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Article

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‘Drama for people ‘in the know’: *Television World Theatre* (BBC 1957-59) and *Festival* (BBC 1963-64)

This article provides a survey of the pioneering BBC series of theatrical adaptations Television World Theatre *(1957-59), examining BBC production documentation and audience research to identify the institutional discourses that surrounded the making and transmission of these programmes. Recurrent arguments throughout the production of the series form a framework of institutional expectations within which classic theatrical plays were commissioned, made and presented for BBC Television. Having identified these questions (as to audience address, populism, the viability of creating a unified ‘house style’ across the diverse plays included in an anthology series) their discussion in contemporary press discourse surrounding* Television World Theatre *is considered, before concluding with a consideration of how the experience of* Television World Theatre *affected expectations the next time that the BBC attempted a similar project in* Festival *(1963-4).*

In a recent lecture, Huw Weldon, managing director of BBC television said: ‘We feel that, like the theatre at large, we should be wanting if we did not ceaselessly recreate the classics – Shakespeare, Sheridan, Shaw and so on.’[i]

With the exception of *The BBC Television Shakespeare* project (1978-85)[ii], little consideration has yet been given to the context of the distinct series and strands in which the bulk of BBC adaptations of classic plays of theatrical origin were broadcast. When an individual production of Shakespeare or Ibsen might be remembered, attention is rarely given to whichever particular series it was made for and shown in. Yet over a long period of 40 years, the majority of classic plays were made for particular series (including *Play of the Month* (BBC1 1965-83), *Theatre Night* (BBC2 1985-90) and *Performance* (1991-98)), each one with its own distinctive identity, place in the schedule, production culture and repertory.

This article considers the first such series, *Television World Theatre* (BBC Television 1957-59, entitled *World Theatre* for its second (1959) series). Although a few individual productions are still remembered (notably Michael Elliot's 1959 productions of *Mother Courage* [iii] and *Brand* [iv]), the short-lived series that they were a part of is forgotten. Yet the *World Theatre* project deserves to be remembered, significant for its pioneering status and particularly high-minded and ambitious repertory. It is also a series with a remarkably high survival rate for 1950s BBC drama, with 11 of its 22 productions surviving (and with individual reels existing from 2 further plays).[v]

This article identifies the institutional discourses that surrounded the broadcast (through publicity) and reception (via audience research, internal communications and press coverage) of the series. This

research is worth outlining in detail, because the arguments that surrounded the first anthology series continued with each further series that followed.[vi] They can be formulated into a series of questions that form the *framework of expectations* within which the institution of the BBC approached the commissioning, making and presentation of classic play adaptations:

- How populist should theatrical adaptations be?
- How unfamiliar should the chosen plays be to their audience?
- Is it worth producing a play that is likely to alienate the majority of the audience?
- Should an anthology series have an overarching rationale?
- Should a play be reinterpreted for television, or should it be a faithful recreation of the theatrical experience?

In particular, discussion of *Television World Theatre* frequently pivots around the divergence between size and reach of audience and critical acclaim, a split that has structured debates governing the production and reception of theatrical adaptations ever since. The article concludes by illustrating how this separation between mass and minority appeal affected institutional thinking the second time that the BBC attempted such a series, *Festival* (BBC Television 1963-64).

Television World Theatre **(BBC, 1957-8)/** ***World Theatre*** **(BBC, 1959)**

The launch of the series *Television World Theatre* in December 1957 represented a considerable shift in the way television adaptations of stage plays were both made and promoted. *Television World Theatre* was the first time the BBC had produced a series of stage play adaptations under an umbrella title with a regular timeslot in the schedule.

Although the continuing *Sunday Night Theatre* (BBC 1950-9) slot might appear to also answer to these criteria, it was not a series as such[vii] (consisting of individual seasons in which the repertory could be planned in advance and balanced) but a continuous outlet for plays which ran for all twelve months of the year. Nor was the Sunday play exclusively devoted to showing theatrical material, offering a repertory that came from a variety of sources; thrillers, farces, light comedies and straight plays, that could be either original television plays or taken from the stage, with only occasional productions of theatre classics. In contrast, the umbrella title *Television World Theatre* emphasised the repertory nature of the series, presenting audiences with work that they could expect to have a theatrical (and international) origin.

Television World Theatre ran for two seasons, promoted to audiences from the outset as offering a series of special individual events, presenting the best plays from the world drama canon. Writing in the *Radio Times*, Head of Television Drama Michael Barry acclaimed the series as a project of major cultural significance: 'All of the plays are of

proved success and importance. They will allow us to consider drama as an international art'.[viii] Viewers could prepare in advance to watch the plays through sending one shilling for a special brochure (illustrated by Feliks Topolski) providing information about the productions and details of each play (plus illustration) were set out within a box (designed like a theatrical programme) in the *Radio Times*.

Television World Theatre offered viewers a repertory of remarkable catholicity with (as its title implied) a strong international bent, even when compared with the later series that were presented to the less general BBC2 audience. Only a minority of the 22 plays broadcast would have been familiar (Shakespeare, Chekhov, Galsworthy, Sheridan and Shaw), even to reasonably well-informed 1950s theatregoers, while some productions are by very obscure writers (H. C. Branner, Alfred Henschke). *Television World Theatre* presented a high percentage of comparatively recent works (Zuckmayer, Fry, Giraudoux, O'Neill, Lorca and Pirandello), and almost entirely unperformed classics such as Buchner's *Danton's Death* and Ibsen's *Brand*. The series also included first British television stagings of Greek tragedy (*Women of Troy*) and Chinese Noh drama (*The Circle of Chalk*, to date still the only attempt at Noh drama). Some productions were conceived around opportunities provided by pre-recording (notably Rudolph Cartier's spectacular filmed footage of armies on the march used extensively in *Mother Courage and her Children*), with

allowances made for individual and idiosyncratic directorial interpretation (most controversially, Michael Elliott's interpolation of newsreel footage of second world war refugees and atomic bombs into *Women of Troy*). Two plays (*Danton's Death* and *Brand*) were re-mountings of contemporaneous theatrical productions that had been staged at the Lyric Opera House, Hammersmith, during the acclaimed six-month residency by Michael Elliot's '59 Theatre Company, linking the series with developments in British theatre by presenting current work to a national television audience.

Barry's article acclaims television as a mass medium with exciting potential to bring classical drama to an audience of non-theatregoers:

> There is one aspect of television about which comment is seldom heard – it has made plays *talked about*! And by talked about I mean argued over, disagreed with, defended, hated and thought about in sitting-rooms, public bars, railway carriages and bus queues. Such a strength of interest in plays has not existed in this country for generations. What a stimulating state of things this presents. Those of us who worked in the theatre in the 'twenties and 'thirties will remember the great deserts of disinterestedness. Only among small groups of enthusiasts did talk about plays or playwrights form a part. And even then it was more likely to be a talk of the latest playwright who had achieved a success in London than about names from the rich mine of dramatic literature of the past. The production of a play

> by Ibsen or Shakespeare was a rarity, almost a suicidal joke for a theatrical manager seriously balancing his box office receipts against his costs.[ix]

Barry contrasts this state of affairs with BBC television having presented ten productions of nine plays by Ibsen since 1936, access meaning that, 'today this author has a nation-wide popularity'. The importance of televising plays by such classical 'distinguished and important' authors, lay not in pleasing the largest possible proportion of the audience, but in encouraging imaginative responses:

> Does it matter that some [plays] have been disliked by a proportion of the audience, or even that others have been a failure? The main factor is that there has been argument and interest on a wide scale.[x]

BBC Audience Research and institutional discourses

Such a programme, that allowed for bewilderment and annoyance of viewers, and expected some plays to fail, was expecting a great deal of its audience; flexibility of imaginative response to be able to move from watching Shakespeare to Gogol to Euripides from week to week, and sufficient curiosity about international culture and different historical periods to attempt to watch unfamiliar forms of drama. The BBC's Audience Research Reports indicate that *Television World Theatre* encouraged selective viewing, with small audiences tuning in for unfamiliar plays such as *Brand* and *Danton's Death* (both of which

were seen by 8% of the population)[xi] while comedies like *The Government Inspector* (featuring comedian Tony Hancock as Hlestakov) and *The Captain of Kopenick* could attract 25% and 21% respectively,[xii] despite their potentially off-putting European origin.

A consistent pattern of hostility emerges amongst responses of the smaller audiences that saw the more tragic and obscure plays. This hostility manifests itself in repeated complaints about plays' tendency towards morbidity and depression (*The Cherry Orchard*,[xiii] *Women of Troy*,[xiv] *Danton's Death*,[xv] *Blood Wedding*[xvi]). These viewers saw such bleak plays' foreign origin as contributing to their unsuitability, being temperamentally inappropriate for British viewers: 'a Slavonic moroseness foreign to our temperament… might be appreciated by Russians, but not by ourselves' (*The Cherry Orchard*),[xvii] 'the ideas and feelings were quite foreign to our way of life' (*Blood Wedding*).[xviii] Another aspect of this antipathy is a sense that a wish to be entertained was being overridden by the tastes of a highbrow minority of programme-makers: 'a nerve-wracking trial inflicted upon them [viewers] by the BBC', 'a play that only the 'highbrow' minority could digest' (*Women of Troy*),[xix] and 'A typical specimen of BBC morbidity. Very Third Programme' (*Blood Wedding*).[xx] Audiences felt especially affronted by scenes of violence and suffering being shown in their living rooms (*Danton's Death*),[xxi] with the *Women of Troy* report describing reactions of discomfort, distaste and deep disgust.

The prevalence of such plays appears to have provoked a cumulative sense of hostility towards the idea of a series of international classics, noted in the *Master Builder* report as 'a sense of resentment – which has of late become increasingly evident – towards the whole idea of *Television World Theatre* and the policy of treating viewers to a season of what they undoubtedly regard as 'the heavier type of play'.[xxii] Barry's vision for *Television World Theatre* (presenting audiences with some plays that they would dislike and some which would fail) could not have been to create a series that provoked antipathy towards the idea of international theatre, and alienation from the BBC's conception of suitable drama, amongst millions of viewers. Against this group, each report also details a minority (though often a small one) who do manage to extract some aesthetic value from each play. Amongst these are viewers who struggle to follow plays, but eventually find them to be rewarding:

> Although the effort to keep pace with such a saga of misery and woe (that called forth the observation 'I think Euripides laid it on pretty thick') had been by no means without pain, yet parts of the drama had a grandeur that certainly helped to make its subject tolerable and, at some points in the play, really gripping. (*Women of Troy*)[xxiii]

> I don't like haphazard mixing of modern language, poetry reading and symbolic scenery, but despite all these objections, I

was thoroughly glad I didn't miss the programme' (Life Assurance Underwriter) (*Blood Wedding*).[xxiv]

The report for *Brand* [xxv] demonstrates how audiences were capable of making distinctions in order to derive personal meaning and engagement from demanding plays, by responding more enthusiastically towards the production than to the source play, described as being 'too deep, too difficult, to heavy and unrealistic and 'positively depressing' (with the smaller proportion of the sample who reacted positively use terms like complex, sombre and grim). By contrast, acting ('with rare exceptions, considered really splendid') was commended as being the chief attraction of the production ('"It was the brilliant acting that made me watch this play", commented a Clerk'), especially Patrick McGoohan's performance as Brand ('variously described as "truly Oscar-winning", strong, brilliant and powerful; he "did a terrific job in sustaining all that high emotion throughout the play"').

The *Brand* audience's interested response in performance and acting rather than theme or literary status indicated how viewer interest might more fruitfully be drawn towards the international dramatic canon, an emphasis that was used in promotion of other productions in the series. Publicity material for the *The Government Inspector* shows a very different approach towards promotion of theatrical adaptations to Barry's *Radio Times* article. The BBC Press release promises that Hancock would appear 'in the same sort of situations'

as his comedy show, the star asserting that, 'Nikolai Gogol, one of the great Russian dramatists of the nineteenth century [...] might well have written scripts for *Hancock's Half Hour*'.[xxvi] Emphasis in this press release is not placed upon the play's classical *theatrical* status, but its affinities to contemporary *television*. By emphasising similarities of comic situation between Gogol's play and *Hancock's Half Hour*, the promotional material attracts the attention of the performer's sitcom viewers, through promising expectations that similar pleasures to the English television programme can be found in the Russian stage play. This strategy for attracting viewers was clearly effective: *The Government Inspector* attracted ratings of 9.5 million[xxvii] against *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* and *Armchair Theatre*[xxviii], two of ITV's most popular programmes.

The press release also cites Barry's approval of the casting: 'The play is high comedy and Tony Hancock is a thumping good actor'.[xxix] Subsequent audience reaction was mediated through understanding of the production's generic hybridity. Viewers are reported as responding as much to Hancock's casting in an unfamiliar role as to the play itself. The audience's reported response to Gogol was cooler than their enthusiasm about Hancock, with half complaining of the play's slow pace and far-fetched premise, although the other half are said to have accepted the play's form and premise, finding value and resonance in Gogol's story.[xxx]

BBC senior management noted the extensive and positive reaction to *The Government Inspector* with approval, a memo from Cecil McGivern (Deputy Director of Television Broadcasting) reading:

> Yesterday morning's press was first class. It really was a joyous idea to cast Tony Hancock in this play and I wish the Drama Department could achieve this kind of interest more often in its casting. Whose idea was it?[xxxi]

McGivern indicates a possible route that the adaptation might take in future (through casting of popular television performers) with particular support from senior BBC management.

Critical reaction

Critical responses towards *Television World Theatre* productions were often highly supportive towards the series' intentions while being sceptical as to its likely success. Maurice Richardson's *Observer* review of the opening production of *Henry V* demonstrates this dual response, presenting the production as a dangerous obstacle course that the BBC has thankfully managed to traverse without injury:

> Thank goodness the BBC's ambitious *Television World Theatre* series got off to such a triumphant start with *Henry V*! It would have been too awful if it had flopped, too awful but none too surprising. […] there were, for television the obvious practical technical difficulties of the battlefield and the camp, with

> memories of the high and elaborate pictorial standards set by the Olivier film still fresh. It seemed, indeed, that a worse and more dangerous play than this producer's death-trap could not have been made; and many deep groans of apprehension were held in check by conscientious diaphragms.[xxxii]

Expressions of approval for the project were usually couched in terms that praised the series' ambition while doubting its attraction to a wide general audience, with Peter Black welcoming the second series for its commitment to a minority audience, rather than for bringing the plays to a mass one:

> The BBC's second *World Theatre* series moves off tonight with *Julius Caesar*. I should like to wish the venture well. It takes courage to present programmes on the honourable assumption that minorities count. The BBC's creative staff is lucky to be able to put on so much adventurous television.[xxxiii]

Later on in the series, in a review of *Danton's Death*, Black explicity lays out the problem facing the series in having to attract and appeal to two separate audiences, general and cognoscenti, and estimates the level of success upon both groups:

> The purpose of these *World Theatre* productions is to please both the faction that never got to see this play, for example, in London and to hold the attention of those who remember

> Robespierre only as the sneering villain of Baroness Orczy's stories. I should say that this production achieved respectively a 70-30 success.[xxxiv]

Philip Toynbee's ecstatic *Observer* review of *Brand*, which he declared to be the best thing that he had ever seen on television ('one of those rare, miraculous occasions when everything was both right and bold') [xxxv] casts the experience of viewing *Brand* as being *beyond* the confines of the medium of television, meaning that the play had to enact a change upon the habits and understanding of its viewers:

> Early and late Ibsen are equally unamenable to the television screen, if only because these plays demand that one should be instantly and drastically removed from everything which we prefer to associate with the armchair and the family circle. (A family which made the transference without any difficulty would deserve a group portrait by Charles Addams.) Going to the theatre is a process of preparing the mind for what lies ahead; there is a solemnising process in the very fact of being among strangers in a straight-backed chair. But the chair at home is associated, for most of us, with nothing heroic or exorbitant.[xxxvi]

McGoohan's performance as Brand presented a shock to the 'natural laziness' and 'defensive embarrassment' that was native to the television viewer, succeeding (appropriately for a firebrand preacher) in raising them 'from their habitual domestic sloth'. The effect of the play described by Toynbee could only be exceptional and

extraordinary and expects a lot of the general television audience's capacity for orignal forms of imaginative reception. Toynbee uses *Brand* to draw a general conclusion as to the prosaic and sentimental failings of other (conventional) television drama: 'If only the usual fare were a little closer to this, and not so close to ITV's offering[s]'.[xxxvii]

In another highly enthusiastic *Observer* review of an Ibsen production (entitled 'Ibsen for All') Maurice Richardson's reaction to *The Master Builder* echoes Michael Barry's aspirations for a wide reach for classical drama, drawing great importance and significance from the play's availability to all television viewers:

> [T]he BBC's *Television World Theatre* production last Sunday was very impressive, very distinguished, and at least as successful as we had any right to expect. The thought of it being available, at the turn of a switch, in millions of subtopian living rooms, gave you one of those sudden rushes of optimism and uplift which mark the televisual occasion.[xxxviii]

Elsewhere, in a disappointed review of *Mother Courage*, Richardson expresses the same argument in negative, where the reach of a television production can hold the power to permanently scar the reputation of a classic: "In the mind of the admass, where TV is so powerful an educative influence" the medium "gets credited as a touchstone by which all merit can be tested", meaning that "one performance of an unsuitable classic" could act to support philistine anti-cultural prejudices.[xxxix]

Such were the levels of importance and prestige attached to the project that the *Daily Mail* published a substantial news feature at the end of the first series, investigating its perceived failings and successes. [xl] Surprisingly, Peter Black's article draws heavily upon internal BBC Audience Research (not normally made available to the press) in forming its conclusions. The piece articulates many of the anxieties within the framework of expectations with its title, 'The 'Flop' that had 6-million friends', betraying the tension between the mass audience rejection and minority audience approval. Black reads the statistical ratings evidence as proving the general failure of the series to increase the audience for classic drama or broaden the typical viewer's cultural horizons, noting the discrepancy between particular plays, with *The Government Inspector* and *The Captain of Kopenick*'s (8m) figures of doubling the 4.5m who had seen *Henry V* or Jean Giradoux's *Amphitrion '38*, 'thus confirming the British hatred for Shakespeare or the sophisticated sex'.[xli]

Black's correspondence from *Mail* readers had revealed a wide range of responses from viewers towards the series from delight to puzzlement and outright hostility. He was highly supportive of the individual *programmes* themselves, 'acted by the best casts that love, money and luck could procure, produced and designed by men who stand at the head of their profession'[xlii] to create a series that 'offered some wonderful things' over three months, but instead found blame with the *series* as a concept, its choice of repertory and presentation.

Entitling the series *Television World Theatre* left viewers with the reasonable assumption that it would provide a representation of the very best of international theatre, whereas Michael Barry had asserted that no experts could agree as to what the best of international theatre was:

> Perhaps; but they would agree on the second best: and in this enterprise there was too much of that. *Henry V* is not the best Shakespeare, any more than *The Master Builder* is the best Ibsen or *Heartbreak House* the best Shaw or *The Clandestine Marriage* the best Georgian comedy.[xliii]

The BBC's promotion of the project had been 'presented with forbiddingly grave publicity' that served to repel a general audience:

> The title – *Television World Theatre* – hinted that the audience was about to be done good. The classic masks of comedy and tragedy that prefaced each play reminded us that they were not just to be enjoyed. There was an uncomforting similarity between the launching of this series and an L. C. C. evening class syllabus.[xliv]

Black instead suggests that the plays would have been more successful if they had been presented by stealth, without the trappings of a repertory series of classic dramas:

> Publicity should have emphasised stars and been unabashedly frivolous about it. Then, 14 weeks later, the BBC could have

> told us what he had done. This strategy might not have attracted the intellectual […] but television's primary purpose is not with him.[xlv]

The article includes new contributions from Michael Barry, reappraising the effect of the series in the light of audience appreciation figures, which, he concedes, have been "surprisingly low" and a modest average rating of 6.3m viewers, although Barry defends that figure as substantial and significant: "How can you call a series a flop when it has had 6,000,000 people watching it, arguing, disagreeing, talking about it?" When read in comparison with his initial *Radio Times* article heralding the series' launch, Barry's conclusions reveal an element of retrospective continuity and repositioning: "we wanted to show that television is mature enough to offer a planned series of important plays. We wanted to boost television's prestige amongst the intellectual and professional class that tends to look down its nose on television as a time-spender".[xlvi] These particular viewers, who combine high cultural capital with a disdain for television as a medium, were perhaps not exactly the same people as the general pub, railway carriage and bus queue audience that Barry had initially envisaged.

The BBC acclaimed *Television World Theatre* as a success in institutional publicity, Hugh Carlton Greene (Director of Television Administration) citing it as a particular achievement when addressing the European Academy of Radio and Television.[xlvii] Despite this public

support, evidence suggests that the project may have been considered something of a burden to the Corporation. Evaluating the solitary season of *Festival* (BBC Television, 1963-4), producer Peter Luke attempted to defend his series by comparing it with *Television World Theatre*:

> Some of the ideas mooted for Drama in 1965 seem to be putting the clock back approximately six years. It will surely be remembered that *Television World Theatre* had to be taken off in 1958 because of its total lack of success.[xlviii]

Although 'total lack of success' is clearly a rhetorical exaggeration intended to present Luke's anthology series in a better light than its antecedent, no series quite like *Television World Theatre* was ever subsequently attempted. The combination of a regular and prominent place in schedules, extensive publicity making substantial claims for the featured plays, and a highly catholic and international repertory was never tried again with similar boldness.

***Festival* (BBC, 1963-4)**

The two short-lived series that followed show polarised reactions to potential lessons learned from the experience *Television World Theatre*. *Twentieth Century Theatre* (BBC Television, 1960), transmitted every Sunday night over six months was a reversion to the *Sunday Night Theatre* model (the new precluding plays from earlier than 1900). Its mixed repertory was mostly formed of popular West

End successes unsuitable for *World Theatre* canonisation such as *Dear Octopus* by Dodie Smith, *Young Woodley* by John Van Druten, or *Aren't We All?* by Frederick Lonsdale. Amongst this selection were very occasional productions in the *World Television Theatre* tradition, such as Bulgakov's *White Guard* or Josef and Karel Capek's *Insect Play*. *Festival* (BBC Television, 1963-4), the provenance of one single producer, took an opposite approach, presenting a challenging repertory of plays by Aristophanes, Ionesco, Beckett, Pirandello and Sartre to a 9.15pm Friday night audience.

Luke saw the role of *Festival* as presenting 'plays of substance' to the audience.[xlix] Terms used in the series' publicity indicate different expectations than Barry's initial promotion of *Television World Theatre* five years earlier, particularly in the reach of its expected audience:

> *Festival* will be a programme of drama for people 'in the know'. It will be for people who are curious and interested in the arts, in history, in our cultural evolution. There will be plays from the Greek Classics and our modern Theatre of the Absurd. Plays by new young writers of 'kitchen sink drama' will also be included. No play, however will be chosen unless it has a particular meaning for us today. All the possibilities of presenting drama on television have never been fully explored… *Festival* intends to explore them. We want to entertain the intelligent viewer; we want to have an element of surprise in the choice of material

> and the way it is presented. *Festival* is going to be adult entertainment.[l]

Emphasis is placed upon the knowledge and intelligence that viewers are expected to bring in order to extract value from the programme, qualities that might be expected to be possessed by the 'intellectual and professional viewers' that Barry identified after the first series of *Television World Theatre* rather than the more general (and less specific) pub-and-bus-queue audience envisaged in his original launch article. The choice of *Festival* plays do not promise the same classic or international status as the *World Theatre* repertory, but contemporary relevance and greater formal consideration of the possibilities of adaptation across media. The right of productions to fail and disappoint is again set out in determined terms:

> There will be times when a *Festival* production will charm you, and perhaps there will be times when you'll be provoked, or angry. *Festival* was not conceived for the apathetic viewer. We want our viewers to challenge and be challenged by our productions.[li]

This statement of intent makes rigorous demands upon the audience, who might find the prospect of being challenged or provoked to anger unappealing. Luke saw the potential *Festival* audience, capable of meeting this challenge, as a minority with a background of prior

cultural and historical interest, part of a wider audience for the arts in post-war Britain:

> On the other hand, so many letters reached me during the season from both known and unknown sources that I was left in no doubt as to the popularity of the series among what might be described as a large minority – a minority that is swelling in number every year. This is the sort of audience that will sit up all night to get tickets for Covent Garden, that invades and fills the vast Albert Hall for the Proms, that queues the length of Milbank for a new exhibition at the Tate Gallery, and one which keeps a throbbing life pulsating at the National Film Theatre, The Arts, The Royal Court and hundreds of other cinemas and theatres all over the country which are not owned by the big business combines.[lii]

Audience reaction for *Festival* indicates that it could achieve high ratings, but inspired little in the way of committed week-by-week viewing from a dedicated audience, with both percentage of the United Kingdom public tuning in (between 19% and 4%) and Audience Reaction Indices (ranging from 78% for *The Life of Galileo* to 23% for Ionesco's *The Bald Prima Donna*, 20 November 1963, a record low) fluctuating dramatically. This indicates that audiences were either unaware of *Festival* as a project, or found the idea of a series 'for people in the know' off-putting, selecting only plays they might expect to enjoy.

Institutional support for the stage adaptation within the BBC had changed with Sydney Newman's appointment as Head of Drama in 1962 and the creation of BBC2 in 1964. Newman saw conventional stage adaptations in the *Twentieth Century Theatre* mode as conservative and unexciting programming:

> Drama was way, way down the list [when Newman arrived at the BBC] - a backwater - occasionally good stuff but largely dramatisations and old-fashioned stuff; stage plays, dramatisations from novels, children's classics... very honourable but ho-hum. [...] old-fashioned[liii]

Newman's own priorities were for a relevant television drama, relevance conceived in terms of immediacy to concerns of contemporary viewers:

> In an odd way, I am not fundamentally interested in the art of television. I am not fundamentally interested in camera work: nor indeed in the spoken word... I do like art that has something to say and art that is of use... I think great art has to stem from, and its essence must come out of, the period in which it is created.[liv]

BBC Drama production during Newman's tenure is therefore marked by greater awareness of potential audience popularity (or unpopularity) than previously. However this awareness did not preclude support for the work of producers like Luke, in a memo from

Newman that states the Drama Group's need to 'provide a wide variety of drama programmes ranging from the excellence and the challenging of Friday night's *Festival* through to the broadest mass appeal programme like *Compact.*' A 'lopsided' approach, that leant too much towards the provision of high-ratings 'easy to take-type dramatic material', would 'risk losing the very influential but minority audience who have a fine taste in drama and who shun the trivial'. Even with a pressing shortage of studio space, Newman did not consider that the BBC could afford to overlook this minority.[lv]

The 1964 launch of BBC2 (a channel with an initially small potential audience, as new sets needed to be bought in order to view it) created an opportunity for this minority's tastes to be served without alienating a mass television audience. From the creation of the new channel to Newman's departure from the BBC in 1967, theatrical adaptations almost entirely disappeared from BBC1, appearing in two series on BBC2. The short-lived *Thursday Theatre* (1964-5) presented 'Plays by well-known authors which have enjoyed West End success',[lvi] while *Theatre 625* (1964-8) (despite its title, not devoted to stage adaptations) was the channel's anthology series for single dramas, presenting 25 theatrical adaptations over its run continuing in the *Festival* mode, with versions of Camus, Goethe, Strindberg and similarly demanding works. With *Thursday Theatre*'s swift demise marking the end of the middlebrow *Sunday Night Theatre* tradition of theatrical adaptation, this meant that it was the classical,

experimental and challenging parts of the theatrical repertory that continued to be broadcast, but that the opportunity to see these adaptations was denied to the mass audience unable to watch BBC2.

Conclusion

As the first anthology series on British television dedicated to the classic play, *Television World Theatre* was an instrumental production in establishing a form of broadcast drama that continued on the BBC via subsequent anthology series over the following 40 years. Many of the concerns that were attached to the broadcast of these later series were fully considered for the first time over the two series of *World Theatre*; breadth of repertory, the variable suitability of dramas from different periods of theatrical history for television production and, in particular, audience address. Aspects of the series promotion and its aspirations were not repeated again in subsequent series, in its ambition of serving a mass general audience with a diverse repertory of demanding material. This intention was at best, only partially achieved, with large audiences only electing to watch certain plays and often responding with disappointment to the more demanding productions that they saw. The experience of mounting the *World Television Theatre* project affected thinking when subsequent series were attempted, with *Festival* intended to only attract a minority audience of viewers, already well-informed about cultural developments, to a repertory of plays that were no longer necessarily posited as holding canonical status. Looking back at *Television World*

Theatre from almost sixty years later, it seems bizarre that the BBC should ever have presented *Women of Troy* or *The Circle of Chalk* with the aspiration of attracting, and improving the horizons of, a mass television audience. But that this experiment was once made, which affecting subsequent thinking about the purpose of the theatrical adaptation, is important to remember.

Appendix: Television World Theatre: List of plays and their archival status

The Life of Henry the Fifth (29 December 1957), w. William Shakespeare, d. Peter Dews (Survives).

The Cherry Orchard (5 January 1958), w. Anton Chekhov, d. Harold Clayton (Lost).

Women of Troy (12 January 1958), w. Euripides, d. Michael Elliot (Two reels survive).

The Captain of Koepenick (19 January 1958), w. Carl Zuckmeyer, d. Rudolph Cartier (Lost).

The Dark is Light Enough (26 January 1958), w. Christopher Fry, d. Stuart Burge (Lost).

Heartbreak House (2 February 1958), w. George Bernard Shaw, d. Michael Barry (Two reels survive).

The Government Inspector (9 February 1958), w. Nikolai Gogol, d. Alan Bromly (Survives).

The Judge (16 February 1958), w. H. C. Branner, d. Campbell Logan (Lost).

The Master Builder (23 February 1958), w Henrik Ibsen, d. Stephen Harrison (Survives).

Amphitrion 38 (2 March 1958), w. Jean Giradoux, d. Harold Clayton (Lost).

The Circle of Chalk (9 March 1958), w. Alfred Henschke, d. Douglas Allen (Lost).

The Clandestine Marriage (16 Mar 1958), w. George Coleman and David Garrick, d. Hal Burton (Survives).

Strange Interlude (in two parts – 23/30 March 1958), w. Eugene O'Neill, d. John Jacobs (Survives).

Julius Caesar (5 May 1959), w. William Shakespeare, d. Stuart Burge (Survives).

Danton's Death (19 May 1959), w. Georg Buchner, d. Michael Elliott (Lost).

Blood Wedding (2 June 1959), w. Frederico Garcia Lorca, d. George R. Foa (Lost).

Volpone (16 June 1959), w. Ben Jonson, d. Stephen Harrison (Survives).

Mother Courage and her Children (30 June 1959), w. Bertholt Brecht, d. Rudolph Cartier (Survives).

Henry IV (14 July 1959), w. Luigi Pirandello, d. John Harrison (Survives).

The School for Scandal (28 July 1959), w. Robert Brinsley Sheridan, d. Hal Burton (Survives).

Brand (11 August 1959), w. Henrik Ibsen, d. Michael Elliot (Survives).

The Silver Box (25 August 1959), w. John Galsworthy, d. Michael Leeston-Smith (Lost).

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Notes

[i] Chris Dunkley, Review, *Radio Times*, 27 March 1975, 74.

[ii] See J. C. Bulman and H. R. Coursen (eds.), *Shakespeare on Television: an Anthology of Essays and Reviews* (Hanover, 1988) and Susan Willis, *The BBC Shakespeare Plays* (London, 1991).

[iii] Billy Smart, Brechtian Television: Theatricality and Adaptation of the Stage Play, in: Andre Loiselle and Jeremy Maron (eds.), *Stages of Reality: Theatricality in Cinema* (Toronto, 2012) 30-52.

[iv] Billy Smart, '*World Theatre: Brand*', 2012, https://screenplaystv.wordpress.com/2012/01/27/world-theatre-brand-bbc-1959/

[v] For a full list of plays in the series, please see Appendix 1.

[vi] For a very late example, see Jeremy Ridgman, Producing *Performance*: An Interview with Simon Curtis, in: Jeremy Ridgman (ed.), *Boxed Sets: television Representations of Theatre* (Luton, 1998), 199-208.

[vii] *Sunday Night Theatre* was not billed under the title in the *Radio Times* until 1956.

[viii] Michael Barry, *Television World Theatre*, *Radio Times*, 27 December 1957, 3. By the second series emphasis upon plays' canonical status was more muted: "(*World Theatre*) is designed primarily to catch the flavour of international playwriting rather than to represent a selection of the greatest plays of all time." (Anon, 'Television presents 'Julius Caesar', *Radio Times*, 2 May 1959, 9)

[ix] Barry (1957), op. cit.

[x] Ibid.

[xi] BBC WAC R/7/40-1.

[xii] BBC WAC R/7/32.

[xiii] WAC VR/58/17.

[xiv] BBC WAC VR/58/32.

[xv] BBC WAC VR/59/273.

[xvi] BBC WAC VR/59/310.

[xvii] BBC WAC VR/58/32.

[xviii] BBC WAC VR/59/310. It is noticeable that plays of British and Irish origin, even when considered disappointing, did not inspire the same antagonistic response from audiences (Shaw's *Heartbreak House* or Christopher Fry's *The Dark is Light Enough*). When classical British and Irish plays were presented, the response was generally enthusiastic; *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, *Volpone* and *School for Scandal* receiving Audience Reaction Indices of 62, 76, 69 and 69%.

[xix] BBC WAC VR/58/32.

[xx] BBC WAC VR/59/310.

[xxi] BBC WAC VR/59/273.

[xxii] BBC WAC VR/58/111.

[xxiii] BBC WAC VR/58/32.

[xxiv] BBC WAC VR/59/310.
[xxv] BBC WAC VR/59/471.

[xxvi] BBC WAC T5/2,096/1, Undated press release. *Hancock's Half Hour* (BBC Television, 1956-60)/ *Hancock* (BBC Television, 1961).

[xxvii] John Caughie, *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism & British Culture* (Oxford, 2000), 34. Caughie neglects to mention Hancock's casting when citing *The Government Inspector*'s high ratings, giving a misleading impression of the innate attraction of nineteenth century Russian comedy to a 1958 television audience.

[xxviii] BBC WAC VR/58/80. *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* (ATV for ITV, 1955-65, 1973-74), *Armchair Theatre* (ABC/Thames for ITV, 1956-74).

[xxix] BBC WAC T5/2,096/1, Ibid.

[xxx] BBC WAC VR/58/80.

[xxxi] BBC WAC T5/2,096/1, 23 January 1958.
[xxxii] Maurice Richardson, No Tudor Today, *Observer*, 5 January 1958, 10.
[xxxiii] Peter Black, Teleview, *Daily Mail*, 5 May 1959, 12.
[xxxiv] Peter Black, Teleview, *Daily Mail*, 20 May 1959, 12.
[xxxv] Philip Toynbee, Titanic Pastor, *Observer*, 16 August 1959, 13.
[xxxvi] Ibid.
[xxxvii] Ibid.
[xxxviii] Maurice Richardson, Ibsen for All, *Observer*, 2 March 1958, 14.
[xxxix] Maurice Richardson, Mother Courage, *Observer*, 5 July 1959, 10.
[xl] Peter Black, The 'Flop' that had 6-million friends', *Daily Mail*, 29 March 1958, 4.
[xli] Ibid.
[xlii] Ibid.
[xliii] Ibid.
[xliv] Ibid.
[xlv] Ibid.
[xlvi] Ibid.

[xlvii] Anon, Cost to BBC of Competitive Television, *Times*, 13 March 1958, headlines the particular section of the article under the unequivocal subheading '*World Theatre* Success'.

[xlviii] BBC WAC T5/2,079/1, memo (entitled 'PLAYS') from Peter Luke to HDP Tel, 22 September 1964.

[xlix] BBC WAC T5/2,079/1, Memo from Peter Luke, 10 March 1965.

[l] BBC WAC T5/2,079/1, Undated press release.

[li] Ibid. This intention to create challenging, agitational, forms of drama relates to the recommendations of the 1962 Pilkington Committee on Broadcasting.

[lii] BBC WAC T5/2,079/1, memo from Peter Luke, 1 September 1964.

[liii] Quoted in Tim Collins and Gary Levy, The Sydney Newman Interview, *DWBulletin* 41/42 (1986) 10-5, 26-30.

[liv] Quoted in Philip Purser, Heads of Drama, *Contrast*, 2/1 (1962) 35.

[lv] BBC WAC T5/2,079/1, memo from Sydney Newman, 24 July 1963. *Compact* (BBC Television/BBC1, 1962-5), an early soap opera set in the world of fashion publishing.

[lvi] *BBC Annual Report 1964-65* (London: BBC, 1965) 25.