

## INTRODUCTION

Lez Cooke, John Hill and Billy Smart

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This special issue is a product of the AHRC-funded project, ‘The History of Forgotten Television Drama in the UK’, based at Royal Holloway, University of London. The project began in September 2013, ending in June 2017, and has incorporated a conference, a symposium, screenings of forgotten dramas at BFI Southbank and at regional centres, conference papers, journal articles, book chapters and a book, *Rediscovering British Television’s Forgotten Dramas*, to be published by Palgrave Macmillan. Further information on the project may be found on our website:

<https://www.royalholloway.ac.uk/mediaarts/research/thehistoryofforgottentelevisiondrama/historyofforgottentvdrama.aspx> and blog: <https://forgottentelevisiondrama.wordpress.com>.

The articles contained in this issue derive from our conference, ‘Television Drama: The Forgotten, the Lost and the Neglected’, which took place at the University of London, 22-24 April 2015. The purpose of this conference was to investigate television dramas that might be regarded as ‘forgotten’, explore some of the reasons for this and assess the consequences of ‘forgottenness’ for both histories of British television drama and television drama more generally. One of the most basic reasons for work becoming forgotten is, of course, that it no longer exists. As Lez Cooke and John Wyver indicate in their contributions, all British television drama was initially broadcast live and no recordings were made. Telerecordings (involving the

use of film) became possible in the 1950s but only occurred on a selective basis. When videotape recording became possible towards the end of the 1950s, the amount of material that was preserved did begin to increase but, due to the expense of videotape and the fact that it could be re-used, many recorded programmes ended up wiped or, following the advent of colour in the late 1960s, junked.<sup>1</sup> It was not until the 1980s that nearly all drama was recorded and the practice of wiping and junking recordings largely ceased.

As the work of the British Film Institute and the television organisation, Kaleidoscope, has demonstrated, it is still possible to find material that was believed to be 'lost' and to identify how the discovery of such work can help, as Cooke indicates in his article on *Anastasia* (1953), to reshape the ways in which we understand the history of television drama. However, even if work does exist, it has not always been easy for scholars to establish if programmes have survived and, if they have, to gain access to them. Television archives have tended to focus on preservation (and commercial use) rather than access and, even though a growing amount of television drama is being made available online and on DVD, the bulk of British television drama from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s still remains either very costly or very difficult to see.<sup>2</sup> As a result, there has always been a degree of correlation between the television drama that is readily accessible and the drama that becomes the object of analysis and discussion.

However, availability and access are not the only factors governing what gets 'forgotten' and what is written up in television histories. Matters of programming, popularity, taste and critical reputation also mediate the ways in which some television dramas enter the 'canon' while others do not. This means that it becomes important to undertake work that addresses the circumstances of a television drama's original production and reception and identify the ways in which these might have influenced a work's subsequent reputation. Such an approach, in turn,

entails the analysis of a range of factors that may influence the extent to which a television drama or drama series becomes 'forgotten': the broadcaster's own stance towards the production (including, in some cases, the non-transmission of their own programmes), the kinds of promotion and publicity that may - or may not - have been undertaken, a programme's timing of transmission or positioning in the schedules, the number of viewers attracted to a production and audience reactions to it, the lack of a repeat, the lack of a star cast or well-known writer or the (negative) responses of the press. Critical reviews have often proved of particular significance in shaping the future reputation of a television drama but are themselves underpinned by both aesthetic preferences – relating to issues of authorship, genre and style – as well as more general moral and socio-political ones related to content. While it has sometimes been argued that television criticism has privileged 'serious', often social-realist, drama at the expense of more popular, generic forms (such as telefantasy), the history of 'remembering' and 'forgetting' television drama has always been much more complex and varied than this and depended upon a range of different kinds of aesthetic and ethical judgement. In this respect, the recovery of 'forgotten' TV drama has not only involved identifying the artistic, cultural or political importance of neglected works but, in many cases, also challenging the terms on which they may be understood.

This may be seen in the essays that follow which all focus on work that is either lost, forgotten or critically neglected. In doing so, they not only locate the works concerned in a specific historical context but also make the case for their historical importance despite their neglected status. The Forgotten TV Drama project is focused on the period 1946-82, stretching from the resumption of broadcasting by the BBC in the postwar period to the arrival of Channel 4 and the beginning of a new broadcasting era. The articles range across this whole period.

Indeed, John Wyver's article on Fred O'Donovan, one of the pioneers of early television drama, goes back almost to the beginnings of television in the UK, O'Donovan having begun his television career at the BBC in 1938. O'Donovan's work as a television drama producer/director (the terms were interchangeable in the early years) no longer exists, all of it having been produced before the first extant recordings were made. By drawing on a range of written sources, Wyver nevertheless succeeds in providing a convincing account of O'Donovan's 'one camera' technique and identifying its continuing significance.

One of the earliest surviving recordings, *Anastasia* (1953), dates from the year after O'Donovan's death and is discussed by Lez Cooke as an example of an early telerecording which survived seemingly against the odds. As such it provides a relatively rare opportunity to examine an extant early 1950s television play without having to rely solely on written documents and allows Cooke to reassess our view of television drama during this period. By 1957-58, when the BBC's *Television World Theatre* series was broadcast, rather more recordings were being made and just over half of the plays broadcast in the series survive in the archives. Drawing on BBC audience research reports and press reviews, Billy Smart examines this neglected series of 'classic' stage plays and assesses how the reactions to it helped to shape the way in which theatrical adaptations were subsequently conceived.

Francis Durbridge was a prolific writer of original television thrillers, yet none of his 1950s serials have survived while those surviving from the 1960s had been unavailable for many decades (prior to their unexpected Australian DVD release in 2016). In his article on Durbridge, Stewart Anderson focuses on the West German adaptations of Durbridge's crime thrillers from 1959 to 1970. Although these serials were extraordinarily popular, they have attracted little attention since. Anderson argues, however, that they played an important role in overcoming the

perceived moral vacuum left behind by the Third Reich while also cultivating a sense of European identity in postwar West Germany.

John Hill considers another neglected aspect of television drama in the late 1960s and early 1970s: the plays of Dominic Behan produced during the early years of the ‘troubles’ in Northern Ireland. Dominic Behan is perhaps better known as a singer and songwriter than a playwright and his accomplishments have been overshadowed by the reputation of his older brother, Brendan. However, as Hill argues, Dominic Behan’s television plays represent a significant contribution to the history of ‘troubles’ drama that challenge many of the conventions with which it was later to become associated.

Ian Greaves and John Williams discuss a ‘forgotten’ series from 1974-75, *Churchill’s People*. Adapted in 26 episodes from Winston Churchill’s four-volume *A History of the English-speaking Peoples* (1956-58), *Churchill’s People* was plagued by production difficulties which delayed its transmission. When it was finally shown the critical response to it was poor and viewing figures plummeted after the first episode. Greaves and Williams dissect the many reasons for the series’ critical failure and subsequent neglect but, in identifying its stylistic and historical ambitions, also suggest why it might be ripe for reappraisal.

Drama documentaries have been one of the most controversial forms of television and Alan Plater’s *The Black Pool*, made for the BBC science documentary series *Horizon*, about a doctor who killed three children in 1972, was considered too problematic to be broadcast when it was made in 1978. Drawing on original research and a viewing of the untransmitted programme, David Rolinson investigates the banning of the programme and reflects on the ethical questions it raises for television scholarship as well as the significance of its use of drama in the context of a science documentary.

Finally, Sally Shaw considers Michael Hastings' 1979 television play, *Gloo Joo*, and an abandoned spin-off situation comedy series, *Meadowlark* (1982), for which a pilot was made but never shown. Both dramas were written and filmed during periods of heightened racial tension and their production histories help to reveal some of the arguments at work in the commissioning process at ITV and Channel 4 in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The untransmitted pilot for *Meadowlark* provides another example of an unseen television drama, but *Gloo Joo*, like several black dramas made in the 1970s, is also a 'forgotten' drama, commonly neglected by television historiography. Both programmes were made by London Weekend Television's Comedy Department and Shaw's article, like Rolinson's, illustrates the value of researching plays and series that were made outside of British television's Drama Departments.

*Meadowlark* was commissioned by Channel Four, the arrival of which, as previously indicated, marks the end point for the Forgotten Television Drama project. That there are many dramas produced by Channel Four which have also been forgotten, along with other dramas produced by the BBC and ITV in the 1980s, illustrates that there is still scope for further research in the area of forgotten and neglected television drama, in addition to the research still to be done on the decades preceding it. The articles in this special issue, and the research undertaken for the History of Forgotten Television Drama project, are a contribution towards that process of rediscovery and reappraisal.

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<sup>1</sup> Dick Fiddy, *Missing Believed Wiped : Searching for the Lost Treasures of British Television* (London, 2001), 6-9.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of some of the issues at stake, see Billy Smart and Amanda Wrigley, Television history: archives, excavation and the future. A discussion., *Critical Studies in Television*, 11 (1), 2016, 96-109.