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Peter Terson: The Artisan Playwright TV season at BFI Southbank in May 2012



BFI Southbank celebrates the work of **Peter Terson**, the playwright and television screenwriter who created some of the most deeply human and talked-about dramas of the 1960's and 70's working with directors including **Alan Clarke** and **Mike Newell**. The season will comprise of a selection of the television dramas commissioned by both **BBC** and **Granada** including **The Samaritan** (Sunday Night Theatre, Granada 1972) and **The Fishing Party** (Play for Today, BBC 1972) as well as the documentary **The Playwrights: Peter Terson**, (Thames 1976) and a panel discussion about his work with producer **David Rose** (BBC Playhouse), actor **Kenneth Cranham** (*Hot Fuzz*, *Valkyrie*) and writer **Shane Connaughton** (*My Left Foot*).

Though always maintaining an affectionate humour and poetic quality that is uniquely his own, **Peter Terson** is often said to belong to the same group of working-class playwrights as **Colin Welland** or **Alan Plater**, yet there is a darker psychological strain to his work that sometimes finds him closer to **Harold Pinter**.

Perhaps because he had no formal training, Terson's plays possess a wonderful lack of artifice. While he was learning his trade as resident dramatist at the famous Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, it was that venue's legendary director **Peter Cheeseman** who spotted Terson's incredible ear for the rhythms of everyday speech, describing him as '*a gloriously natural writer*'. In a wonderfully creative relationship, together they produced plays of great relevance to the local community with work such as **The Heroism of Thomas Chadwick**, filmed for television in ABC's Armchair Theatre strand by producer **Leonard White** in 1967.

During a long and fruitful collaboration with the National Youth Theatre, Terson was to write one of the definitive plays about football culture, **Zigger**

Zagger. Filmed for BBC Schools TV in 1975, it became an instant classic. Television producers soon realised that Terson's ability to write ordinary people with dialogue that flows like everyday speech and which effortlessly moves from humour to menace or the strangely enigmatic, was perfect for the single drama format of the 1960s, with its deliberate attempt to move away from the great drawing-room classics. Thus it was that with **The Wednesday Play: The Last Train Through Harecastle Tunnel** (BBC 1969) Terson begins to write specifically for television and in this case, for the great producer **Irene Shubik** and director **Alan Clarke**. Throughout the early 70s a stream of fascinating plays were commissioned by both Granada and the BBC, and what is so interesting is the breadth of their style and subject matter. Within a period of just four years, they range from dark, psychological explorations of the father-son power struggle in plays such as **Lost Yer Tongue** (Granada 1975) and **But Fred, Freud is Dead** (Granada, 1973), to the Pinteresque power games of **Dancing in the Dark** (Granada 1974) and **The Samaritan** (Granada 1972) and the easy humour and acute observation of **The Fishing Party** (BBC 1972). Certain themes become apparent – the dysfunctional family and in particular the uneasy relationship between father and son, the nature of control in any group dynamic, and the poetry in the soul of the working man that connects him back to the land and his northern roots. All this written with an earthy, honest humour, which in turn anchors Terson back to his strong sense of place.

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NOTES TO EDITORS

The Samaritan

Sunday Night Theatre. Granada 1972. Dir Derek Bennett. With Tom Bell, Kenneth Cranham, Martin Jarvis. 65 min

Working in collaboration with Michael Butler, Terson's ear for blistering dialogue enables Tom Bell to turn in a fantastically powerful performance as the bluff Yorkshireman arriving in a London flat share. Riddled with demons of his own, he soon destabilises the relationships in the flat, and what follows is a fascinating psychological game, reminiscent of Pinter in its dark and subtly-revealing twists. Martin Jarvis' character (working as a Samaritan) draws out the truth about our mysterious man from the north. Beautifully directed, this is acting for television at its finest.

+ The Ballad of Ben Bagot

Scene. BBC 1973. Dir Ronald Smedley. With Peter Firth, Clare Sutcliffe, Jack Shepherd. 25min

With his predilection for peppering his plays with literary references and poetic quotations, Terson was the perfect choice of author for this *Billy Liar* tale.

Seventeen-year-old Ben has thrown caution to the winds and left school behind, believing it to be inferior to his natural wit and intelligence. Prone to fantasy, he cannot see the true reality of his situation, trapped as he is by marriage and his wife's pregnancy. There is a refreshing energy in the free form of this made-for-schools production that still has the power to make us think.

Fri 4 May 18:20 NFT2

The Last Train Through Harecastle Tunnel

The Wednesday Play. BBC 1969. Dir Alan Clarke. With John LeMesurier, Angela Pleasence, Richard O'Callaghan. 80min

Produced by Irene Shubik and directed by Alan Clarke, this production has a terrific pedigree. Using the experiences of one trainspotter's weekend trip, Terson

introduces us to a variety of characters the protagonist meets on his progress – from the disenchanting army officer and the woman dissatisfied with the narrowness of her life to John Le Mesurier's enigmatic judge and his totally dysfunctional family. In short, a microcosm of British society is laid bare with Terson's trademark wit and dark humour.

+ Lost Yer Tongue?

Granada 1975. Dir Mike Newell. With Ronald Herdman, Robbie Pattinson, Lizzie McKenzie, Deirdre Costello. 52min

A recurrent theme in Terson's work, that of the troubled father-son relationship, is brilliantly dissected in this perfectly formed play. Bernie is a hard, self-made man with a mistress of 17 years and a long-suffering wife in poor health. He is sure of his world until a stranger beats him at snooker and revelations about his family force Bernie to reassess his own life and relationship with his father. Mike Newell's talents as a director are well in evidence even at this early stage of his career.

Wed 9 May 18:10 NFT2

The Fishing Party

Play for Today. BBC 1972. Dir Michael Simpson. With Brian Glover, Ray Mort, Douglas Livingstone. 57min

The characters Terson created for this play – Art, Ern and Abe, three loveable if naive miners – had an everyman quality that made them his most enduring and popular figures, and resulted in their further adventures in *Shakespeare or Bust* and, finally, *Three for the Fancy*. Each play used Terson's favourite device of taking characters outside their natural comfort zone, with the comic potential that this released. When the miners book in to a seaside hotel a cut above what they are used to, the result is a pitch-perfect and hilarious exposé of petty class prejudice enshrined in the intransigent rituals of the hotel and its formidable proprietor.

+ Discussion Panel & Q&A

We discuss Peter Terson's work – illustrated with clips from some rarely-seen plays – with producer David Rose, actor Kenneth Cranham (work permitting) and writer Shane Connaughton.

Wed 16 May 18:00 NFT3

Shakespeare or Bust

Play for Today. BBC 1973. Dir Brian Parker. With Brian Glover, Ray Mort, Douglas Livingstone 70min

The *Fishing Party* trio return: with Art in search of culture as he takes the lads on a canal trip to Stratford-upon-Avon in a quest to see the Bard's work at the Royal Shakespeare Company. Unfortunately his love of Shakespeare is not shared, and his mission looks doomed until a chance encounter leads to something magical. Terson once more manages to suffuse working-class culture with an inner poetry

+ Three for the Fancy

Play for Today. BBC 1974. Dir Matthew Robinson. With Brian Glover, Ray Mort, Douglas Livingstone. 52min

The final outing for Art, Ern and Abe sees them enter the strangely obsessive world of champion livestock breeding. Eternally optimistic, they never fully comprehend the reality around them – hence their hapless charm. Terson at his wryly observational best.

Wed 16 May 20:30 NFT3

Dancing in the Dark

Village Hall. Granada 1974. Dir Alan Gibson. With Michael Latimer, John Fraser, Mary Morris, Gordon Reid. 52min

When Granada commissioned a series of plays set around a village hall, they naturally turned to writers whose strengths were character and dialogue. Terson surprises us with his deep understanding of the psychology behind a provincial touring ballet company as he explores the tensions and dynamics of this world, as

well as the damaging nature of control within this rarified environment. Featuring a bravura performance from Mary Morris as the imperious Dame.

+ The Rough and the Smooth

Village Hall. Granada 1975.

Dir Alan Gibson. With Trevor Adams, Kenneth Cranham, Jan Francis, Christopher Guard.

52min

Less intense in tone but aching funny, and close to Alan Ayckbourn in its skilful use of observational dialogue, this play from the same series sees Terson turning his attention to the local badminton club. Riddled with gossip and internal tensions, the group is seriously undermined by the arrival of a blonde German bombshell. Watch out for another fine performance from Kenneth Cranham, one of the few actors to work on more than one Terson television play outside of the *Fishing Party* trilogy.

Tue 22 May 18:20 NFT2

But Fred, Freud is Dead

Granada 1973. Dir Derek Bennett. With David Swift, Pat Heywood, Colin Farrell. 64min

Having begun life at Peter Cheeseman's famous theatre-in-the-round at Stoke, this does occasionally betray its stage roots but, nevertheless, Terson here produces a powerful play that is part Ibsen and part Strindberg, set within the northern suburbs. Proving that amateur psychology is a dangerous game to play, Fred is obsessed with his sons' growing virility and constantly feels the need to prove himself. A fascinating, primeval exploration of father-son rivalry, shot through with Terson's wry humour

+ The Playwrights: Peter Terson

Thames 1976. Dir Gabrielle Beaumont. 24min

In this documentary series about playwrights, Benedict Nightingale talks to Peter Terson and the director who championed his work in the early years, Peter Cheeseman, to provide a revealing insight into a complex man and his work

Mon 28 May 21:00 NFT2

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