

Mark Lawson on the state of the art of tv drama

Playing Safe

One evening in March, bashful men in dinner jackets will weave through white-clothed tables heavy with grub and grog to receive large face-masks overlaid with gold leaf from whichever junior member of the royal family's turn has come up on the roster this year. Each of these men, for it is almost always men who are honoured, will, without fail, button up his dinner jacket half-way to the stage. The origins of this tradition are unclear: maybe protocol dictates that princesses be spared the sight of shirt or cummerbund? The British Academy Of Film And Television Arts (Bafta), a sort of Garrick Club for practitioners of the visual media, will be holding its annual awards ceremony.

In the category of Best Single Drama, the judging committee will be making its selection from four works which came top in the postal ballot of Academy members: *First And Last*, written by Michael Frayn; *Bomber Harris* by Don Shaw; *The Accountant* by Geoffrey Case and *She's Been Away* by Stephen Poliakoff.

In the category of Best Drama Series Or Serial, the judges will shortly be choosing between *Summer's Lease* (from the novel by John Mortimer), *Mother Love* (from the novel by Domini Taylor), *Inspector Morse* (from the books by Colin Dexter) and *Traffik*, the Channel 4 international co-production about the international trade in narcotics.

It is possible, on the basis of this short-list, to make certain general observations about the present condition of television drama. But it should first of all be pointed out that, despite the back-slapping, dinner jackets and Chablis, it is wrong to assume that Bafta necessarily represents a tendency in the voting to favour the politically safe or thematically middlebrow. At last year's awards, deliberate messages were sent to the government by the honouring of the play *Tumbledown* and the serial *A Very British Coup* (and indeed in another category, the documentary *Death On The*

Rock). If the choices from the 1989 output appear generally softer, then it is fair to conclude that they reflect the range of available choices.

Indeed, the political content of single dramas has been significantly narrowed and diluted during the 1980s. The latest Bafta nominations in this category, for example, include one comedy drama about the mafia (*The Accountant*), in a genre which might be characterised as 'Ealing with teeth', if rather small ones. There are also two exceptionally literate scripts by theatre writers, Poliakoff's *She's Been Away* and Frayn's *First And Last*.

Both were essentially domestic pieces, each revolving around a portrait of a marriage, and partly reliant for their high profiles and budgets on the star names of Peggy Ashcroft and Joss Ackland. The one slightly political piece was the bio-pic, *Bomber Harris*. Wearing its research heavily, it was a courageous play only in the sense that it dared to be mildly contentious about events nearly 50 years old.

There is, of course, no reason why every television drama should be contentiously contemporary but there is an increasing worry that almost *none* of them now are. This is partly because of the general alteration in the intellectual climate in television and partly because of the difficulty the critical playwrights have had in finding a response to the political events of the last decade.

But financial constraints also have a role to play. The BBC faces the increasing imperative to earn money or reduce the amount it lays out, while ITV companies must save up money to attempt to buy their franchises back off the government when the highest bidder system replaces the IBA interviews. In these conditions, the logic of international co-productions has become more and more attractive.

The difficulty is that any drama funded from several countries, or needing to be attractive to the North American market, is going to avoid domestic political reference



Lindsay Duncan: Getting caught in *Traffik*

and have a script written in the kind of air-traffic-control English which is easily translated or dubbed for Europeans or simple enough for the American audience to understand.

A recent example was the production of *A Tale Of Two Cities* which, despite the input at the British end of Granada, the classiest drama producer after the BBC, rendered Dickens in a kind of compromise demotic and accent which were the drama-

tic equivalent of the Channel tunnel.

Another contributing factor has been the BBC's decision to end the *Play For Today* series. It was easily and frequently parodied - perhaps there were a few too many about alienation on housing estates - but the series ensured that around 26 reasonably demanding, often politically challenging plays, were produced every year. There has been nothing to replace it.



The effect is that there are certain kinds of single plays which are simply no longer produced on television. Recently, for example, BBC2 imaginatively repeated two plays by Vaclav Havel to celebrate his accession to power in Prague. They had originally been shot as part of a *Play For Today* season in 1975, long before Eastern European dissidents became, as the media say, 'sexy'. If the two-decade process towards Czechoslovakian democracy

were beginning now, where is the slot on British television which could quite routinely produce works by censored writers?

Even more significantly, a work like Jim Allen's *United Kingdom* (1981) is now unimaginable. It was a 150-minute drama about the attempt by a solid, northern, Andertonesque policeman to break a rebellion on a housing estate. The director, Roland Joffe, has, perhaps symbolically, since gone to Hol-

lywood and Allen into general silence broken only by the theatrical controversy over *Perdition*.

It is not that the quality of drama has declined, either technically or in the line-by-line quality of the writing, but that the subject matter is habitually less tough than before. It is, perhaps, emblematic that the big drama project mounted by Thames Television for ITV evening peak-time in 1976 was Trevor Griffith's 11-part *Bill Brand*. It was a dense ideological and sexual dialectic about a Labour MP. In 1986, the big drama project mounted by Thames Television for ITV evening peak-time was John Mortimer's 10-part *Paradise Postponed*, a warm, chortling amble through the postwar years. *Bill Brand* is another drama which it is impossible to imagine reaching the screens today.

Similarly, it is significant that, after the decades of Griffiths, Potter and Mercer, with their experimentation in structure and ideas, the most lauded small-screen dramatist of the 1980s was Alan Bennett. Again, this is not to object to the quality of the work produced by Bennett. The *Talking Heads* monologues (1988) were gloriously written and performed and, in their simplicity, formally daring. The point is that they underline the move from the political to the domestic in recent television drama.

The same trend is detectable in the Bafta nominations in this year's Series And Serials category. *Summer's Lease*, the latest Mortimer chortle, must be the favourite. *Mother Love*, adapted by Andrew Davies, whose original work, *A Very Peculiar Practice*, makes him the most significant of the new television writers, was a black and visually impressive representation of a nightmare. But the nightmare, again, was a domestic one.

The same applies to the most regrettable omission from the list, *Take Me Home*, a sort of Strindberg piece for a modern new town seen on BBC2 last year. The moral bankruptcy of the new town

idea was not used for an exploration of urban planning or government policies, as might have been expected in the 70s, but was represented through the tensions of a cross-class sexual triangle. The retreat from the boardroom into the bedroom was also observable in one of the best Channel 4 drama serials of its first half-decade on the air: *What If It's Raining?* (1986), an Anthony Minghella piece about yuppie adultery.

One conclusion to be drawn from all this is that drama on television now offers roughly the same plot in packages for different brows. Middle-class sexual complication, for example, is served up for brows low (Andrea Newman's *A Sense Of Guilt*, 1990), middle (*Summer's Lease*) and high (*Take Me Home*).

It is notable that the bulk of the serials on public themes come from Channel 4, including last year's winner *A Very British Coup* and this year's nominee, *Traffik*. But an inescapable conclusion for anyone examining these nominations or any recent television drama is that virtually all of it is produced by the BBC. There are almost no single plays on ITV and, though Channel 4 has comendably started the Saturday night series *4 Play*, the only regular flow of dramas is from the corporation.

How safe are they under the future envisaged for broadcasting by the present government? Quality drama is ruinously expensive and watched by audiences which the authors of the white paper would regard as small. If the present system of funding goes, it is hard to see how dangerous, literate, critical writing will not be the first casualty.

If *Bomber Harris* does win the Bafta for Best Single Drama this year, it would be bitterly appropriate. Question: What's the similarity between the strategic bombing pioneered by Bomber Harris and Thatcherite plans for broadcasting?

Answer: They both aimed to take out all the important bits.