

# An open letter

from SYDNEY NEWMAN, Head of Drama Group, BBC Television, to James MacTaggart, newly appointed producer of the BBC's 'First Night' play series

Dear Jim,

You have just become producer of our popular play series 'First Night' and I know it's going to be rough at first. As an old dog (six years short of fifty-two as stated in *The Observer*) who has been buffeted about as a producer by John Grierson, General Motors of Canada, commercial television, etc., I'd like to pass on to you my 'feel' of the current drama situation and perhaps some words of advice—not necessarily because I'm your boss.

First thing to remember, is, *you are BBC drama*. You'll think when reading this, 'Oh, go on, you're kidding me', but in an odd way what I have said is true. Critics and public alike are unfairly reluctant to accept the fact that 'Z Cars', 'Dr Who', and the rest of the eight hours of drama a week that the Group, of which you are a member, produces, are drama as well. To them only single plays count as drama. So I'm not kidding!

It's no joke that the very existence of the single play, as in 'First Night', 'Festival', 'Armchair Theatre', or what, is in jeopardy. It's already dead in the United States, thanks to an uncertain cost-per-thousand. The sponsor himself inadvertently helped kill single play series by fiddling interference and negative strictures. Here, the ITA companies' dropping 'Television Playhouse' has reduced their single play risks by a third which, I think, is no solution. The proportion of good to bad is likely to remain the same. *You need more plays written to get more good plays*. And that applies to directors, designers, etc., as well. So when John Elliot told me he wanted to leave to write I resisted the temptation to let the series cool off a bit—taking a leaf from Howard Thomas's book, who also resisted doing the same when I got 'Armchair Theatre' into what seemed like bad trouble, during my first year in England.

Mac, you're a tough Scot and have a sense of humour and you are going to need plenty of both during the next while.

The critics and articulate members of the public knock drama in their disappointment because they consciously, or unconsciously, recognize that the creation of the single television play is the most important activity in the field of drama. They care. The very quantity of plays demanded continues to unearth new writing talent, new actors, and dozens

of kinds of creative people. All these people ultimately range the dramatic media from feature films to West End. Also, a society is measured not only by its productive power, its housing, but by its inventive and creative minds, whether pure physics or art. The creative writer and director are society's nerve-endings. They are the ones who reveal our state to us.

But television drama is also an industry. It's also very, very public. Picasso may do an erotic drawing and be lauded for it, but just you try and get away with allowing the hero of a play to caress a woman's thigh! This, as you will recall, happened in the BBC's 'The Scapegoat' a few weeks ago and the letters of complaint are still coming in.

The main job of the series of single plays which you are producing is to excite the imaginations of the largest number of viewers (unlike 'Festival') with the best possible quality of dramatic entertainment, commensurate with your understanding of what that audience is.

Who are they? They are day labourers, company directors, housewives, university dons, church-goers, beer-swillers—in short, anybody you can think of. In the main they are fair and reasonably moral. All they ask for really, in the very simplest of terms, is a good story well told, and *you must love them for this*. Your love of that big audience is the most important quality a producer of television plays must have. Shun, as I do, those cynics who refer to them as 'the admass' or, worse still, 'the great unwashed'. Because of their wide range of education and bank account (neither a guarantee of brains) your respect for them will help you find the way to put on plays which deal only with those *common denominators of worth-while human experience and emotion*.

Nowadays the whole notion of how a story is told is changing. The well-tailored play, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, seems to have gone by the board. We know, of course, this isn't true. Only the terms have changed. We start plays fast, intriguingly, avoiding great gobs of indigestible, establishing matter. We don't end plays like 'Perry Mason'. (From the *lack* of endings I've seen lately, maybe we should!) Recognizing the power of the camera, contemporary playwrights make greater demands on the



Scene from *The Bedmakers*, by David Turner, in the series 'First Night' (produced by John Elliot): George Devine (left) as Bill Summers, and Edward Chapman as Herbert Adams



From *Ted's Cathedral*, by Alan Plater, another of the series 'First Night' (produced by James MacTaggart): Alan Rothwell (left) as Ted, and Bryan Pringle as Stan, a reporter

audience forcing them to figure things out through the visual clues. Dialogue is like the peak of an iceberg with most of the meaning submerged in the actor's characterization. Audiences love this challenge *providing they are intrigued* (Pinter).

Carry your directors with you in the belief that that great audience will never forgive you if the main point in a play hinges on a nuance (the stew boils over just then) or on a piece of esoteric information. Speaking of nuance don't let the arrogant excuse, 'they didn't get the subtlety of the story . . .', cover up sloppy, unclear writing, direction, or acting.

That love for the audience will also help you realize they want something for the time they have given to watch a play. They want laughter and tears to quicken the spirit; they want demonstrations of intelligence which flatters by recognition; they want a profound curiosity satisfied; and they want courage and hope to go on.

You know we've been attacked for too much pessimism, sordidness, and kitchen-sinkery. You also know that too many people are blaming the writer for this. While it may be partially true, especially as we are not legally entitled to make changes in his play, this is not entirely fair. Some writers, sensitive to the world around them, may write a good but pessimistic play and you should produce it. Trouble is, 'vogue' or current writing 'market trends' may push lesser writers, or more optimistic writers, into the same kind of thing. Too often in the past we have allowed the 'genuine article' to be drowned out by the spurious imitation. Now even good working-class plays get the derogatory title 'kitchen-sink'.

My quarrel with too many producers and story editors is they don't demand enough from the writers who can't know how their play is going to fit into the week-to-week schedule, actors' availabilities, and so on. Tell them how *their* play fits into *your* series. Tell them how you see audience needs, what you want—not dogmatically, mind you—but let them into your particular approach. From my own experience they won't resent it. In fact, it's proof that you care.

Part of the difficulty affecting BBC single plays this last year has been the somewhat disjointing process of re-organizing our Drama Group. It's been like updating and adding a couple of engines to a jet in full flight. We are already able to face with confidence the exciting challenge

of providing four hours more drama a week for BBC-2. Our re-examination of basic premisses of how we go about dealing with playwrights, producing plays, attitudes to audiences, and so on is almost complete.

Our present in-between stage, when we are trying to capture as well the imagination of a bigger *young* audience, is causing us to lose the loyalty of some of the older members who are more traditionally minded. We may have moved too fast. I think the important fact to remember here, when doing a play which is unusual in form or shocking in content, or pessimistic, is to make certain it's a good play and directed and acted beautifully. If you aren't certain, don't risk it—not often, that is. It's sad, but a fact of show business, that a cliché-ed 'happy' play done well goes down better than a shocking or 'different' play done badly.

'Why don't you make nice plays for nice people?' someone once implored me. I suppose this means that alongside the Theatre of the Absurd and the Theatre of Cruelty you must not forget the Theatre of Reassurance. But why not? People today are brave, do triumph against odds, do win through in the end. We need reassurance—a restatement of these basic qualities in a changing world of automation, new morality, and interplanetary travel.

Finally, you will succeed as producer of your series if you also remember you are in the razz-ma-tazz of show-biz. The Barnum and Bailey touch is the magic that is required to create a sense of thrilling anticipation. Make the critics your friends and read them wisely, although they will sometimes disappoint you when the morning after one of your greatest productions you'll discover they reviewed *Stars and Garters* instead. When they praise you, you'll probably quote them. When they attack you, you'll forget it. At any rate, Maurice Wiggin\* will probably blame *me*!

As with me, your strength will rest with your directors and the writers who have trust in you. Don't worry about getting the great-name writers, who are probably writing for other media as well, but get out and find your own and get to be so good they will find you. One thing you may count on always as you work your way to becoming the best producer in the business (I say this to all your fellow producers!), I'll back you to the hilt.

Good luck!

SYDNEY

## Is television drama dead?

by JOHN BOWEN

*John Bowen has written many television plays, some of which have been published in book form in 'The Essay Prize'. He has also published five novels, the most recent being 'The Birdcage'*

RECEIVED IDEAS ABOUT television drama are common. Perhaps that is because most of those who review television professionally have come to it late in life. There is even a received list of television dramatists—Owen, Exton, Turner, Mercer—they are like the ghost-words in Turkish-English dictionaries, some of which never existed as Turkish words at all, but were misheard by early lexicographers and transferred from edition to edition, dictionary to dictionary. So our received list remains, even though Mr Owen and Mr Turner write more for the stage nowadays, and it is a long time since Mr Exton showed his first bright promise.

Since the received list is producing little, it is easy to accept the most received idea of all the received ideas about television drama, which is that it is dead. Mr Philip Purser tells us so, and Mr Troy Kennedy Martin, writing in *Encore*, says that 'informed management' (who informed it? Perhaps Mr Martin did) believe that television drama is 'so bad it can't get worse'. It is true that there are many

bad television plays, but why should anyone be surprised? There are good plays also. (The best of those I myself saw in 1963 was Leon Griffiths's *Rasputin Was a Nice Old Man*, but he is not on the list). There are plenty of bad novels, bad stage plays, and bad films. Are novels, films, and plays dead too? A television play is a form—that is, it is something for which the words 'dead' and 'alive' have no meaning; it is something for a writer to use, well or badly.

But that cuts across another received idea, which is that there is something called 'television drama', which is importantly different from a novel, a stage play, or a film—though we must try to dodge the fact that 'television dramatists' who produce this special 'television drama', Messrs Owen, Mercer, and Turner among them, do write for the stage and films, and have the cheek to use television techniques in stage plays and theatrical notions in television: writers are not *tidy*. But we, the purists with the received ideas, know that a television play can only seriously be considered if it should be *true to the medium*—not true to life, just 'true to the medium'—as if what one has to say were less important than how it is said.

I think it would be better if we left the prison of received

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