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## Beyond the Fourth Wall: Experiments in TV Drama



London – Tuesday 16 October. During October and November **BFI Southbank** will present ***Beyond the Fourth Wall***, a season of television plays that experimented with new forms and styles to create truly exciting and original TV dramas. Highlights include the BBC adaptation of **Bertolt Brecht's *Baal*** (BBC, 1982) starring **David Bowie** and directed by **Alan Clarke**, ***The Old Crowd (Six Plays by Alan Bennett)***, directed by **Lindsay Anderson**, (LWT, 1979) and a trio of plays by **Samuel Beckett - *Ghostrio, But the Clouds* and *Not I*** (BBC 1977). Another highlight of the season will be a panel discussion ***Experimental Drama Then & Now***, with directors **Philip Saville** and **Piers Haggard**, producer **Ken Trodd** and TV historian **Lez Cooke**. This season will give audiences an opportunity to see a set of extremely rare dramas which push the boundaries of television drama, many of which have not been seen on our TV screens since they originally aired.

From soap operas to the latest period blockbuster, audiences' experience of television drama is based on an assumption that what they are watching is real. The camera occupies an unseen 'fourth wall'. *Beyond the Fourth Wall* explores those television plays that rejected the usual constraints of pure naturalism to try something completely new. Attempts to push at the boundaries of television drama go back to 1958, with the creation within the BBC of the Langham Group, an experimental drama unit charged with producing plays in an innovative style.

The one surviving example of the Langham Group's work, ***The Torrents of Spring*** (BBC, 1959, Dir Anthony Pelissier) will screen. Revolving around a theatrical manager who procures men for his singing-star wife, this play fuses popular music with fluid camera movements and choreographed crowd shots to really push the boundaries of TV production. It is also a rare opportunity to see **Harry H Corbett**

relishing a role outside of *Steptoe & Son*. *Torrents of Spring* was an adaptation of a novel by Ivan Turgenev, which reinforced a tradition of European 'high art' that was central to the Group's work. However, scriptwriter Troy Kennedy Martin condemned the Group for its lofty aspirations. For him, and a new generation of producers and directors such as John McGrath, Tony Garnett, Ken Loach, Alan Clarke and Ken Trodd, what mattered was a direct, popular connection with a working-class audience.

With its heavy use of montage and its tale of the creation of a Kafka-esque state in which reality and politics collide, James MacTaggart's play ***Three Ring Circus*** (BBC, 1961) was a pivotal moment in television history that first put into practice many of the non-naturalistic techniques subsequently taken up by others. The plays that followed would exploit advances in television technology, such as split screens and Colour Separation Overlay. The latter of these techniques is when live action is electronically superimposed against any background and is evident in MacTaggart's ***Alice through the Looking Glass*** (BBC, 1973) and McGrath's ***The Adventures of Frank*** (BBC, 1980).

Another way in which writers and directors subverted television norms was through work that explored psychology and the subconscious. Dennis Potters' dominance in this particular form has made it necessary to exclude him from the season to make way for others we less frequently see. Examples include David Halliwell's ***Triple Exposure*** (BBC, 1972), which repeats the same scene from three characters' points of view, Bennett's ***The Old Crowd*** (LWT, 1979) which pays homage to absurdist writers and Clive Exton's ***The Rainbirds*** (BBC, 1971) in which the viewer enters the dreams of a man in a coma. To experience these extremes of British television drama is as surprising as it is rewarding – and a timely reminder of what the risk-taking single television drama can achieve.

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#### **Screenings taking part in the season:**

##### **The Old Crowd (Six Plays by Alan Bennett)**

LWT 1979. Dir Lindsay Anderson. With Jill Bennett, Isabel Dean, John Moffatt. 61min

Produced by Stephen Frears, this is a brilliant and, typical for Bennett, slightly tongue-in-cheek synthesis of experimental forms, referencing Pinter, Genet, Pirandello and more. A middleclass dinner party ensues; as each set of guests arrives, Bennett dissects the fears and prejudices of those gathered, in the presence of two servants who are not quite what they seem. Subverting naturalistic conventions, the camera takes in the TV studio and watching crew who become like voyeurs at the party. Truly experimental television – all the better for Bennett's superb control and sense of irony.

##### **+ Triple Exposure (Play for Today)**

BBC 1972. Dir Alan Cooke. With Alec McCowen, Sheila Allen, Tom Chadbon. 65min

Exploiting the then recent ease with which videotape could be edited, writer David Halliwell shows us the same scenes from three different characters' points of view: a burglar (Chadbon), the master of the house (McCowen) and his wife (Allen). In telling this simple and funny tale of how a burglar is adopted by a middle-class couple from their

separate perspectives, Halliwell provides a fascinating insight into their innermost thoughts and the misunderstandings between them that borders on farce.

**Mon 22 Oct 18:00 NFT2**

### **Three Ring Circus**

BBC 1961. Dir James MacTaggart. With Andrew Cruikshank, John Breslin, Hilary Paterson. 60min  
When a man walks into a police station with no memory of who he is, he becomes entangled in the affairs of a strange Kafka-esque state. Assuming the identity of high-profile figures who have disappeared, he tries to rediscover himself. The concerns of the Cold War loom large over Jack Gerson's play while MacTaggart's expressionistic direction create an atmosphere of political menace and paranoia. A pivotal play in television history that first put in to practice many of the non-naturalistic techniques that were to be taken up by others.

**+ Panel & Q&A: Experimental Drama Then & Now 45min**

Taking *Three Ring Circus* as the play that kickstarted the non-naturalistic play, our panel will discuss the whole experimental movement, its main exponents and its legacy today. The discussion will be illustrated with clips. Panellists to include directors Philip Saville and Piers Haggard, producer Ken Trodd and TV historian Lez Cooke.

**Mon 29 Oct 18:00 NFT3**

### **The Torrents of Spring**

BBC 1959. Dir Anthony Pelissier. With Sandra Dorne, Harry H Corbett, Charles Houston, Penelope Horner. 60min

A product of the Langham group (tasked with producing experimental drama), this was adapted from a Turgenev novel. Revolving around a theatrical manager who procures men for his singing-star wife, the play fuses popular music with fluid camera movements and choreographed crowd shots to push the boundaries of TV production for 1959. The extreme naturalism of the script and fine performances suggest a debt of influence to the (then pioneering) output of Royal Court Theatre, with plays such as John Osborne's *Look Back In Anger*. A rare opportunity to see Harry H Corbett relishing a role outside of *Steptoe & Son*.

**+ Dr Korczak and the Children (Studio 4)**

BBC 1962. Dir Rudolph Cartier. With Joseph Furst, Anton Diffring. 60min

This deeply affecting true story relates the dilemma of Dr Korczak, charged by the Nazis with leading the children from his Polish orphanage to the gas chambers – but should he tell them the truth? Owing much to Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the play starts with the actors complaining about the bare studio; only then do they gradually 'become' the characters. Stripped of artifice, this production pays homage to the power of performance and exploits the expressive potential of the TV close-up.

**Introduction by Professor John Hill, Royal Holloway, University of London**

**Thu 25 Oct 20:30 NFT3**

### **Prisoner and Escort (Armchair Theatre)**

ABC 1964. Dir Philip Saville. With Alfred Lynch, Norman Rossington, Tim Preece, June Barry. 56min  
Designed by Voytek, this was a real attempt to make the TV studio an expressionist extension of the action. A naturalistic train carriage is replaced by a series of sliding screens owing much to the work of avant-garde theatre directors Piscator, Meyerhold and Brecht. A soldier is held prisoner on the way to his trial, but what was his crime? Into this explosive atmosphere steps a young women fleeing from her past and trying to start a new life. A razor-sharp script by Charles Wood combines with powerful performances under the visionary direction of Philip Saville.

**+ Play for Today Presents The Largest Theatre in the World: The Rainbirds**

BBC 1971. Dir Philip Saville. With Madge Ryan, James Cossins, Andrew Grant. 65min

Written by Clive Exton and produced by Irene Shubik, this play was entered into the 'The Largest Theatre in the World' strand – a Europe-wide initiative to produce the same plays in each European country in their own language. Telling the story of John Rainbird, a young man who tries to commit suicide and ends up in a coma, Exton and director Saville create

audacious and vivid fantasy dream sequences which relate to John's past memories and ambiguous feelings towards his parents.

**Thu 1 Nov 18:10 NFT2**

### **Alice Through the Looking Glass**

BBC 1973. Dir James MacTaggart. With Sarah Sutton, Brenda Bruce, Judy Parfitt, Freddie Jones, Stephen Moore. 65min

Two plays directed by the high priest of non-naturalism. MacTaggart was quick to realise the potential in the new Colour Separation Overlay technique that allowed actors to be electronically superimposed on any background. Physical scenery could be dispensed with and whole visual worlds conjured up. In this production (the BBC's official entry to the prestigious Prix Italia competition), MacTaggart pushes the new technology to evoke Lewis Carroll's psychologically complex dream world. The beautiful visual style is complemented by performances that create a memorable array of eccentrics.

### **+ Drums Along the Avon (The Wednesday Play)**

BBC 1967. Dir James MacTaggart. With Leonard Rossiter, Valerie Newman, Rafi q Anwar, Amita Mall, Salmaan Peer. 73min

Produced by Tony Garnett and described as 'a fable' by writer Charles Wood, this is an audacious riff on race, immigration and prejudice. Employing a variety of Brechtian techniques, from actors addressing camera to a complex use of montage and music, the play testifies to MacTaggart's brilliance as a director. As the councillor who 'goes native', Leonard Rossiter is funny and entertaining, displaying his usual flashes of comic genius.

**Sat 17 Nov 15:00 NFT2**

### **The Adventures of Frank (Play for Today)**

#### **Part 1 – Everybody's Fiddling Something + Part 2 – Seeds of Ice**

BBC 1980. Dir John McGrath. With Mick Ford, Jim Broadbent, Jane Wood, Alan Ford, Jennifer Hilary, Gayle Runciman. Part 1: 65min and Part 2: 78min

Harking back to Ken Loach's groundbreaking *Diary of a Young Man*, this play also uses the 'fable' of a young man from the North (Ford) who comes to London to seek his fortune. Exploiting the newly developed Quantel system that could shift and move the television picture in to any shape and size, McGrath creates a series of split screens, reminding the viewer that they are watching an artificially constructed play. Music and drama combine to carry the action forward and underscore the play's political messages. Produced by Richard Eyre this is a brave and refreshing antidote to the extreme naturalism of the social realists. Drawing on his experiences in the theatre, McGrath never forgets the power of humour in this tale, which charts its hero's fall from naive innocence to (with devastating contemporary resonance) corruption in the world of high finance.

**Thu 22 Nov 17:45 NFT2**

### **The Classic Play: Baal**

BBC 1982. Dir Alan Clarke. With David Bowie, Zoe Wanamaker, Jonathan Kent, Polly James. 62min  
David Bowie stars as the anti-hero Baal in this fine production, adapted from Brecht's play by John Willet and Alan Clarke. Bowie is convincing as the womanising poet and delivers the show's songs with the required blend of deep conviction and ambiguity as we chart Baal's demise from arrogance and swagger to a murderer who dies alone. Clarke keeps the television camera well back to create wide, beautifully lit tableaux and uses split screens to find a televisual expression of Brecht's trademark 'alienation' technique.

### **+ The Lively Arts: Shades – Three Plays by Samuel Beckett**

**Ghostrio + But the Clouds:** BBC 1977. Dir Donald McWhinnie. With Ronald Pickup, Billie Whitelaw, Rupert Horder.

**+ Not I:** BBC 1977. Dir Anthony Page. With Billie Whitelaw. 60min

This trio of plays (introduced by Melvyn Bragg) was a Beckett world premiere at the time. The first two were specifically written for television; *Not I* was a Royal Court theatre production. Between the films, Martin Esslin provides his views on the significance of Beckett's work. Across all these productions, television permits Beckett total control over

every detail of lighting, movement and rhythm. Plus **Eh Joe** (BBC 1966. Dir Alan Gibson. With Jack MacGowan, Sian Philips. 12min).

**Fri 30 Nov 18:00 NFT3**

## **NOTES TO EDITORS**

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- Championing emerging and world class film makers in the UK
- Investing in creative, distinctive and entertaining work
- Promoting British film and talent to the world
- Growing the next generation of film makers and audiences

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**\*\*\* PICTURE DESK \*\*\***

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