

1 Introduction

GEORGE W. BRANDT

A television programme is not a commodity. It might become one, but it begins as a labour of love. To make money in television you must first make things, and the things you make are things of the spirit.

Clive James¹

This volume is a follow-up to my earlier *British Television Drama* (Cambridge University Press, 1981) – but with a difference. In editing that book my aim had basically been a simple one: it was to argue the case for television playwriting as a legitimate form of drama, deserving of respect as much as any other form of playwriting and hence worthy of study. The overall pattern of *British Television Drama* – that is, each of its chapters being devoted to the work of one playwright – was not intended to imply any auteurist delusion either on my part or on that of the contributors to the volume. Yes, the author was and is at the heart of the playmaking process. But to say that is not tantamount to putting him or her on a pedestal as a solitary genius. We were not ignorant of the real world of TV, with its pressures of time slots, scheduling for specific audiences and the tyranny of ratings. But even if a writer is commissioned to produce some episodes of a soap opera originated by someone else, and thus obliged to work with pre-established characters and within situations leaving little space for self-expression, he or she still has to *write*. No matter whether the script arises out of what we might call primary or secondary creativity: without the act of writing there simply wouldn't be any programme.

That said, I was of course perfectly well aware of the massive input in the final product of countless workers other than the writer. Just to take producers: key people like Kenith Trodd, long-time associate of Dennis Potter; like Michael Wearing, responsible for some of the outstanding productions of the eighties, including two dealt with in this book (*Boys*

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

from the *Blackstuff* and *Edge of Darkness*); like the late Innes Lloyd, who produced more than sixty films, dramas and series for the BBC, particularly promoting the plays of Alan Bennett;² like the formidable Verity Lambert, a powerful influence in countless productions at the BBC from *Doctor Who* onward, later the Controller of Drama at Thames TV and a director of that company's subsidiary Euston Films;³ like Betty Willingale, who nursed along writers of the stature of Dennis Potter, Arthur Hopcraft, Ken Taylor, Troy Kennedy Martin and John Hopkins⁴ – such individuals have always mattered enormously in the making of what is arguably still, at least at the time of writing, the best television drama in the world. They and their colleagues must be included in the overall evaluation of any programme – as must the directors, actors, composers, musicians, set/costume/lighting designers, cameramen, make-up artistes, and indeed all the other collaborators in the collective enterprise that is TV drama.

But the emphasis on the *writer* in a book written in the late seventies made sense. It was a strategy dictated by the academic prejudice still current at the time against what had already by then become a significant art form – but one lacking the sanction of literary esteem.

The need for arguing such a case no longer exists. The favourable reception of *British Television Drama* and later books on the subject suggests that the climate has changed. The exponential growth in recent years of TV studies, admittedly often more sociologically than aesthetically orientated, at universities in the English-speaking world shows that television, including its drama, has come to be recognised as an important factor in contemporary culture. In view of this, the present book's format differs somewhat from that of its predecessor. Apart from the fact that it takes for its theme a much more limited time span – only one decade: the eighties – it has adopted the *programme* rather than the playwright as its organising principle. This has allowed the contributors to look at a great many aspects other than, or rather in addition to, the written text.

Nevertheless the present volume, too, is concerned with the aesthetic response to given programmes. Admittedly there must be a subjective (which is not to say an arbitrary) element in such a response. This book does not set out to deny any other ways of looking at television drama in committing itself to a felt rather than a purely cerebral response. But it asserts that aesthetics, and hence value judgements, are a key function of the critic, as indeed they must be by definition. The direction taken by media and cultural studies in recent years makes it clear that this is not altogether an unproblematical attitude.

Let us take an example of what might be termed the New Establishment point of view. In the introduction to his *Television Drama*, published in

1990, John Tulloch devotes several pages to a critique of *British Television Drama* – which he sees as (unhappily) embedded in the liberal/critical discourse shared by many television practitioners. Tulloch says of the book that

the social location is the alliance between a liberal academia and a ‘critical’ media practice which allows the ‘ventilation’ of public issues; and the ideological work of the discourse is in promoting ‘creativity’ (though occasionally ‘politics’) to a ‘mass audience’ by way of, primarily, public service television.⁵

Having noted all the quotation marks raised like so many quizzical eyebrows, one might ask whether from a progressive point of view (which is that taken by Tulloch) it would be better *not* to ventilate any public issues, better *not* to present any politics to a mass audience. Or indeed not to value creativity, however defined. One notes the implied attack on a supposedly elitist stance – the programme-maker (or the academic) talking down to the ‘mass audience’ from a superior, class-based point of vantage. Paradoxically, Tulloch makes it clear that he prizes many authors – Griffiths, Potter, Bleasdale, McGrath – who would fit into the (as he might see it) liberal-humanist canon easily enough. So to take the argument beyond this particular instance: one cannot help wondering at the position of quite a few radical scholars who, in their eagerness to attack the ‘liberal-critical’ consensus in the matter of ‘quality’ drama, risk ending up, in effect if not in intention, close to a rightwing populism that Rupert Murdoch might well, and indeed does, endorse vociferously.

Let me state my own stance right from the start. The pattern of the present book may differ from that of its predecessor, but the underlying editorial attitude is much as it was before. That attitude no doubt runs counter to a good deal of the work done in cultural studies during the eighties. To quote Paul Kerr: ‘These days it is unfashionable on the left to talk about “quality”. It is an evaluative term – and evaluation has been out of intellectual favour for some time in cultural criticism.’⁶ I am content to go against the fashion. This collection of essays, admittedly an incomplete and selective overview of the eighties, sets out to deal with critical – and that must include judgemental – issues. No attempt has been made to deal with television in value-free, merely ‘ethnographic’ or sociological terms.

The question of quality is central here. In an essay, ‘Problems with Quality’, Charlotte Brunson, the well-known contributor to *Screen*, has sought to unravel the distinguishing features of high-prestige drama productions. Taking Granada’s *Bridehead Revisited* and *The Jewel in the Crown* as the paradigms, she has singled out the factors that appear to make these epics ‘uncontroversial signifiers of quality’. According to her list, which I summarise, they are the following:

4 GEORGE W. BRANDT

- 1 *Literary source.* British culture having a predominantly literary bias, middle-brow literature legitimates the 'vulgar' medium of television (whereas high literature might offend as being too good for TV). Adaptations gain prestige from their literariness.
- 2 *The best of British acting.* Prestigious actors with a theatrical pedigree give 'class' to quality productions – a notion supported by international opinion (i.e. the foreign market).
- 3 *Money.* Such programmes are distinguished by high (meaning high-cost) production values. Tastefully deployed, these tend to underwrite upper middle-class lifestyles. Ms Brunsdon reminds us that Rupert Murdoch asserted as much in an 'anti-elitist' diatribe in his MacTaggart Memorial Lecture at Edinburgh in 1988.
- 4 *Heritage aspect.* Classy serials tend to project a National Trust image of England and Englishness (though not necessarily of the rest of Britain).⁷

Touché! – the heritage thrust is a palpable hit. A largely idealised past which panders to nostalgia for a never-never-land of social harmony is a pitfall for 'quality' productions.⁸

The other arguments are more questionable.

For a start, throwing together the two ideologically very different Granada blockbusters, *Brideshead Revisited* and *The Jewel in the Crown*, muddies the waters. As for the literary aspect of drama (plotting, characterisation, dialogue), this is as much or nearly as much part of the television play as is the visual input – and that is true not only of adaptations, which are the point at issue here, but more generally. Whether literariness is commendable or otherwise depends entirely on the context. It would be as absurd to say dogmatically: 'Literary = bad' as it would be to assert the contrary.

And why on earth should outstanding performances, even by stage actors, be seen as irrelevant to 'quality'? British actors fortunately cross over from one medium to another quite freely. This would be reprehensible only if the skills on display were somehow inappropriate to the medium; which is not the case as a rule.

The money argument has some validity – but not much. A telefilm like *The Far Pavilions* sank without a trace in spite of its having a budget considerably larger than *The Jewel in the Crown*. It embodied the romance of empire in precisely the way that *Jewel* did not. Ms Brunsdon's case against prestige productions is not strengthened by her invoking Rupert Murdoch to prop it up. The pseudo-radicalism of that latter-day Citizen Kane is rightly suspect; it is the radicalism of the right, populism from the top down.

But perhaps the anti-evaluative stance of eighties radicalism is beginning to lose some of its gloss. To quote Ms Brunsdon again, who has written in (at least partial) revision of an earlier position:

Although frequently informed by a desire to investigate, rather than judge, other people's pleasures, this very avoidance of judgement seems somehow to recreate the old patterns of aesthetic domination and subordination, and to pathologize the audience. Because issues of judgement are never brought out into the open, but always kept, as it were, under the seminar table, criteria involved can never be interrogated... I do not wish to argue that television studies should be devoted to discriminating between 'good' and 'bad' programs [*Why on earth not? GB*], but I do want to insist that most academics in television studies are using qualitative criteria, however expressed or repressed, and that the constitution of the criteria involved should be the subject of explicit debate... 'What are we going to do about bad television?' Nothing, if we're not prepared to admit it exists.⁹

What then is quality? Far be it from me to lay down any a priori, once-and-for-all ground rules for defining that elusive beast. But the assessment of TV drama cannot be totally isolated from the criteria applied to other narrative and dramatic forms. The television play may be *sui generis* (though even that is questionable); it certainly does not exist in an aesthetic vacuum. Drama as a mirror of life (which may well be a distorting mirror: naturalism is no longer seen as the 'natural' language of TV); as a reflection of real human concerns (which are not necessarily just topical ones); able to relate individual experiences to an implicit moral structure and scale of values; able to broaden the viewers' sympathies beyond their normal confines, to lead them to a greater insight into interpersonal and social relationships, to educate their feelings (at all levels) through laughter, suspense, empathy or whatever, by means of images as well as words, and to do this in a form with a palpable beginning, middle and end – these aims are as valid for drama watched over a TV dinner as they are for its counterpart on the stage or the cinema screen. (Except that the Aristotelian insistence on an end as a necessary formal element doesn't apply to the closure-less continuous serial.)

As in *British Television Drama*, the contributors to this volume come from a variety of backgrounds. I negotiated with them as to which particular programmes they would be writing about, and we achieved a meeting of minds concerning the importance, however defined, of their chosen topics. The programmes discussed in the book represent highlights of the decade's TV drama on all four channels – which is not to say that there weren't a good many other outstanding plays which might alternatively have been selected. In any case, each of the productions chosen was interesting in its own right; each one commented directly or indirectly on the times we live in, either in affirmation or in dissent; and it is by these

programmes and others like them that the small-screen drama of the eighties is going to be remembered.

In contrast to the plays examined in *British Television Drama*, they are not predominantly single plays but either serials or series. This reflects the actual change in the balance of TV drama programming during the eighties. All the plays raise a number of critical issues, both in themselves and in their historical, institutional or generic context. Many of them 'ventilate' public issues – and are none the worse for that (nor necessarily any the better either). Most of them pay at least a nodding tribute to genre conventions, but as often as not it's precisely their breaking through these conventions that gives them their distinctive character.

The hope of confining the topics to plays available on video, which would enable the interested reader to pursue the subject further, could unfortunately not be realised entirely. Nevertheless, a number of plays *can* be bought or rented for home viewing in the UK, so that the arguments advanced here are capable of being either verified or confuted (and the plays enjoyed all over again).¹⁰ Though the essays all express personal points of view, differing from each other in approach as well as in style, they are so arranged as to offer something in the nature of an internal dialogue.

Albert Hunt opens with an examination of one of the monologues from Alan Bennett's *Talking Heads*. In this series, the six episodes of which had several directors, Bennett pared the form down to its barest essentials. All the dramatic communication is in the actor's hands, or rather in the actor's face. Here television shows its affinity not only with the stage – the monologue is after all a well-established minor theatrical form – but with the short story as well. This is TV drama at its most literary.

By way of contrast, Vera Gottlieb presents the opposite end of the spectrum in the second essay; she sets episode 355 of *Brookside* ('Damon's YTS Comes to an End') in the context of the soap opera form. The continuous serial has been flourishing mightily during the decade, and there is a growing volume of literature – academic, polemical or adulatory – covering this area. The episode in question, written by Barry Woodward, describes an all-too-typical event in the life of a young man during a period of high unemployment.

John Adams, in the third essay, uses an episode from the extremely successful series, *Yes, Prime Minister*, by Antony Jay and Jonathan Lynn, as a springboard for wide-ranging reflections on the nature of TV comedy.

In the fourth essay, Richard Sparks locates an episode from the Inspector Morse series, 'The Last Enemy', within a definite genre convention; and he shows that it runs counter to some of these conventions. That exceptionally popular series, built around the character first created

by Colin Dexter in his nine Morse novels, has been served by writers as accomplished and diverse as Anthony Minghella, Julian Mitchell, Charles Wood and Peter Nichols.

Troy Kennedy Martin's mini-series, *Edge of Darkness*, is the subject of the fifth essay. In a detailed analysis, Andrew Lavender makes clear that this suspenseful story of nuclear skulduggery blends symbolism with realism and increasingly locates a politically inflected thriller in the realm of metaphor.

The writer of the sixth essay, Bob Millington, is well known as the co-author of a book on his chosen subject:¹¹ this is Alan Bleasdale's *Boys from the Blackstuff*, another treatment of political issues – but seen in essentially personal terms. This series of five self-contained but interlocking stories, with their X-ray vision of Liverpool working-class life in a period of recession, appears in retrospect to have been one of the representative statements of the decade.

Geoffrey Reeves presents in the seventh essay the history of the production as well as the reception in the press and the country at large of Charles Wood's Falklands drama, *Tumbledown*. He draws a parallel with the fate of Ian Curteis's *Falklands Play*, which failed to achieve production, and he raises questions of the public response to that ever-contentious genre, docu-drama.

Four Days in July – the only single play in this volume apart from *Tumbledown* – is writer-director Mike Leigh's study of the Ulster 'situation' as experienced in everyday life. In the eighth essay of the book Paul Clements, an acknowledged expert on Leigh's highly personal working methods,¹² examines this film which was shot on location in Northern Ireland.

The next essay – Hugh Hebert's piece on John Byrne's mini-series *Tutti Frutti* – also considers aspects of British life from a perspective other than that of the Home Counties. Scotland has during the decade been developing a more distinctive accent in TV drama, in which John Byrne's unmistakably Scottish tone of voice stands out.

In dealing in the tenth essay with *The Jewel in the Crown*, Ken Taylor's dramatisation of Paul Scott's Raj Quartet, I have engaged with some of the problems of adapting novels for television, a sore point with many critics who deplore this as an inherently second-rate form of writing.

The question of adaptation comes up again, together with problems of feminist representation on television, in the eleventh essay, Liz Bird and Jo Eliot's piece on Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* as dramatised by Ted Whitehead. The writers relate the highly acclaimed serial to a number of current theoretical issues.

The last essay, Joost Hunningher's sleuthlike investigation of Dennis

Potter's *The Singing Detective*, arguably the most complex TV drama of the decade, uncovers some little-known details of its production history.

This listing of essays (which incidentally confirms the BBC's continuing place as the leader in the field) suffices to demonstrate that the eighties were a fertile period for television drama – *malgré tout*. Rather than attempt to give an exhaustive account of all the major plays of the period, let me sketch in the background against which this drama was written and produced.

Many of the previous decade's familiar landmarks – people as well as programmes – were, of course, still part of the scene. Thus, Alan Plater was in constant demand; he adapted Trollope in his *Barchester Chronicles* (BBC 1982) and Olivia Manning's Balkan and Levant trilogies under the title of *Fortunes of War* (BBC 1987), epics on a par with the Granada blockbusters; and he contributed many original stories such as *Thank you, Mrs. Clinkscales* (Yorkshire 1983) and *The Beiderbecke Trilogy* (Yorkshire 1984–6).

Alan Bennett went from strength to strength.¹³ John Mortimer supplied a new stack of briefs to his crusty legal hero, Rumpole of the Bailey, who had first laid down the law for Thames TV as long ago as 1978. If Mortimer's dramatisation of Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (Granada 1981) was a nostalgia trip for some, his serial *Paradise Postponed* (Thames 1986) reported on the state of the nation between 1948 and 1985 from the perspective of disappointed postwar idealism.

Some writers of that sometimes underrated but perennially popular genre, sitcom, also proved to have enviable staying power. In the BBC stable there were Carla Lane, allegedly the highest-paid comedy writer of them all (*Bread*), John Sullivan (*Only Fools and Horses . . .*) as well as Roy Clarke (*Last of the Summer Wine*). At Central TV, the old team of Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais launched *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* in 1983; it staged a comeback in 1986.

Some soap operas seemed to go on for ever – like *Coronation Street*. Though sometimes accused of living in a cosy Northern timewarp, The Street has been able to retain its dedicated following. Yorkshire TV's *Emmerdale Farm* carried on a bucolic career begun in 1982; the village where its exteriors are filmed has become a tourist trap, complete with Emmerdale rock, mugs and tea-towels.

A number of changes did take place though, in soaps as elsewhere. Scottish Television joined the chorus with *Take the High Road* at the beginning of the decade, whilst Central TV's *Crossroads* did not long survive the attempts in 1985 to beef up its anaemic, much maligned but passionately defended existence. Phil Redmond's *Brookside*, launched on Channel 4 in 1982, set out to break new ground. Its situation in a *real* housing estate updated the concept of location shooting, with sound and

vision control placed in a technical block right among the actual houses. Eclipsing them all, Julia Smith and Tony Holland's *EastEnders* managed to make Albert Square as familiar a place as *The Rovers Return*. In the year of its launch, 1985, the new soap reached an audience of 22.15 million in the week ending 14 December. The actor Leslie Grantham, with a real-life conviction for murder behind him, made *Dirty Den* an inexhaustible story for the tabloids.

If the eighties – like all decades – were a transitional period, they did have a distinctive character of their own. In the age of Thatcherism the postwar consensus screeched to a halt. The government hammered the public with the message that there was no alternative to its measures, however painful. The new ideology employed the language of libertarianism as a cover for reversing the social gains taken for granted for over three decades. Henceforward the free market was to be equated with freedom as such. To quote Howard Brenton:

Thatcherism, like all authoritarian dogmas, was brightly coloured. Writers were trying to get at the darkness, the social cruelty and suffering behind the numbingly neo-bright phrases – ‘the right to choose’, ‘freedom under the law’, ‘rolling back the state’.¹⁴

According to Mrs Thatcher, there was no such thing as society. The Good Samaritan was merely a man with enough money in his pocket to be Good. The new rugged individualism aimed to undermine the public-service ideal which hitherto had informed many areas of life, notably broadcasting, and to substitute undiluted market principles – although historically dubious ‘Victorian values’ were also invoked from time to time. In the terminology that came to dominate public discourse, the citizen (an adult person possessed of certain inalienable rights irrespective of wealth) was to be replaced by the consumer (whose clout would vary according to purchasing power). The catchword used *ad nauseam* was that of ‘choice’. What was ignored was the fact that in many fields, certainly in broadcasting, a greater multiplicity of goods in the shop window didn't necessarily spell greater variety. It might simply mean more of the same, with no *meaningful* widening of choice at all. American television, the free-market ideal towards which most Thatcherite thinking appeared to be tending, was a case in point. The approximately forty channels on tap in New York merely offered a choice of similar material greatly inferior on the whole to what was available to the British viewer on four.

Opposition among writers and broadcasters to such a philosophy couldn't be snuffed out overnight, but dissidents were to come under steadily growing, though often unacknowledged, pressure during the decade. The fact that Mrs Whitehouse maintained her old campaign to

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clean up the airwaves was only a minor irritant; the old campaigner's Punch-and-Judy show had almost become an endearing national institution. True, she sometimes went too far. There was, for instance, the radio interview in 1989 when she suggested that, if *The Singing Detective* was anything to go by, the cause of Dennis Potter's well-known psoriasis must have been the childhood trauma of seeing his mother being seduced in the woods. Mrs Potter senior was not amused, sued and received an apology. Mrs Whitehouse claimed she'd blacked out halfway through the interview and hadn't really meant what she'd said.

More serious was the relentlessly tightening government pressure on the BBC. One way of hobbling the Corporation was to question the licence fee – always a good populist ploy – and look to commercial ways of funding the Corporation. The Committee on Financing the BBC, set up in 1985 under the chairmanship of Alan Peacock, was charged with the task of assessing the effects of advertising or sponsorship for BBC programmes; in fact, its investigations covered the whole field of broadcasting. Its findings, published on 3 July 1986, didn't quite live up to what the government had obviously expected: the Committee's advice was *against* advertising. Some of its other recommendations were not so good. The policy, adopted in April 1988, of index-linking the licence fee failed to take into account the fact that TV production costs (not only for the BBC, of course) were rising faster than inflation. The recommendations that (a) a quota of airtime be reserved for independent producers, not only in BBC but also in ITV programming, and (b) the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) should in future be guided by strictly commercial criteria in awarding ITV franchises, were later picked up with questionable results by the Home Affairs Committee on Broadcasting, in a report submitted on 22 June 1988.

Indeed, Independent Television wasn't safe in its commercial corner either, since the IBA was also committed to a public-service concept. There were repeated attacks in parliament and in the press not only on the BBC but on certain ITV programmes as well – controversial documentaries such as Thames TV's *Death on the Rock* (28 April 1988) stirring up even more of a hornet's nest than the broadcasting of mere plays.

Not that drama was immune. Some plays were red rags to the bulls of reaction – particularly if produced by the BBC. Trevor Griffiths, an enthusiastic and effective contributor to TV drama in the seventies, ran into a lot of flak with his less than idolatrous portrait of Scott of the Antarctic in *The Last Place on Earth* (BBC 1985) – after which, passively or even actively discouraged, no more of his work was seen on the small screen for the rest of the decade.¹⁵ Another red rag was Alan Bleasdale's mini-series *The Monocled Mutineer* (BBC1, 1986), the fictionalised story of a real squaddie, Percy Toplis, who impersonated an officer during the First