

Introduction: Play for Today at 50

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Along with Armchair Theatre and the Wednesday Play, Play for Today constitutes one of the historically most important British television drama series. Beginning on BBC1 on Thursday 18 October 1970, it continued until 1984, running to around 300 individual plays and regularly commanding audiences of several millions.¹ It also acquired a reputation for its support of a talented group of producers, writers and directors and the creation of a body of work that was notable for both its artistic innovation and social significance.

In origin, Play for Today was no more than a replacement for the Wednesday Play, resulting from a desire to free up Wednesday evenings for sport and move the drama slot to another day, initially a Thursday. Indeed, the very first Play for Today, Alan Sharp's *The Long Distance Piano Player* (15 October 1970), was, like a number of others in the first season, originally commissioned as a Wednesday Play. However, the change of title also indicated how the plays were more clearly intended to be contemporary or, in the words of the BBC's Head of Drama, Shaun Sutton, 'plays for the present day'.² While there was no specific intention to cultivate a particular kind of work, a BBC research report, produced in 1975, did nevertheless indicate how the series had acquired an association, for many viewers, with "'realistic" plays on modern subjects' that were 'likely to provide "food for thought"'.³ As a result, it has often been works drawing attention to the plight of the socially disadvantaged - from Jeremy Sandford's *Edna, the Inebriate Woman* (21 October 1971) to Jim Allen's *The Spongers* (24 January 1978) - which are taken to emblemise the series as whole.

This may also be linked to the series' reputation for social and political radicalism and capacity to provoke controversy. The transmission, all in the same year, of *All Good Men* (31 January 1974), Trevor Griffiths' dissection of Labour reformism, *The Cheviot, the Stag and*

the Black, Black Oil (6 June 1974), John McGrath's exuberant account of the history of exploitation in the Scottish Highlands, and *Leeds United!* (31 October 1974), Colin Welland's epic tale of striking clothing workers directed by Roy Battersby, not only fuelled complaints about *Play for Today's* 'left-wing bias' but also provoked anxieties within the BBC regarding its responsibility for political 'balance'. The desire of producers, writers and directors to push back the boundaries of television drama also led to concerns over the use of language (e.g. *Gotcha*, 12 April 1977), the representation of sexuality (e.g. *Coming Out*, 10 April 1979) and the treatment of sensitive subject-matter such as domestic abuse (e.g. *Don't Be Silly*, 24 July 1979), the Health Service (e.g. *Through the Night*, 2 December 1975) and the conflict in Northern Ireland (e.g. *The Legion Hall Bombing*, 22 August 1978). Most famously of all, Dennis Potter's 'blasphemous' play involving the rape of a disabled young woman, *Brimstone and Treacle* (1976), and Roy Minton's unflinching expose of borstal life, *Scum* (1977), were refused transmission altogether and led to debates about the limits of acceptability in public broadcasting.

However, while *Play for Today* was undoubtedly responsible for some of the most challenging and politically 'radical' television drama in the history of British television, it only tells a part of the story. The strand was far more varied and eclectic than subsequent accounts have allowed and encompassed a range of genres stretching from comedy, family drama, crime and the period drama to horror, science fiction and the openly experimental. Indeed, in recent years, it might be said that it is the plays most associated with 'fantasy' (rather than 'politics') – such as John Bowen's 'folk horror' *Robin Redbreast* (10 December 1970), David Rudkin's mystical *Penda's Fen* (21 March 1974), directed by Alan Clarke, and Alan Garner's time-switching *Red Shift* (17 January 1978) – that have emerged as some of *Play for Today's* most revered works (see, for example, Harle and Machin, 2019).

The rise in critical fortunes of *Penda's Fen's* may in part be attributed to the shifts in interest within British film and television studies away from social realism towards the anti-naturalist, but is also linked to issues of availability and public circulation. As Sukhdev Sandhu suggests, prior to its DVD release in 2016, the work's existence had largely been 'in the form of rumours and hand-me-down memories, a folk myth about a lost televisual civilization' (Sandhu 2016: 1). However, while it is certainly astonishing that a work as remarkable as *Penda's Fen* 'disappeared' for quite so long, it becomes less of an aberration when placed within the larger context of the history of television drama. *Penda's Fen* did at least get repeated, reshowed on Channel Four and, following this, become available for a time on YouTube. Over 30 Plays for Today, however, did not survive at all, only around a third were ever repeated and even fewer enjoyed a release on VHS or DVD. In this respect, the vast majority of Plays for Today (and television drama from this era) might be said to have 'disappeared', remaining by and large unseen and often 'forgotten' since their initial transmission.

This 'disappearance' of so much of the series has inevitably shaped subsequent perceptions of both individual plays and the Play for Today strand as a whole. While the *British Television Drama* and *TV Brain* websites have successfully documented information on every production, there is as yet no specific history of the series.⁴ Irene Shubik's book, *Play for Today: The Evolution of Television Drama*, originally published in 1975, has remained a standard source of reference but deals primarily with her own experiences as one of Play for Today's original producers. Simon Farquhar's more recent book *Play for Today* (2021) confines itself to the first year of the series. An informative overview of the series may be found in Lez Cooke's *British Television Drama* (2015) but this is necessarily restricted by length. This means that apart from some discussion of individual plays (such as Cooke 2007 and Shaw 2015) the bulk of writing on Play for Today has occurred, somewhat

tangentially, in works mainly devoted to the careers of individual producers, directors and writers. These include *inter alia* books on Alan Bennett (McKechnie 2008), Alan Clarke (Rolinson 2005), Tony Garnett (Lacey 2007), Trevor Griffiths (Poole and Wyver 1984, Tulloch 2006), Barry Hines (Forrest and Vice 2018), Mike Leigh (Whitehead 2007), Ken Loach (Leigh 2002, Hill 2011), Dennis Potter (Gilbert 1995, Cook 1998) and Jack Rosenthal (Vice 2009). Something of a similar pattern may also be detected in the Plays for Today released on video and DVD which are mostly to be found in collections devoted to well-known writers such as Bennett, Potter, Rosenthal and Peter McDougall or directors such as Clarke, Leigh and Loach (Smart 2016, May in this volume).

As Cooke indicates, this has meant that the reputation of Play for Today has depended upon ‘a relatively small percentage’ of the plays transmitted (2015: 101). In particular it has rested upon the status of a group of – almost exclusively male - writers, directors and, in the case of Garnett, producers who have been recognised as distinctive creative personalities or ‘auteurs’. It has also rested, especially in the case of directors, on the use of film (albeit with some notable exceptions such as Mike Leigh’s studio production *Abigail’s Party*, 1 November 1977). Play for Today has, of course, been seen as an important staging-post in the transition of television drama away from the studio towards the use of film. Moreover, at a time when British cinema was facing economic decline, television came to be regarded as a home for a form of low-budget filmmaking that compared more than favourably with British films of the time and paved the way for Film on Four under David Rose who, as Head of English Regions Drama, was responsible for many of the most memorable Plays for Today such as *Penda’s Fen*, *Nuts in May* (13 January 1976) and *Licking Hitler* (10 January 1978) (see Cooke 2012, Hill 1996, Rolinson 2010). However, while there can be little doubt that filmed productions constituted some of the high points of Play for Today, they were also rarer than the writing about them might suggest. As May indicates in his statistical history of the

series, two-thirds of Plays for Today were shot partly or wholly on video. For May, therefore, it is the video productions that constitute the least well-known Plays for Today. However, while this is true, it is also the case that many of the works on film have been critically neglected as well. Thus, while *Play for Today* as a series can hardly be said to have been ‘forgotten’, it is still the case that large numbers of individual plays – shot both on video and on film – remain largely unknown.

One of the opportunities provided by the fiftieth anniversary of Play for Today, therefore, was to revisit the series, take stock of its achievements and address some neglected issues. There was, in this respect, rather more interest in the anniversary than might have been expected. The BBC broadcast a ninety-minute television documentary, *Drama Out of a Crisis: A Celebration of Play for Today* (BBC4, 13 October 2020), a sixty-minute radio documentary (Radio4, 17 October 2020) and a short season of Play for Today repeats.⁵ The BFI also launched the first of a series of Play for Today Blu-ray box-sets and programmed a season of Play for Today screenings at BFI Southbank which, due to the pandemic, was first postponed and then cancelled a part of the way through its run. The symposium on Play for Today at 50 which gave rise to this special issue was also scheduled to take place at BFI Southbank to coincide with the screenings but had to be moved online. Taking place on 14 and 15 October 2020, the event grew out of the work of the ‘Forgotten Television Drama’ project hosted by the centre for the History of Television Culture and Production at Royal Holloway, University of London, and was co-organised by John Hill and John Wyver, the director of the documentary, *Drama Out of a Crisis*. Its aim was to bring together a mix of television professionals and scholars to discuss the history of Play for Today, its cultural legacy and the individual plays that were produced. Given its links to the idea of the ‘forgotten’, there was also a concern to address neglected and under-represented aspects of Play for Today as well as work that is rarely included in the Play for Today ‘canon’.⁶

This may also be seen in the contents of the issue that follow. Although there is discussion of individuals and individual work, the focus is on the series as a whole and the patterns of production and representation that may be detected. There is also a desire to go beyond the plays that have been most commonly discussed and pay attention to neglected work that acquires a new significance when viewed through critical perspectives other than the 'auteurist'. In doing so, the aim is to broaden and extend our understanding of *Play for Today* as well as to relocate it in relation to broader artistic and socio-cultural debates relating to gender, ethnicity and nationality. The issue begins with Tom May's discussion of *Play for Today*'s title sequence which changed a number of times during the course of its fourteen-year run and has so far been little discussed. May addresses the challenges involved in creating a title sequence that would both suggest something of the nature of the material to follow as well as help to bind together, and mould an identity for, a fairly eclectic mix of one-off plays. Through a combination of oral history and textual analysis, he explores the changing meanings suggested by the various title sequences and the ways in which their modes of address oscillated between the 'startling' and the 'seductive'.

This is followed by Vicky Ball's discussion of women writers. Although women producers – such as Irene Shubik and Margaret Matheson - made a significant contribution to the making of *Play for Today*, women writers (and directors) were much less numerous and earned much less critical attention than their male counterparts. Drawing on original research into the contribution of women to television drama, Ball looks at the factors explaining the low percentage of plays written by women – only 13% - before going on to consider the creative contribution made by those that were, including relatively neglected plays by Julia Jones and Gilly Fraser. A similar impulse also underpins Eleni Liarou's discussion of race and ethnicity in *Play for Today*. For a series associated with contemporary social issues and representations of the present, it is certainly extraordinary that only three plays involved a

none-white writer and only around a dozen dealt with the experiences of black and Asian communities in Britain. However, while these plays constitute a tiny proportion of the series, Liarou argues that – due to the range of stories they told and the physical and cultural spaces they portrayed - they were nonetheless pioneering in the ways in which they represented the divisions of race, class and generation within British society of the time.

It was, of course, a part of the remit of Play for Today that it should encourage stories from around the UK. Thus, from 1972 onwards, English Regions Drama, based at Pebble Mill in Birmingham, sought to produce work from the regions across England (Cooke 2012). The BBC in London was also responsible for making a number of plays in Scotland and, from 1974 onwards, BBC Scotland secured a number of Play for Today slots. In his contribution, Jonathan Murray notes the almost total critical neglect of the plays emanating from Scotland itself compared with those produced out of London and undertakes a comparison of these. He concludes that the better-known externally-produced plays – such as those written by Peter McDougall – are generally more complex and nuanced than critics have suggested but are also an unreliable indicator of Play for Today’s overall representation of Scotland. Focusing on little-known plays such as *Degree of Uncertainty* (6 March 1979) and *The Good Time Girls* (7 April 1981) he identifies an engagement with gender politics and Scottish modernity that challenges many of the assumptions regarding the period previously to be found within Scottish screen studies. John Hill also challenges prevailing assumptions about the plays produced about Northern Ireland during the 1970s. In the face of the ‘troubles’, he identifies the obstacles to the production of Northern Ireland plays and the scrutiny to which they were subject. However, he also argues that those plays that did manage to get made command far more interest than has been conventionally allowed. Identifying the mix of ‘oblique’ and experimental strategies employed by a selection of Plays for Today, he examines the complicated ways in which they engaged with the conflict and

differed from what was subsequently to become a more settled form of 'troubles drama'.

The final essay consists of John Wyver's discussion of Plays for Today dealing with the Second World War and its aftermath. Although Play for Today was commonly associated with contemporary drama, it included more historical dramas than is generally recalled. Such works, however, were still conceived of as speaking to the present or providing historical parallels. Wyver identifies what he refers to as the 'home front quintet', a grouping of revisionist plays addressing the war and its legacy through representations of the home front. Through the identification of a number of shared characteristics he reveals how the plays subvert traditional perceptions of the past but also fail to imagine a more positive future appropriate to the time in which they were made.

The special issue then concludes with a survey of statistical data gathered by Tom May. In the spirit of the volume as a whole it tests out traditional assumptions about Play for Today through an examination of the number, lengths, viewing figures, repeats and originality of Plays for Today. In doing so, he confirms the relative invisibility of a wide range of plays which, following Julian Petley, he refers to as a 'lost continent'. A part of the purpose of this issue has been to make some of such work better-known and provide some new perspectives on its significance. However, given the sheer volume and variety of the plays that make up the series, there is still much more work waiting to be done.

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¹ In Tom May’s statistical survey in this issue, he counts 294 Plays for Today. However, this figure is arrived at on the basis of very strict criteria that excludes plays made for the series but not shown as part of it, plays broadcast as part of the strand but not made by the BBC and plays included in repeat series of Play for Today but originally shown in a different context. All Plays for Today were originally shown on BBC1 so all references to individual Plays for Today throughout this issue will include the date but not the channel.

² *Radio Times*, 29 October 1970, p. 64.

³ British Broadcasting Corporation, ‘Play for Today’, An Audience Research Report, September 1975, BBC WAC VR/75/503.

⁴ See <http://www.britishtelevisiondrama.org.uk/> and <https://www.tvbrain.info/>.

⁵ One of the most significant developments for academic researchers and teachers, however, emerged as a result of the ‘Television Drama: Archives, Access and Research’ conference organised by the ‘Forgotten Television Drama’ project and Learning on Screen at BFI Southbank in 2017, and attended by representatives from the BBC, ITV, BFI, ERA (the Educational Recording Agency), Learning on Screen, the British Library, Network, FOCAL and numerous universities. Under a new agreement with ERA, the BBC now permits pre-1989 television material to be added to digital services provided to those in formal education. This led to the immediate addition of 1,000 pilot programmes (including numerous rare Plays for Today) to Learning on Screen’s Box of Broadcasts (BoB) as well as the subsequent launch of a new ‘on-demand’ service enabling educators and researchers to access BBC holdings. This means that many of the Plays for Today which were once so difficult to see are now freely available to subscribers of BoB and that many of the plays discussed in this issue may be viewed there.

⁶ The symposium consisted of interviews with Peter Ansorge, Richard Eyre, Tara Prem and Ken Trodd as well as presentations by Vicky Ball, John Cook, Katie Crosson, Simon Farquhar, John Hill, Eleni Liarou, Tom May, Jonathan Murray and John Wyver. Recordings of these interviews and presentations may be found here: <https://forgottentelevisiondrama.wordpress.com/2021/07/14/play-for-today-at-50-interviews-and-presentations/>.