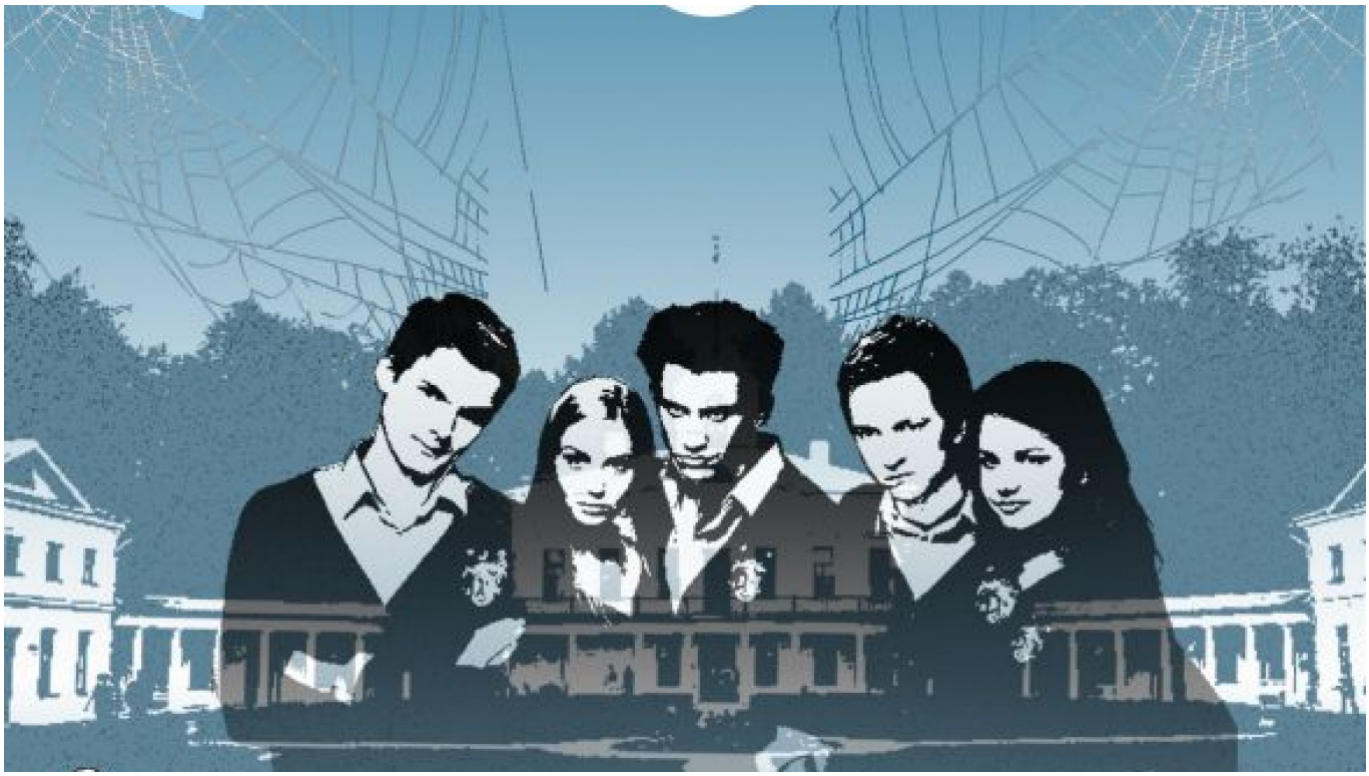
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Inthe Spotlight

By Anna Malpas

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As the children return for a new term at their well-appointed boarding school, everything seems normal. Except for the new cleaner who has just escaped from a psychiatric hospital, the bodies of dead hares scattered in the snow and the dungeon with its decaying skeletons.

This is the plot of CTC's new show, "The Closed School," which picks up on the trend for spooky, gothic shows like "True Blood." Starting this week, it is set in a school for the privileged offspring of businessmen and film stars, which has a lovely white-columned building on a remote country estate. Outside its gates is a wild forest full of things that go bump in the night.

Surprisingly, the idea for the licensed show came from Spain, which had a show called "The Black Lagoon Boarding School" (El Internado Laguna Negra). While Spain is hardly known for its impenetrable forests, the idea works pretty well in Russia, where forests really are frightening and likely to be full of wild dogs, abandoned military installations and possibly even serial killers, like the one who has cast a permanent shadow over Moscow's wooded Bitsevsky Park.

The show began with a young woman, Maria, escaping from a high-security psychiatric hospital and turning up at the school as the new cleaner. On the way, she decides to change out of her hospital pyjamas in the woods. She is chased by a rottweiler and shimmies up a tree wearing only a bra and knickers. So full marks to the scriptwriters for getting a bit of titillation into the first five minutes.

As she cringes in the branches, the school's hunky headmaster jogs up to the rescue. He is puzzled — "We don't have any dogs, especially not mad ones," he says.

She is immediately accepted at the school, and the staff turn off radio reports describing the escaped patient, sighing "That's all we need."

The school has wood paneling, leather-bound books and a chef who whips up Italian food for lunch. The pupils are driven for their first day back at school in huge jeeps, and one has a film star mother who poses for photographs with the dowdier mothers.

But under the placid exterior, there is something very wrong, the white-haired history teacher warns his pupils: "Terrible things are happening in the wood. It's dangerous for the children, for the school, for all of us."

The headmaster thinks he is a bit touched and tells him to take a holiday, but instead he heads into the woods, following an ancient map, and finds an underground bunker, reminiscent of the one in "Lost." Inside, he stumbles upon a pile of skeletons in a barred cell.

The teacher manages to run away, but does not get far as he walks into a mantrap. Soon he is thrown into the dungeon himself by a mysterious stranger flanked by the savage rottweiler.

Meanwhile his teenage pupils wait for him in a cemetery full of leaning crosses, with dead hares lying mysteriously dismembered on the ground.

"This is gothic, it's cool," one comments.

CTC, which aims for a young audience, is pinning its hopes on the show to revive its fortunes after a drop in ratings and a few much-vaunted shows that disappeared without a trace.

The first episode was pretty eventful, although the chills were on the mild side — after all this show airs at 9 p.m., just as the toddlers are tucked into bed to watch "Good Night, Little Ones."

The trailer on the channel's web site promises plenty more blood and gore, saying: "There won't be a prom. No one can run. No one can hide. Their home forever is 'The Closed School.'"

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