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978-1-107-04393-0 - Viewing America: Twenty-First-Century Television Drama

Christopher Bigsby

Excerpt

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Introduction

Television drama

In the 21st century, the mass of men lead lives of quiet masturbation.
Television is the optimum tool for that. David Simon¹

Television is at the base of a lot of our problems. It trivializes everything.
David Chase²

I think there are some amazing highs on television and there's a permanence to it on some level . . . people feel less alone in a great way. It becomes part of their education. It becomes an entertainment that is substantial. They feel close to other people. They communicate with an artist. There's light shed on their lives. They're diverted. They are lifted from their burdens. They are entertained. As television turns into something else that part of it, whatever that is, that comes from the ancient plays, the ancient dramas, that's not going to go away. Matthew Weiner³

Television, so much part of people's everyday life, has tended to be dismissed, even by its practitioners, as mere entertainment, as if entertainment were an unworthy objective. In 1884, Henry James felt obliged to defend the novel on similar grounds. How, it was said by some, could the imagined be said to bear on reality? For him, 'The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life.' He rejected the notion that 'the novelist is less occupied in looking for the truth . . . than the historian'. The only obligation which may reasonably be expected of a novel beyond that, he suggested, was that it should be 'interesting'.⁴ In a similar way, television drama, often not recognised by many as drama in so far as it is part of the continuum of the nightly schedule, has tended to be dismissed unless, imported from Britain and given the title *Masterpiece Theatre*, it is presumed to have the *imprimatur* of 'culture'. Yet it can indeed seek to represent life, and in doing so enter the arena alongside the historian, the sociologist, the political scientist. Henry James, though, set the bar somewhat low in requiring the novel

to be ‘interesting’, but perhaps ‘entertaining’ was too gross for his refined sensibility.

Most people will never see productions of the plays they study or read. They rely, instead, on the text alone, but the British playwright John McGrath has said that the text is what is left when the play has gone. The problem and triumph of theatre is that you have to be there. It is a live art, a present-tense art. You were either at the party or you were not. To watch a simple recording of the event is to witness a body from which the soul has flown. Richard Eyre has recalled that Michelangelo was once asked by one of the Medici to create a snowman. It was, it was said, the most beautiful thing he ever created, but it melted with the sun. Theatre, too, exists in the moment and thereafter only in memory, but it is its evanescence that gives it its intensity, that burns it into the memory.

Television drama is the reverse, at least it has been since the invention first of video recording and then of box sets, downloads and streaming. Now, it is possible for everyone to see the production, but few have the chance to read the script. In contrast to theatre, though, television can permit a serial reality to unfold and characters to evolve over time. Initially, stories may necessitate a pause of a week, as magazine serials once required a degree of patience before the fate of a character became known. Recording technology has closed that gap. Long-form (or ‘serial’) drama can now be watched as I tend to eat After Eight chocolates. I start meaning to have one and end up going straight through the entire box. The nineteenth-century serial novel, available at first episode by episode before appearing entire, now has its counterpart, and most of the creators of the very best American drama series happily invoke those novels as their models, and not only in terms of their structure. Dickens, in particular, is referenced, along with Balzac, in so far as many of them set out to address the social and moral condition of the nation.

Henry James, who was capable of writing both taut, morally economical novels and also works of considerable density and elaboration, observed, in his essay on *The Tragic Muse*, itself first issued in episodes, ‘I delight in a deep-breathing economy and an organic form. My business was accordingly to “go in” for complete pictorial fusion, some such common interest between my two first notions as would, in spite of their birth under quite different stars, do them no violence at all.’⁵ Economy and organic form are no less distinguishing marks of television drama.

For James, the imagined and the real occupied the same space: ‘There are no tendencies worth anything but to see the actual or the imaginative, which is just as visible, and to paint it.’⁶ The same could be said of the

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paintings to be seen on television screens where the actual and imaginative make equal claims.

Theatre going is plainly not deeply engrained, nor does it have a wide social reach, even as the hunger for drama is self-evident. Today, audiences for non-musical theatre constitute only 9.4 per cent of the population, down from 13.5 per cent sixteen years earlier.⁷ It is film and television, particularly the latter, which command attention and where dramatised stories are played out in day time and prime time alike. For a young Arthur Miller, to have a play on Broadway was to enter into a dialogue with America. It is no more, unless lion kings have much to offer in the way of conversation. Now, at least potentially, it is television which plays that role. It is where America is explained to itself if also where it distracts itself from reality. And not only America. For the British playwright Trevor Griffiths, theatre 'is one specialized form of drama among several; the television play and the film are others, in my view pre-eminent in terms of creative challenge and social impact'.⁸ At the same time it has had to confront the fact that writing for television has long lacked the cachet of theatre. For Dennis Potter, if the word 'TV' appeared before the word 'play', it was like putting 'processed' in front of cheese. Respect went to those who worked for the theatre. The television playwright was regarded, he thought, not with contempt or disinterest but as a typewriter for hire. Nonetheless, he believed that 'Only television is classless, multiple . . . Television is the biggest platform and you should kick and fight and bite your way onto it'.⁹

For Griffiths, television is 'a means of intervening in a society's life',¹⁰ a means, indeed, of forging a society. Stanton B. Garner Jr has recalled Raymond Williams's observation that, 'Since our way of seeing things is literally our way of living, the process of communication is in fact the process of community: the sharing of common meanings, and thence common activities and purposes; the offering, reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to the tensions and achievements of growth and change'.¹¹

Beyond that, for Potter television offered the possibility of subversion, of offering a critique of his society. As he explained, 'I don't know in what direction the world is moving in and in that sense I'm a quietist . . . I do care, but I don't care in the way that I want to scream in the street about it . . . I'm therefore attending, or showing, in that Quaker sense of the word, concern – it doesn't mean that you issue a diatribe of where you think society is going to . . . it doesn't mean that I'm feeling any the less passionately involved in what I think is wrong, but that if I do what

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I can do myself with the pen on the page, within the very medium that seems . . . to be the voice of the occupying power, then the resistance ought to take place within the barracks as well as outside.¹²

In recent years writers have been struck by a failure of nerve in British television, which seems to have lost its primacy. Paul Abbott, one of its principal writers, has remarked that, 'Just because an audience wants to watch *Heartbeat* [a British police drama] doesn't mean to say you've got to make it like white, sliced bread. *Heartbeat* could have been *Heimat* [Edgar Reitz's thirty-part series about life in Germany from 1919 to 2000]. The bar is set way, way too low. I watch *ER*. . . We breed typists and it's our fault. . . You watch people on *ER* working and they are just supremely comfortable. Nobody fears putting up a suggestion that is crap because they know that the next stage is the growth stage and somebody has to say the first bit.'¹³ British television, it seemed to him, was 'flooded with people who are under-skilled and not creative. They're all architectural scaffolders and there's nobody doing masonry',¹⁴ though, ironically, it was John Wells of *ER* who bought the right to create an American version of Abbott's series *Shameless*.

The problem, as it seemed to Abbott, was that there was a tendency to underestimate the intelligence of viewers: 'The TV literacy of audiences', he has insisted, 'is way beyond most executives. We should be able to have comedy and emotional truth in the same drama . . . Upsetting and funny in the same breath. Most people can cope with that sort of telly and the Americans do it really well. I want to change the genres.'¹⁵ America, though, offered problems he did not encounter in Britain. When adapting *Shameless* for American television he came up against censorship: 'You can show somebody taking three heads off with a gun but you can't imply a sexual scene involving a 14-year-old boy with high testosterone. I don't mean showing anything, just imply. That's just wrong. If we can cope with it in real life, why isn't it on telly? Who's telling the lie? We want it to go on mainstream TV. I bet it won't but I'd like to put up a fight and at least try to nudge that wall back a bit.'¹⁶

Stephen Poliakoff, who has written for both stage and television, is bemused by writers who treat the latter with suspicion: 'Maybe they think they won't get their own way . . . they prefer to get rich making movies that don't get made . . . I love the theatre – I'm still in the theatre – but television offers the opportunity to reach a lot of people, and to create work that lasts because of DVD.'¹⁷

As he remarked in 2008, 'I don't think we should say TV isn't a cultural experience. The best show is the American Golden-Globe winning TV

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series *Mad Men*.' It was, he thought, 'Easily as good as contemporary American theatre, easily as good as David Mamet and by far the biggest cultural highlight I've had in any medium for the past couple of years. Interestingly, it is quite slow. It has deliberately gone back to the days of a really rich period of American writing basing itself on the writers of the 1950s. The fact it is so successful in the US puts us to shame, really.'¹⁸ That shift, which has seen American television drama excel at a time when British television drama has been marginalised, is precisely what this book is designed to explore, though there are signs of revival (David Hare's *Page Eight* two-part miniseries being one of them), even if some of the more impressive dramas have needed the financial backing of NBC (*The Hollow Crown*) or HBO (*Parade's End*).

In the United States, network television is concerned with maximising income, doing so by addressing the greatest number and making viewers available to those wishing to buy advertising space. As such it has at times proved vulnerable to pressure from those who take exception to the programming they have chosen to associate with, or the individuals they had hoped might win them the kind of attention they desired if not deserved. In times of reaction, this has sometimes proved destructive. The chief concern is ratings, and these are watched as assiduously as a doctor monitors a patient, except that sponsor and network are a great deal more ready to turn off the life support system.

Early television drama in America was in part committed, as the producer of NBC's *Television Playhouse* observed, to bring Broadway to the screen. A rapidly expanded television audience, in an economically booming America, increased the demand for programming, the more especially since there was at first no technology for recording. Of the broadcasts in the 1950s, 90 per cent were live. Meanwhile, as with radio, programmes were originally controlled not by networks but by sponsors, equally committed to raising their profiles, associating themselves with quality programming but ensuring the exclusion of controversial material. Nonetheless, drama proved central to all networks – NBC, CBS, ABC, DuMont – and American television was ahead of its European counterparts.

ABC and CBS's *The Actors' Studio* ran for three years from 1948 to 1950. NBC's *Television Playhouse* began in the same year but continued until 1955. As with radio, these series were often branded according to the sponsors (*Kraft Television Theater*, *The Ford Theater*, *Philco and Goodyear Television Playhouse*, *Texaco Star Theater*). Nonetheless, and despite commercial and production constraints, many of the new television plays won prizes, an outstanding example being Reginald Rose's *Twelve Angry Men* in 1953,

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which, in its stage version, was still being produced more than fifty years later.

Television attracted established and newly emerging playwrights, as it did actors who had initially established their reputations on the stage. Two years after appearing in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Marlon Brando featured in the Actors' Studio production of Henry Kane's *I'm No Hero*. Paul Newman and Steve McQueen appeared on the *Goodyear Playhouse* and there is a sense in which method acting might be said to have lent itself to a trend towards realism in television, no less than in film.

When a volume of Paddy Chayefsky's television plays was published in 1994, it included a foreword written by the author in December 1954. It is a revealing document which makes plain something of the uncertainties in writing television drama at that time, underscoring the radical differences between writing for the stage and for the new medium. 'In television', he complained,

the writer is treated with a peculiar mixture of mock deference and outright contempt. He is rarely consulted about casting, his scripts are frequently mangled without his knowledge about it, and he is certainly the most poorly paid person in the production. Some programmes don't allow the writer to attend rehearsals of his own show. At the same time he is granted the proud title of playwright, and, in every respect but his work, he is treated with a dignity inherited from the stage.¹⁹

It is a curiously contradictory statement. In the same foreword he remarks that, in television, urgencies of time generate a necessary pragmatism: it 'does not allow for the self-indulgent mannerisms usually associated with the creative spirit. If the writer has to cut five minutes, he simply cuts it, or someone else will cut it for him.'²⁰

The sponsors, he pointed out, studied a work not for what he interestingly called its 'theatrical merit' but for

its palatability . . . By definition, they are concerned with selling their client's products, and the twenty-two or three minutes of drama that go between the commercials are considered as essentially part of the sales talk. The agency is most concerned with [not] offending possible customers, a policy that stringently limits the scope of television drama . . . Only on the Broadway stage or in the novel form is there any freedom of topic, and even the stage has produced little in the last ten years that could not have been done on television.²¹

It was a strange observation given that this was a remarkable period in the American theatre, and although it was clearly possible to present *Death of*

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a Salesman and *A Streetcar Named Desire* on television, what was missing was precisely what distinguished the two forms.

Chayefsky wrote at a time when television was still in its infancy, certainly as far as drama was concerned. Plays were staged live, in converted radio studios. Cameras were large and not particularly mobile. Actors frequently had to run from one set to another, and those sets had to be simple. He warned against the inclusion of windows on the grounds that this meant a separate set would have to be constructed to give the illusion that there was a world to be glimpsed through those windows. Exteriors were to be avoided, especially anything exotic which would merely seem absurd. Costume changes had to be held to the absolute minimum. In the early 1950s there was an amateur air about television drama. Live performances had an edge to them but there was too much that could go wrong. Cables trailed across the studio floor awaiting an actor's foot. Cameras failed, sound booms dipped into shot. Actors forgot their lines. A radical change of scene might necessitate a break, acceptable in the theatre but oddly disruptive on television, just as dead air to this day is feared by radio producers. Only four actors at a time could be shown so he advised against writing crowd scenes. He thought large dramatic stories were not suitable for television. With only fifty-three minutes then available to play within an hour slot (considerably more than is available in today's network television), he thought it difficult to explore character in depth. The multiple story was not, he considered, proper to television. On the positive side, since shows were live, they offered actors the chance to develop their characters in real time instead of shooting out of sequence as in film.

Eventually, all of these restrictions would be swept aside, but one thing he says would continue to resonate. 'Television', he observed, 'has a camera, and the audience expects the camera to show something real.'²² For him that meant that impressionistic or expressionistic drama would not fare well on television. His insistence on television's ability to capture reality would be reflected in the language of the early pioneers of television and would underscore what did indeed emerge as a prevailing aesthetic, one against which Dennis Potter would revolt in Britain and David Chase among others in the United States.

Chayefsky's foreword makes for depressing reading. Writing, he explains, is drudgery, and the intervention of others in its process the source of resentment. While insisting, none too convincingly, that his own experience had been exceptional (others, he explains, revise his work because 'I have long since lost my perspective and will accept just about any suggestion they make'), he describes the life of his fellow writers who are

assigned to projects 'that demean their talents' and who 'work from under a hard coat of defensive unconcern, finding whatever reward they can in the mechanical excellence of their craft rather than their artistry'. They are skilled artisans and 'go about their work with the diffident detachment of a carpenter'. Directors and producers were, he noted, liable arbitrarily to rewrite material they did not like, and 'unless the writer is there to do the rewriting and cutting, the director and even the actors will butcher it for him'.²³ Directors, indeed, he regarded as essentially mundane and limited in ability. Writers, meanwhile, were underpaid and had, he calculated, a writing life of no more than five years.

For all that Chayefsky stands as one of the best-known of pioneer television writers, his approach registers the extent to which the possibilities of the medium were as yet to be fully realised. Speaking of *Printer's Measure* (1953), he describes it as 'a good, sound piece of theatre'.²⁴ His plays were arranged in acts, which remains the preferred terminology for television drama. For Chayefsky, 'television drama is not too different in structure from the stage play . . . they are both in the three-act form'.²⁵ The acts were necessitated in order to allow for the commercials and, as he remarked, 'The advertising agencies . . . do not want dramas that will disturb potential customers . . . You cannot write about adultery, abortion, the social values of our times, or almost anything that relates to adult reality . . . Downbeat-type drama is almost as taboo as politically controversial stories.' These, he explained, were the restrictions which faced the first television writers and which explained 'the incredible trash they wrote'.²⁶

The trash, he confessed, was still around but he detected changes which meant that writers were beginning to write more intimate plays, of which his own *Marty* was an example. They were living, he suggested, in stressful, alienated times in which people no longer found meaning in the public world and hence turned within. Television seemed to him to be ideally suited to addressing this need as it explored 'profound truths of human relationships', something he strangely suggests that 'no other dramatic medium has handled or can adequately handle'. It was this which led him to make his much quoted remark that, 'It may seem foolish to say, but television, the scorned stepchild of drama, may well be the basic theatre of our century.'²⁷

At a time when the shape of television drama was not yet clear, or, indeed, its distinction from theatre, he offered a series of rules, or, rather, one central, 'absolute' and 'arbitrary' rule: 'a drama can have only one story. It can have only one leading character. All other stories and all other characters are used in the script only as they facilitate the main story.'²⁸

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There should, he insisted, be no character 'who doesn't have to be there to ensure the demands of the main character's story'.²⁹ While acknowledging that George Bernard Shaw 'will drag in any number of peripheral characters just to indulge a dissertation', he explained that 'he is guilty of this only in his inferior plays'.³⁰

The basic story, he added, 'is always the central line of the script. Don't ever make the basic line the social comment of the script. Drama is concerned only with emotion. If your characters also carry a social value, that's fine. It gives your play added dimension, but that's all, a dimension.'³¹

For all his dubious theorising, though, Chayefsky's work for television helped to establish its possibilities as a dramatic medium, most famously in his 1955 play *Marty*, which went on to be a successful film. It concerns an unattractive and unmarried man in his mid-thirties who at last finds a relationship with a woman. In her late-twenties, she is equally unattractive but the two immediately respond to one another. Tempted by his friends to abandon her, he resists. Here, it seems, is what he has been seeking, but for his mother this relationship carries the threat of her own abandonment. Another of his plays, *The Mother* (1954), concerns a woman who feels guilty about her aging mother who values her independence but who is no longer up to the job which provides her only source of self-confidence. The play ends with her being fired.

Chayefsky, in other words, dealt in the small change of life and was happy to build a thesis on it. He had, he said, become aware of 'this marvellous world of the ordinary'.³² It was, he thought, 'the sort of material that does best on television'. The essence of the two plays, he thought, lay in 'their literal reality', a 'sort of meticulous literalness [that] is something that can be done in no other medium'.³³ He then makes a curious point: 'The closest thing to reality I ever saw on the stage was in *Death of a Salesman*, but even this extraordinary play involved a suicide and an incident in which the son discovers his father in a hotel room with a woman other than his mother. These are excellent dramatic incidents, but they are not everyday occurrences in the life of the lower middle class. In writing the stage play, it is necessary to contrive exciting moments of theatre. You may write about ordinary people, but the audience sees them in unordinary and untypical circumstances.'³⁴ Playwrights, he lamented, had not previously 'plumbed the sub-conscious levels of their characters, except perhaps in the broadest and most primitive fashion'.³⁵

This seems to be an attempt to generate an aesthetic out of the constrained circumstances of early production. References to 'literal reality', however, to 'meticulous literalness'³⁶ and, more strangely, to a 'relentless

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literalness', hint at a wider debate about the function of television which from an early stage presented as a primary virtue its ability to capture reality – not merely the moment (as cameras recorded public events) but the tangible immediacies of experience. *Marty* could never have been a radio play. It depends on the audience registering a banality of surfaces as well as a psychological truth. Quite why he disavowed the capacity of theatre to accomplish this is not clear.

In time, all Chayefsky's rules would be broken. Multiple storylines would emerge in drama that would not revolve around a central character. The typical would make way for the extraordinary, the ordinary for its opposite. Violent actions would drive plots. Characters would be divided against themselves no less than against one another. Major social and political issues would be engaged in plays that extended beyond the fifty-three-minute canvas to which he had had to adjust himself. Sponsors would lose their powers and companies emerge that were not wholly dependent on advertising, though there remained certain sensitivities.

As the 1950s edged into the 1960s, so new subject matter became possible. A 1957 Studio One production – *The Defender* – became the basis for a series *The Defenders*, which ran to 130 episodes over four years from 1961. A legal drama that featured a father and son team (played by E. G. Marshall and Robert Reed), it dealt with a number of controversial issues, including the death penalty, illegally obtained evidence, abortion (three sponsors withdrawing for the occasion) and visa restrictions. One key episode engaged with the black list which, given the role of network radio and television in that area, was a dangerous subject to tackle and, indeed, it is an episode in which the father–son team are effectively defeated by reactionary forces. The point about the series was not simply that it addressed major public issues, usually from a liberal point of view (these were the Kennedy years), but that it was well written and acted, the principal writer being Reginald Rose who wrote eleven episodes of the series but was senior story editor for the rest.

The Defenders played its role in making another 1960s series possible. *East Side/West Side* (CBS 1963) lasted for only a single season. It was not a ratings success and was not attractive to sponsors, but it was influential. Like *The Defenders*, it tackled controversial subjects. It starred George C. Scott but also featured the black actress Cicely Tyson. One episode concerned the struggles with poverty of a black couple in Harlem whose baby is bitten by a rat. The episode – 'Who Do You Kill' – starred Diana Sands and James Earl Jones and was not transmitted by CBS's Atlanta affiliate. A New York senator praised it in Congress for what it said about discrimination