

The Bovril of the masses

Howard Schuman

TV drama is often anodyne. The author of 'Rock Follies' is one of the playwrights out to change that.

When *I, Claudius* began its American run recently, *Time* magazine's television pundit wrote something to the effect that the secret of making great television drama was locked up in Britain as securely as the crown jewels. Well, yes . . . Personally, I would agree that the British lead the world in creating high class Roman, Victorian and Edwardian soap opera. But television drama in this country (by which I mean the whole range of drama—one-off plays, series, serials, situation comedies and revue) also has a noble tradition of looking at contemporary society with energy, style, wit and commitment, often utilising innovative techniques. With a few honourable exceptions, most of the drama produced over the past nine years has lacked these qualities.

While British society has been experiencing its most dramatic period of social stress since the war, the dominant sounds on the box have not been those of growing aggro in the street but the rustle of aristocratic crinoline, the flutter of middle class melancholy, the swish of yet another cartoon queer mincing his way across a plastic set to squeals of laughter, sometimes canned, but all too often real.

When television drama turns to modern life, it invariably uses a mode of stale, unenergetic, spurious "naturalism" totally unsuited for capturing the psychological states of people who have lived through the sixties, much less the seventies. The clothes may be up to date but the mental attitudes are out of synch—which is why in series like *The Organisation* or *Good Girl* or *The Foundation* everything seems false in a way you can't immediately define, a vertigo-inducing falsity. Then it hits. There's a time warp: fifties' heads are decked out in seventies' garments.

Why are energy, innovation and commitment in such short supply? The answers are many and complicated. A few thoughts follow.

JOE BLOGGS

A script editor rejected *Verité*, my first television play, by saying: "I think it's funny, but it's not for Joe Bloggs. The characters are too weird, too surrealistic." Since I had written with reasonable accuracy about people I knew, including myself, I was shaken up: the woman was rejecting not only my play but my idea of reality. She was not to be the only one; 18 months went by before someone took a chance on the piece.

It was disheartening for an American

admirer of the British television industry to realise that it employed large numbers of men and women whose main function, it would appear, was to keep my plays off the air lest they disturbed Joe Bloggs. When I eventually regained my sanity and entered a less solipsistic phase I realised that script editors, like all television practitioners, come in two distinct mental breeds. There are those who want to engage, enrage, exhilarate, provoke and generally stimulate an audience. And there are those who conceive of the medium as a kind of electronic cup of Bovril whose function is to tranquillise the folks at home, if not actually put them to sleep. The Bovril Brigade visualise the public as a well scrubbed and carefully manicured couple of about 50, whose highest accolade is: "Well, I thought that was very nice, dear." This is Mr and Mrs Joe Bloggs very cosy in their semi, thank you very much, and they don't want to be disturbed.

An example of the mentality. The afternoon Piers Haggard finished editing *Verité*, he showed it to me out at Thames Television in Teddington. The play centred around the relationship between an American underground film-maker and an English couple; it ended with the film-maker's images of the brutal underside of London. When the lights came up, the editor took me by the shoulder and led me to a window. Out of it we could see men playing cricket on a green in the afternoon sun. "Howard, that's the real London." There was no arguing. His London was real; mine wasn't. Do Not Disturb.

Far too many script editors, producers and department heads are spiritual members of the Bovril Brigade. They avoid or distort a wide range of subjects. There is almost a total absence of drama involving the situation in Northern Ireland, the lives of minority groups in Britain, the position of women, the growth of homosexual consciousness . . . any viewer can expand the list. The most ironic failure of television drama is its almost complete inability to capture the sensibilities of the television generation, a failure both of content and style, symbolised by the refusal of most practitioners to explore the uses of rock music until fairly recently.

Kids brought up on television long for energy, anarchy, an input of ideas and images that almost no British drama programme provides. They like an American programme such as *Kojak* because its energy, though of a low order, at least

gives the show a contemporary feel. *Monty Python* gave them that kind of buzz, as do *The Muppets*. Half of our *Rock Follies* audience is made up of eight to 18 year olds. I don't know how many of them understand the personal relationships. But what I do know from letters we've received is that they get off on the comedy, the music, the visuals and the pace.

So much needs to be done to increase the range of contemporary subjects television deals with and to develop new kinds of electronic techniques to enhance the subjects visually . . . and yet what were we offered this autumn? *Love for Lydia* paced at the speed of death, a stilted *Anna Karenina* and a stillborn *London Belongs to Me*. To be fair, there has been a good *Hard Times* and half a dozen excellent plays. But that is an infinitesimal proportion of drama time. Bovril rules, okay. And although there are undoubtedly millions of viewers who are quite content with things as they are, who perhaps would like even more tranquillity, there are also millions of people like the London cab driver who asked me why most of television was such crap:

"When something like *Softly, Softly* comes on, I go into the kitchen for a beer and shout out at my son, what plot are they using tonight and he says plot number 18 or plot number 20, something like that. And I know just what we're in for."

A GOOD BLEAT

Television companies are corporations and most practitioners fall into the corporate mentality: commitment to producing good popular art shades into a commitment merely to survive. There are not very many brave people in television and yet there is a growing repressive climate that will require bravery to combat.

Neither Aubrey Singer, the Controller of BBC2 or Alisdair Milne, Controller of BBC1 until recently, have been noted for their sympathy towards progressive drama. Milne is the man who dismissed Potter's *Brimstone and Treacle* with the word "nauseating," but would not specify the root of his nausea. He has been replaced by Billy Cotten Jr, ex of light entertainment, who said to a director about to embark on six documentary dramas concerning runaway girls, "I hope you're going to show there's no mileage in this leaving home business." Even more worrying was his decision to postpone the showing of *Scum*, a Roy Minton play directed by Alan Clarke and set in a borstal. The creators were asked to produce documentary evidence that what they portrayed was so. Does this mean that Cotten's office must be filled with bugged, beaten and exploited boys before *Scum* can be scheduled?

The conduit for repression in ITV is the Independent Broadcasting Authority. The *Daily Mail* of 14 November gave a useful indication of where that body's head is at: "Television writers should tone down the sex, violence and bad language in 'realistic drama,' the head of independent television and radio said yesterday." (Presumably in

non-realistic drama one can go for blood and bollocks.)

Personally, I have had less interference from the IBA than from the higher-ups at the Beeb, but the resident censor was definitely heavier on the *Rock Follies* sequel than he had been the first time around—when, having been told it was satirical, he hardly bothered us at all. Not, at least, until episode four, when he objected to a porno actor asking how many orgasms the producer required. I changed that to: "Why can't I just grease up my pectorals and poke her one, you know the usual?" and he was made easy in mind.

As I say, there was more heaviness on *Follies of '77*. The use of "Jesus" and "Christ" was severely restricted. More sinister was his report on episode six (one of the three not shown in the late spring due to industrial action). In it there was (and is) an anti-Jubilee song and my invisible censor opined that although I was within my rights to harbour such feelings, it was "asking for trouble" to allow the song to remain in the episode. It was kept in, because my producer, Andrew Brown, is not one of the Bovril Brigade.

What the controllers of the Beeb and the members of the IBA seem to have in common is the conviction that they are protecting the public interest, and that any decisions they come to should not be questioned. Dennis Potter was not given a chance to argue the merits of *Brimstone and Treacle*; nor was Brian Phelan allowed to plead the case of *Article 5*, his play about torture; nor was I ever told exactly what the powers-that-be objected to in *Censored Scenes from King Kong*. These are Beebisms.

As for the IBA, Stephen Murphy made its position clear at this year's Edinburgh Festival. The IBA would ban any play like *Brimstone and Treacle* which offends public decency; but he couldn't spell out how the Potter play did so offend. He went on to say that the IBA felt no need to defend publicly any decision they made. In fact, the press only distorted such reasons. But his most chilling pronouncement came at the end of the censorship discussion. "Well," he said, "you've all had a really good bleat, but that's the way the system is and that's the way it's going to remain."

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

"Television drama at the moment is going nowhere fast. Informed management believe it is so bad it can't get worse. They are wrong. It can and will destroy itself unless a breakthrough in form is made."

Troy Kennedy Martin wrote that in March 1964. So this climate has been building for a long time. (Mary Whitehouse was just getting underway, too.) Martin devised and wrote (with John McGrath) a six-part series called *Diary of a Young Man*. It told the story of two young men down from the north to London. The first episode was shown at Edinburgh this year and proved to be absolutely marvellous. It mixed music, narration, film action, stills, comedy, satire, and a heightened stylised speech.

The other sections, which I've read, are even better. Martin never got another series like it off the ground.

Like the fellah said, a country gets the kind of television it deserves. Evidently Britain doesn't deserve another rich, imaginative series like *Diary of a Young Man*.

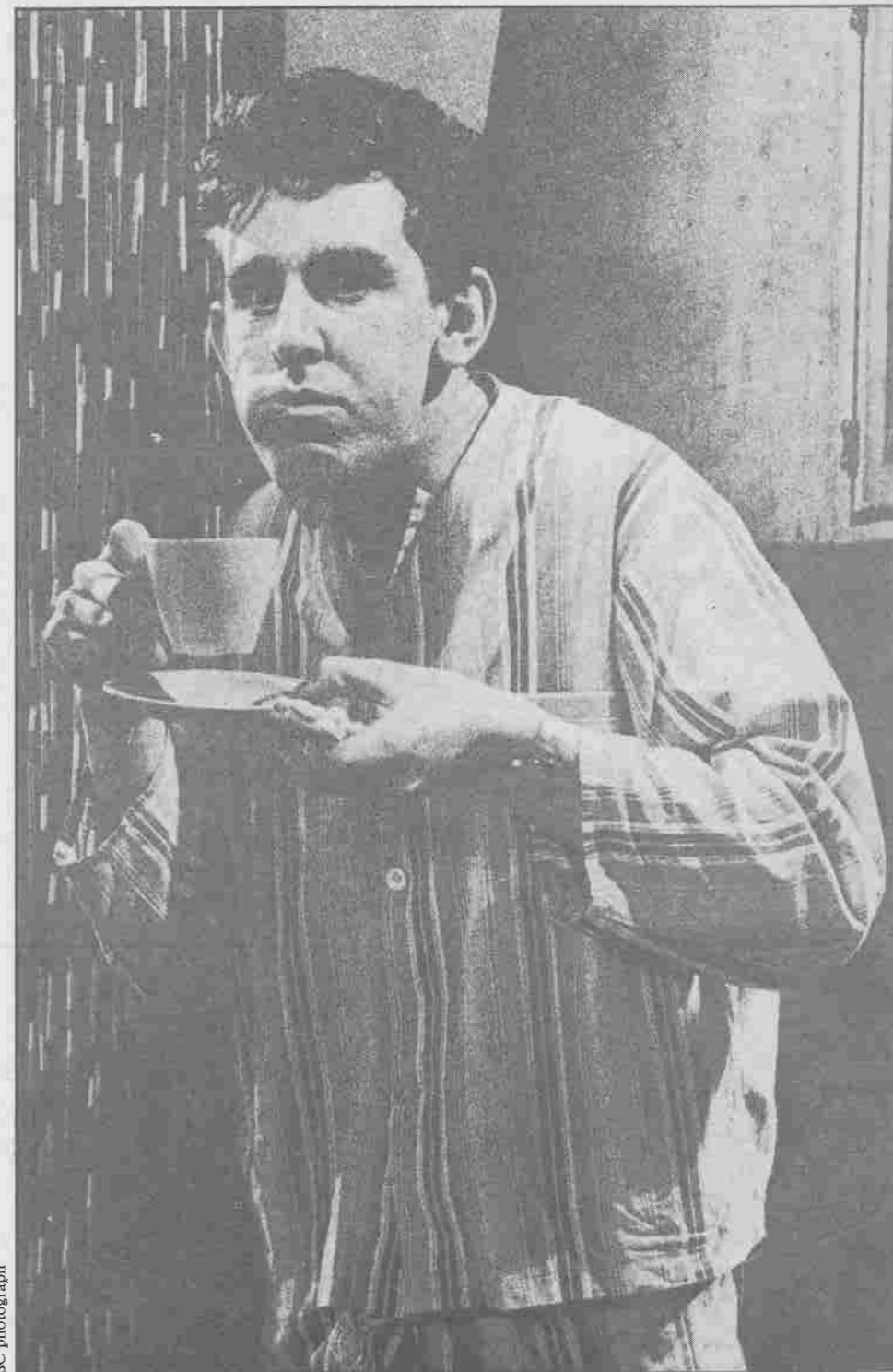
Television, like the country as a whole, seems to be moving steadily towards conservatism. Decision making is less and less open. This is not a situation that is going to change dramatically in the near future, if at all. The only hope is to affect a bit more decentralisation and sneak a few responsible freaks into the industry and

create some pockets of subversive energy.

This is not absolutely a pipe dream. In 1964 a group of writers headed by Martin failed to organise themselves into a group powerful enough to fight the decision makers. But in 1977, the first television festival in Edinburgh brought together many practitioners who clearly shared commitment and anxiety in equal measure. Next year's festival is going to tackle the issues of excluded and distorted experience on British television. It may prove to be a focus for resistance.

Watch this space.

Richard Moore as Ginger in the "Marriage" episode of "Diary of a young man"



BBC photograph