arrange a covert meeting with David Paterson, Knox's intermediary. Under cover of darkness, Burke and Hare cart the body through Edinburgh's streets to Surgeon's Hall, where Knox coolly inspects the corpse and pays them far more money than they have seen in years. The effect is immediate and intoxicating. For the first time, survival seems to have offered them a route out.

With money in their pockets, the four eat well, drink well, and begin to talk about the future as though it can be bought. Hare sees the truth before anyone else: if one dead body can change their fortunes, why should they stop at one? Burke resists, but only weakly. Helen understands the danger. Margaret, pragmatic and unsentimental, negotiates her share. What began as an opportunistic transaction hardens into a pact. The episode ends with the first unmistakable rupture of conscience: Burke and Hare lure a weary Irish woman and her young grandson into the lodgings under the pretence of helping them. The old woman is smothered while the child, waking at the wrong moment, sees everything. Cut to black.

Episode Two

The second episode opens in panic. The little boy is now a witness, terrified and inconsolable. Helen pleads to spirit him away, but fear wins. Burke and Hare kill him too. The step from exploiting the dead to murdering the living has been taken, and there is no road back. From here on, the killings become not accidents of fortune but a business model. The series makes clear that the true horror is not only the murders themselves, but how quickly routine begins to form around them. The lodgings become a trap. The tea chest and cart become instruments of trade. The prison wall motif — tally marks appearing with each death — turns murder into grim arithmetic.

As Burke and Hare grow bolder, so do the world around them. Johnson's investigation deepens. In graveyards and taverns, he pieces together the relationship between body-snatchers, surgeons and middlemen. He is courted by civic figure William Allan, who sees political advantage in exposing the resurrection trade and offers Johnson money and access if he can uncover the truth. Johnson also recruits information from the city's underclass, including Dapper, who points him toward the feared Andrew Merrilees — a figure whose reach extends into grave-robbing, criminal networks and potentially the protection of corrupt officials.

Meanwhile, the ripple effect of the murders begins to spread through the lives of Edinburgh's vulnerable. Mary Paterson and Janet Brown, young women surviving on the margins through drink, sex work and domestic jobs, drift into Burke's orbit. The city itself becomes more dangerous in the telling: women speak of people going missing, police respond with contempt rather than protection, and the line between tavern conviviality and mortal risk keeps narrowing. On the academic side, Knox's assistants begin to notice that Burke and Hare are bringing in an unusual number of fresh "subjects," but convenience overrules concern. The poor, after all, are invisible until they become useful.

The central relationships also begin to fracture. Helen grows increasingly sickened by the men's rationalisations, especially after the child's murder. Burke, though fully complicit, still wants to think of himself as better than Hare. Margaret remains hard and transactional, believing survival depends on staying practical. Hare grows more volatile and more certain that conscience is merely a luxury for people with full stomachs. By the end of the episode, the murders have become serial, the body-count is rising, and the city's underworld is beginning to sense new competition in the corpse trade. The scheme is no longer hidden inside one room — it is now brushing up against Edinburgh's criminal infrastructure, its gossip networks and its social conscience.

Episode Three

By autumn 1828, the operation has become reckless. Burke and Hare are drunk on money, but also increasingly exposed. Helen is preparing to leave with Burke and lie low with family, hoping distance might yet save them. Burke, too, begins to imagine separating from Hare. But the logic of crime is binding: once men have killed together, separation becomes another kind of threat. Hare senses that Burke's loyalty is slipping. Trust between them starts to rot.

Johnson's investigation turns active and dangerous. With Dapper's help, he attempts to get close to Merrilees by posing as a new customer in need of cadavers. It goes badly wrong. Merrilees sees through the pretence and has Johnson brutally beaten, a warning that nearly ends the investigation there and then. But if Johnson is bloodied, he is not broken. He continues pressing forward, now understanding not just the scale of the trade but the violence protecting it. He also begins to pursue the growing number of missing persons, linking bodies in the anatomy theatres to lives that did not end naturally.

Inside the lodgings, Burke and Hare commit one of their most shocking murders: Daft Jamie, a large, broad seventeen-year-old with learning difficulties, known to locals and impossible to pass off as anonymous. Hare plies Jamie with whisky; Burke arrives drunk; tensions flare over betrayal and greed. When they move to kill the boy, he fights back ferociously and nearly escapes. Margaret, panicking, locks the door and becomes part of the trap. Jamie is finally overpowered and suffocated. His murder feels different because the city knows him. He is not a nameless drifter. He has a face, a reputation, a place in the street. At Surgeon's Hall, even Knox's own people recognise the body. The implications are now impossible to ignore.

From here, the atmosphere turns from secretive to feverish. Mary Knox warns her brother that his dealings are growing dangerous. Johnson finds a crucial witness in Janet Brown, who reveals that the men around Mary Paterson were not Merrilees's but Burke and Hare's. Johnson and Janet begin closing in on the West Port. Hare nearly catches them skulking near the lodgings, and only Mrs Connoway's interruption allows them to escape. That same night, another victim — Mrs Docherty — is killed, and her desperate cry of "Murder!" is heard through the wall by Mrs Connoway. The close is no longer whispering; it is listening. By the end of the episode, the conspiracy is fraying from every side: witnesses, gossip, missing women, identified bodies, and the first true sense that the law may finally be about to notice.

Episode Four

The final episode is the collapse. Burke tries clumsily to stage the scene after Mrs Docherty's murder, dousing the room with whisky in the hope of disguising events, but suspicion has already taken hold. Testimony begins to align. Mrs Connoway has heard too much. Janet Brown knows too much. The Grays and other lodgers occupy the same fragile ecosystem of poverty and fear, but self-preservation now drives them toward disclosure rather than silence. The authorities move. Burke and Hare are arrested, and the city that ignored the poor in life becomes ravenous for justice in death.

What follows is a courtroom drama shaped by politics as much as morality. The Crown wants convictions, but the case is difficult because so many bodies have already passed through the dissecting rooms and evidence has been systematically blurred. Hare is offered King's Evidence in exchange for testimony against Burke. It is a sickening deal, but dramatically perfect: the more shamelessly Hare describes what happened, the more fully he reveals the depths of his own guilt. His testimony condemns Burke, but also exposes the entire moral filth of the enterprise. The trial becomes both legal process and public theatre, with figures like Henry Cockburn, Sir William Rae, judges, civic authorities and the press all shaping the narrative that Edinburgh will tell about itself.

Johnson, who has pursued the story from graveyards to taverns to the threshold of violence, is finally where William Allan promised he would be: inside the biggest story in the city. Janet Brown, grieving Mary Paterson and seeing the men brought to account, becomes part of the human cost that the proceedings can never fully repair. Merrilees, too, is finally swept up as the machinery of justice expands beyond Burke and Hare to the wider underworld that profited from the dead. Yet the series refuses easy catharsis. Knox, whose reputation has rested on these bodies, remains shielded by status and ambiguity. He may be tainted, but the system is careful not to devour one of its own too completely.

In the end, Burke is convicted and meets the fate the city demands, while Hare, spared the noose, is marked forever as the man who talked. Justice arrives, but incompletely. The final movement of the series leaves us not with the comfort of punishment, but with the uglier truth the story has been building toward all along: Burke and Hare did not emerge from nowhere. They were created by a world that priced bodies, despised the poor, rewarded silence, and called exploitation progress. Their crimes are singular, but the conditions that made them possible remain embedded in the city itself.

Themes

At its deepest level, *Burke and Hare* is about **the market value of human life**. The poor are disposable until they become useful; then they are monetised. The anatomy trade becomes a prism through which the series examines class, colonial prejudice, institutional hypocrisy and the seductions of modern progress. The series asks who gets to call himself civilised when civilisation itself is built on hidden brutality.

It is also a story about **complicity**. Burke and Hare commit the murders, but the women enable them, the buyers reward them, the city ignores the missing, the police fail the vulnerable, and the institutions protect their reputations until public scandal makes denial impossible. Everyone tells themselves a version of the same lie: that necessity excuses the next step.

Finally, the series explores **storytelling itself** — who controls the narrative of crime, science and justice. Burke and Hare sell one story to the surgeons. Knox sells another to society. Johnson tries to force the truth into print. In court, Hare weaponises confession to save himself. Edinburgh is a city telling stories about progress while burying the evidence beneath them.