



NORTHERN VOICES

No Trams to Lime Street + The Hard Knock

One of the more original talents to emerge from the new wave of British playwrights in the late 1950s, Alun Owen (b. Menai Bridge, Anglesey, Wales, 1925. d. London, 1994) gave British television drama the distinctive shape it took in the 1960s.

Born in rural North Wales, of Welsh parents, his family moved to Liverpool when he was eight and he was brought up in that city. He served in the Merchant Navy and, later, worked for a couple of years in the coal mines as a 'Bevin Boy'. Following that he joined a northern repertory company as assistant stage manager.

His ambition, however, was to be an actor and, after an introduction to the stage through pantomime, he started with the Birmingham Repertory Company in the 1943-44 season. Thereafter he progressed to Sir Donald Wolfit's Shakespeare Company, the Old Vic Company and with the English Stage Company at the Royal Court.

By the mid-1950s he had small roles in films (*Valley of Song*, d. Gilbert Gunn, 1953), narrated Lindsay Anderson's Covent Garden Market life documentary *Every Day Except Christmas* (1957) and appeared in bit parts on television: *The Grove Family* (BBC), *The Granville Melodramas* (ITV), *The Adventures of the Scarlet Pimpernel* (ITV).

Although he enjoyed a spell as a comedian, doing bits in *The Dick Lester Show* (ITV), *Idiot Weekly, Price 2d* (ITV) and *Son of Fred* (ITV), the latter two series directed by Lester, and playing stooge to Arthur Askey in *Before Your Very Eyes* (ITV), it was becoming clear to him that writing was his true vocation.

His first scripts for the BBC were for radio: *Two Sons* in 1957, *It Looks Like Rain*, 1959. His first full-length play, *Progress to the Park*, about four friends who pass from youth to manhood during a warm summer weekend in Liverpool, began as a radio production, was staged in 1959 by Joan Littlewood at the Theatre Royal, Stratford, and at the Royal Court, before reaching the West End at the Saville in 1961.

Although his second play, *The Rough and Ready Lot*, dealing with Irish, Welsh and English guerrillas in 19th century South America, was presented on television (BBC, 1959) by director-producer Casper Wrede from an adaptation by Charles Lawrence, Owen's first work directly for the small screen was the highly successful, Liverpool-set slice-of-life drama *No Trams to Lime Street* (1959) for ABC's *Armchair Theatre* (ITV).

Owen followed with the popular *Armchair Theatre* productions *After the Funeral* (1960), an entertaining commentary on Welsh ancestry, *Lena, O My Lena* (1960), a pithy story of a naive Liverpool student and his love for a North Country factory girl, *The Ways of Love* (1961), starring Kenneth Haigh as a young Welsh writer discovering literary fame in London, and *The Hard Knock* (1962), revolving around a tough Liverpool merchant seaman; all directed by the proficient William (Ted) Kotcheff.

In 1963 Owen returned to acting, briefly, as the curate in Joseph Losey's account of patrician degradation, *The Servant* (1963), from a script by his old friend Harold Pinter. Some three years earlier Owen had written the screenplay (from a Jimmy Sangster storyline) for Losey's *The Criminal* (1960), a gritty picture of English prison life.

When American producer Walter Shenson was assigned to produce the first Beatles film, *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), he brought in Dick Lester as director. Lester, in turn, hired Owen to write the screenplay that, in its frantic combination of music, fashion culture and madcap humour, established the notion of 'Swinging London' in the middle 1960s. Owen also wrote the 'book' for Lionel Bart's boisterous musical story of Liverpool's dockland, *Maggie May*, which opened at London's Adelphi Theatre in September 1964.

In 1965 BBC2's prestigious *Theatre 625* presented Owen's trilogy of Liverpool-Welsh plays in which, for the most part, an emotional journey ends in anticlimax: *Progress to the Park*, *No Trams to Lime Street* and *A Little Winter Love*. For producer Stella Richman's Rediffusion series *Half Hour Story* (ITV), Owen wrote *Shelter* (1967), *George's Room* (1967) and *Stella* (1968), all directed by Alan Clarke. He also composed three comedy scripts for Rediffusion's *The Ronnie Barker Playhouse* (ITV, 1968), a David Frost executive-produced showcase for the multi comic character talents of the always-dependable Barker.

In 1969, in an attempt to revive the television single drama, a series of self-contained plays was devised by the various ITV companies under the collective banner *Saturday Night Theatre* (ITV). For ATV's contribution to this collection, Owen wrote the triangular love story *Park People* (1969), followed by a trilogy of half-hour plays introduced by Sir Laurence Olivier: *MacNeil* (1969), starring Sean Connery as a womanising master carpenter, *Cornelius* (1969), with Michael Caine as a concupiscent cockney draughtsman, and *Emlyn* (1969), featuring Paul Scofield as an amorous barrister.

A later work, the six-part Yorkshire Television serial *Forget-Me-Not* (ITV, 1976), featuring a couple of modern-minded women journalists in a Fleet Street newspaper setting, was, unfortunately, considered a resounding flop. He made a rare return to acting in the second series of the psychiatric hospital drama *Maybury* (BBC), playing an unemployed Scottish welder on the brink of madness in Shane Connaughton's three-part story 'Alice' (1983).

Among Owen's last works for television were the adaptations *Unexplained Laughter* (1989) for *The Play on One* (BBC), a dark comedy from the novel by Welsh writer Alice Thomas Ellis, starring Diana Rigg and Elaine Paige as a couple of friends sharing a remote holiday cottage retreat in Wales, and the three-part lust-and-greed drama set in 1930s Wales, *Come Home Charlie and Face Them* (ITV, 1990), from the novel by R.F. Delderfield.

It has been observed that as a television playwright Owen had the remarkable talent for being able to write idiomatic dialogue that, while sounding authentic, was actually carefully constructed heightened realism. As one of the leading voices of 1960s British television, when it was a writers' medium, it was appropriate that his last television appearance was as an interviewee for presenter Richard Lester on the documentary *Hollywood UK: British Cinema in the Sixties* (BBC, 1993), a five-part series charting the fluctuation of British films and filmmakers (as well as television) during that decade.

Tise Vahimagi, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

THE WEDNESDAY PLAY: NO TRAMS TO LIME STREET

Director: Piers Haggard
Production Company: BBC
Producer: Harry Moore
Book by: Alun Owen
Designer: Marilyn Taylor
Music and Lyrics: Marty Wilde, Ronnie Scott
Music Arranged and Conducted by: Ken Woodman
Choreography: David Toguri

Cast

Anthony May (*Billy*)
Rosemary Nicols (*Betty*)
Glyn Owen (*Old Cass*)
Paul Greenwood (*Cass*)
Eilian Wyn (*Taff*)
Arthro Morris (*the chief*)
Julia Hand (*barmaid*)
Gerard Hely (*sergeant*)

BBC1 tx 18.3.1970
50 mins

ARMCHAIR THEATRE: THE HARD KNOCK

Director: Ted Kotcheff
Production Company: ABC Television
Producer: Sydney Newman
Script: Alun Owen
Designer: Timothy O'Brien

Cast

Colin Blakely (*Pat Greevey*)
J.G. Devlin (*Da Greevey*)
Frank Finlay (*Franco Angelo*)
Sylvia Kay (*Mary Greevey*)
Ronald Lacey (*Trevor Williams*)
Lynne Furlong (*Lil*)
Lois Daine (*April*)
Kenneth Keeling (*fat man 1*)
Anthony Cundell (*fat man 2*)
Alison Bayley (*Ma Greevey*)
Coral Atkins (*Rita*)
Alan Barry (*Derek*)
Angela Douglas (*Angela*)
Jill Tilsley (*barmaid*)

ITV tx 8.7.1962
56 mins

NORTHERN VOICES**In Celebration**

Mon 27 Mar 20:30; Sun 23 Apr 18:10

Northern Soul

Thu 30 Mar 18:15; Sat 15 Apr 20:40

The Wednesday Play: No Trams to Lime Street

+ **Armchair Theatre: The Hard Knock**

Fri 31 Mar 18:20

Of Time and the City

Sat 1 Apr 20:40; Tue 18 Apr 18:20

Saturday Night Theatre: Roll On Four O'Clock

+ **Play for Today: Kisses at 50**

Tue 4 Apr 18:10

Billy Liar

Thu 6 Apr 20:30; Fri 14 Apr 18:15; Thu 27 Apr 20:50

Letter to Breznev

Fri 7 Apr 18:20; Thu 20 Apr 20:50

Priest

Sat 8 Apr 20:40

The Arbor

Tue 11 Apr 20:40; Sun 30 Apr 14:30

Play for Today: Comedians

Sat 15 Apr 15:15

Play for Today: The Land of Green Ginger

+ **Armchair Theatre: The Pity of it All**

Sun 16 Apr 15:20

Rita, Sue and Bob Too

Sun 16 Apr 18:30; Sun 30 Apr 12:10

Northern Voices Forum

Sun 23 Apr 15:00

Laughter from Liverpool + intro

Sat 29 Apr 14:50

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