

Drama Out of a Crisis: a celebration of *Play for Today*

A 90-minute documentary to mark the series' 50th anniversary

Written and produced by John Wyver, Illuminations

In 300-plus single dramas made between October 1970 and August 1984 **Play for Today** engaged directly, brilliantly, uncompromisingly, entertainingly and in fundamentally innovative ways with the turbulent time that was Britain in the 1970s and early 1980s. And the series did so for audiences that regularly exceeded 5 million viewers.

These were the years in which the post-war consensus was torn apart by industrial conflict, inflation, racial tensions, rapidly changing sexual politics, the rise of the far right, the conflict in Northern Ireland, and, in the last years, the social policies of Margaret Thatcher's government.

In studio dramas and films made by, among many others, writers Dennis Potter, Trevor Griffiths, Paula Milne, Julia Jones, Colin Welland and Jim Allen, and directors Alan Clarke, Ken Loach, Philip Saville, John Mackenzie and Horace Ové, **Play for Today** was the heart of television's creative response to the nation's tribulations.

Drama Out of a Crisis is a compelling exploration of the series, and of its origins, achievements, controversies, quirks and legacies. It features an immensely rich and surprising range of archive extracts and original interviews restricted to participants in the series, including producers Kenith Trodd, Margaret Matheson, Tony Garnett and Richard Eyre together with major creatives like David Hare and Mike Leigh.



James Fox and Penelope Wilton in Trevor Griffiths' *Country* (1980)

The distinctiveness of **Drama Out of a Crisis** is achieved by creative and sometimes unconventional use of extracts, narration by a high-profile actor, imaginative graphics and a deeply informed analysis. This analysis rigorously avoids rosy-hued nostalgia while detailing the social and political context of the strand, its place in contemporary broadcasting, its close links with contemporary British theatre and its central importance as the birthplace of new British cinema.



Mike Leigh's *Abigail's Party* (1977) with Alison Steadman

Drama Out of a Crisis can also be extended in two key ways, to reach audiences beyond television and to ensure that the film has far more profile and impact than just another archive documentary.

From the moment of the film's commission the celebration of **Play for Today** can be a coordinated social media project, publishing a blog, running Twitter and Instagram accounts, working closely with existing BBC resources like the Archive Twitter feed and building an extensive online dialogue with academic and fan communities.

And the film can be central to a far broader cultural and educational initiative, developed with the BFI and other partners. Screenings of the plays (as well as **Drama Out of a Crisis**) together with related discussions can be organised at BFI Southbank, and at arts cinemas across the country. With detailed attention to rights and permissions (some of which were cleared for BBC Store), key plays can also be made available on BBC iPlayer, BFI Player, other streaming services and as DVD releases. And related to this can be the creation and provision to colleges and schools of online educational elements to prompt use of the plays in drama, literature, modern history and PSHE courses. Illuminations has extensive experience of such projects.

JOHN WYVER is uniquely well placed to write and produce **Drama Out of a Crisis**. He is an experienced producer who has worked extensively with archive television. As both a journalist and an academic, and as Professor of the Arts on Screen at the University of Westminster, he has written extensively about television drama, and its connections with British theatre and cinema. He led the AHRC-funded research project *Screen Plays* (2011-15), he has co-authored books about Trevor Griffiths and Dennis Potter, and has organised seasons of television drama for BFI Southbank, The Paley Centre for Media in New York and the American Film Institute in Los Angeles.

He also has an intimate personal involvement with this story. One of his most vivid teenage memories of television is of being scared stiff by John Bowen's *Play for Today: Robin Redbreast* (1970). He watched the series every Thursday evening through his A' levels and at university, and after his finals *Play for Today* was the topic about which he wrote in his successful application to become *Time Out's* Television Editor. From the autumn of 1977 he previewed each *Play for Today* for the magazine, interviewed many of the creators and visited the shoots of a number of the films, including Dennis Potter's *Blue Remembered Hills* and Stephen Frears' delightful *Long Distance Information* (both 1979).

He has good personal relationships with key figures in the story, including Kenith Trodd, Tony Garnett and Richard Eyre, and is confident that they will give him revealing and forthright interviews.



John McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1974)

Drama Out of a Crisis: Structure

The film has a loose chronological frame but is primarily conceived in distinct segments, some of which can be focussed on key writers or directors (Mike Leigh and Jack Rosenthal are prime candidates), but the majority of which are thematic and concerned with the ways in which **Play for Today** engaged with social and political. Possible segments are outlined below.



In addition, a small number of segments can act as interludes. **On This Island Then**, for example, is a montage of short extracts from films that feature, in passing, the look of everyday life in Britain nearly fifty years ago. **The Disappeared**, by contrast, recognises television's fragility by highlighting, with photographs and

graphics, the twenty-plus episodes of **Play for Today** of which no recording is known to exist. These include Simon Gray's *The Man in the Sidecar* (1971) directed by James MacTaggart and Alan Clarke's version of David Hare's *Man Above Men* (1973).

More substantively, the following are segments imagined to be 4-7 minutes long, with varied styles, interview contributions from those who took part, and where appropriate contextual news and current affairs footage as well as rare elements of 'behind the scenes' material.

Introducing...

An opening section signposting the riches to come and the reasons why **Play for Today** demands attention fifty years after its debut.

Beginners

The genesis of the series, from live television drama in the United States and Canada in the 1950s, through Sydney Newman's *Armchair Theatre* and Newman's move to the BBC, the Pilkington Report's directives to the BBC encouraging serious drama with a moral basis, then from 1964 *The Wednesday Play* and the re-naming of this series in 1970 as **Play for Today** when the schedules dictated a move to Thursday.

What About the Workers

A number of the key films in the strand focussed on industrial action: Jim Allen's *The Rank and File* (1971), based on the Pilkington Glass strike; Colin Welland's *Leeds United!* (1974); Barry Hines and Ken Loach's pair of films, *The Price of Coal* (1977), and, more unconventionally, Tom Clarke's *Stocker's Copper* (1972).

Stage Nights

Play for Today marks the transition for television drama from a grounding in theatre to a future in film, and innovative translations of stage plays provided a number of the most notable productions, including Lindsay Anderson's adaptation of David Storey's *Home* (1972), John McGrath's innovative *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1974), David Hare and Howard Brenton's *Brassneck* (1975), and – inevitably – Mike Leigh's *Abigail's Party* (1977).

The Nation's Health

Hospital and mental health institutions feature in a significant number of **Play for Today** productions, responding to changing understandings of healthcare: Roy Minton's *Funny Farm* (1975), directed by Alan Clarke; David Edgar's *Baby Blues* (1973); Trevor Griffiths' *Through the Night* (1975), Paula Milne's intensely personal *John David* (1982), and Alan Bennett's *Intensive Care* (1982).

What the Censors Saw

The major censorship rows associated with the strand were Dennis Potter's *Brimstone & Treacle* (1976, finally transmitted in 1987) and Roy Minton and Alan Clarke's *Scum* (1977, shown in 1991; also re-made as a feature film). Other productions that were the focus of official concern included several dealing with the war in Ireland.



North and South

The war in Ireland was never far from the concerns of **Play for Today**, and the treatment of the conflict and its underlying causes was dealt with in plays including *Taking Leave* (1974) by Joyce Neary, *Your Man from Six Counties* (1976) by Colin Welland; *The Legion Hall Bombing*

(1978) written by Caryl Churchill and directed by Roland Joffe; David Leland's unrelenting *Psy-Warriors* (1981), directed by Alan Clarke; plus Dominic Behan's little-known historical drama dealing with Unionist opposition to Home Rule in 1912, *Carson Country* (1972). Also, importantly, J. Graham Reid's *Billy* trilogy, which starred a young Kenneth Branagh.

Make It New

While many **Play for Today** titles used forms of social realism, there were key productions that explored fantasy, non-naturalism, experimental and occasionally just plain bonkers techniques: David Rudkin's *Penda's Fen* (1974), Alan Garner's *Red Shift* (1978), *The Flipside of Dominick Hide* (1980) and John McGrath's two-part CSO spectacular, *The Adventures of Frank* (1980)



After the War Was Over

The series consistently engaged with memories and understandings of World War Two, and the ways in which it shaped post-war England, including in Jack Rosenthal and Alan Parker's *The Evacuees* (1975), David Hare's *Licking Hitler* (1978), Ian McEwan's *The Imitation Game* (1980, left), and Trevor Griffiths'

masterpiece *Country* (1981), *Rainy Day Women* (1984), written by David Pirie, and Dennis Potter's *Blue Remembered Hills* (1979), which is set on a summer's day in 1943.

Ain't No Black in the Union Jack

... but **Play for Today** explored in many different forms questions of race and the ways in which Britain was failing to come to terms with a post-imperial world: In the *Beautiful Caribbean* (1972), David Edgar's *Destiny* (1978), Tom Clarke's *Victims of Apartheid* (1978), *Comedians* by Trevor Griffiths (1979), *A Hole in Babylon* (1979) by Horace Ové, and Barrie Keeffe's *King* (1984).

Gay Lives

Lesbian and gay stories are the focus of only a small number of **Play for Today** episodes, but these are indicative of the changing attitudes of the time: *The Other Woman* (1976) and James Andrew Hall's *Coming Out* (1979).

Small Screen Cinema

The mainstream British film industry was in the doldrums throughout the 1970s, and the best cinema was made for the small screen, in gems like Peter McDougall and John Mackenzie's *Just Another Saturday* (1975) and Neville Smith's *Long Distance Information* (1979), directed by Stephen Frears.

Austerity Measures

The social policies of the 1974-79 Labour government and of the government headed by Margaret Thatcher after 1979 were challenged on numerous occasions by *Play for Today*, including in two films written by Jim Allen and directed by Roland Joffe, *The Spongers* (1978, right) and *United Kingdom* (1981), as well as notably Alan Bleasdale's *The Black Stuff* (1980), commissioned for the strand but debuted separately, and his *The Muscle Market* (1981).



... And the Band Played On

The legacies of **Play for Today**, including those notable series spun off from original productions, including from *Rumpole of the Bailey* to *Gangsters* (both 1975) and of course *Boys from the Black Stuff*, as well as those series that continued its concerns and understandings of the world, through to *Our Friends in the North* and beyond. And Channel 4 took up the mantle of being the saviour of the British film industry, with Film Four and BBC Films today extending the astonishing achievement of **Play for Today**.

John Wyver, Illuminations
4 February 2019

john@illuminationsmedia.co.uk