Television Drama: An Introduction

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Television Drama: An Introduction

David Self

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Acknowledgements

No one who has read Shaun Sutton's *The Largest Theatre in the World* or Frank Pike's collection of essays *Ah! Mischief*, and who then writes about television drama can be other than deeply indebted to them, and the author acknowledges his debt to them and to many friends and colleagues in Anglia Television, the BBC and the Society of Authors; and in particular to Maggie McPherson and Edward Kelsey. He is also aware that, although television is in many ways a male-dominated industry, both men and women make significant contributions in all departments and hopes that where pronouns indicate one gender, they will not be taken as excluding the other.

The author and publishers should like to thank Oriel Press for permission to reproduce p. 2 of Cecil P. Taylor's play *Charles and Cromwell* which appears in Cecil P. Taylor's *Making a TV Play* (1970).

Preface

Once upon a time, drama was a way of honouring the gods. Pilgrims made their way to Epidavros or to Delphi in order to witness performances that retold the stories of their heroes, human and divine. In a later age, drama was not so much an act of worship, more a luxury. By carriage or cab, the selected few could travel to town 'to see a show'. Later still, at a flick of a switch in every living-room, anyone could view the entire *Oresteia* or the latest social comedy. Better still, many could record them and watch them at a time best suited to the individual.

In the words of Raymond Williams, Professor of Drama at Cambridge, Britain had become 'a dramatised society', with drama a daily and domestic experience. Now, most people watch many hours a week, as a seemingly inexhaustible supply streams into each home: *Crossroads*, *Brideshead Revisited*, *Minder*, *Measure for Measure*. . . . Seventeen million people watch a single episode of the twice-weekly *Coronation Street*. Four million watch a Shakespeare play on one Sunday evening. (It takes the Royal Shakespeare Company four years, playing in all its theatres, to play to that size of audience.)

At the time of writing, Britain has not yet experienced cable television (apart from a few small-scale experiments). When that comes, with its multiplicity of channels, and when direct broadcasting by satellite begins, one might expect an even richer diet of drama. However, there are those who believe that the golden age of television drama is already over and that the future will see not an expansion of the drama output but a retraction. 'Within a matter of years, two of the four great

resources of British broadcasting will have vanished: writing and acting. Only music and the visual arts will remain.' Such was the gloomy prediction of Michael Kuhn, an authority on cable television, at the 1983 Edinburgh Television Festival. Indeed, as I write, there is every indication that cable television will consist mainly of popular music, feature films and sport. Few cable operators will wish to invest in expensive drama production. If they attract as much of the audience as they expect to (so the argument goes), then sooner or later neither the BBC nor the Independent Television network companies will be able to justify or afford the production of original drama.

But this book is not intended as an obituary. It is written in the hope that diversity and quality will be maintained and developed, though its primary purpose is to record the state and the practice of the art of television drama as television enters a new age of multi-channel distribution.

Because the extent of television drama is even now so enormous, it has been necessary to impose some limits on the scope of a book of this size. It is restricted to descriptions of British practice and (despite the excellent writing, acting and direction to be seen in such a series as *A Fine Romance*) it does not cover programmes generally labelled as 'comedy' or 'situation comedy'. Nor does it cover films made for the cinema, even though they form a significant proportion of the drama to be seen on television.

To many, television drama is a mystique. Many of those involved in it professionally labour to keep it that way. Technicians talk in an almost impenetrable jargon. Directors speak patronisingly to those 'who just don't understand its grammar'. 'Of course,' they say, 'when you've been in the game as long as I have, then you'll understand!' (Five years earlier, their experience of direction was limited to a university drama society and a fringe theatre in outer Edinburgh.) Academics also maintain the mystery. With talk of 'authorial ideologies', 'the interplay of inter-related discourses' and 'textual codes', they pontificate upon a Cockney thriller that was constructed with one simple aim in mind: to get high ratings.

This book's secondary aim therefore is to penetrate the

mystique and clarify the process by which a television drama is made. It is intended as a primer for students of television, both those on courses which are mainly critical or theoretical and those on courses which include a practical element but where resources preclude the production and recording of a full-scale play.

It is also intended for the general reader and student of related disciplines in the hope that it will increase the appreciation of a particularly strange art form: a form created not by an individual but by a team working within a highly competitive manufacturing industry.