



**NORTHERN VOICES**

# Roll On Four O'Clock + Kisses at Fifty

## Colin Welland on writing for television

Most television viewers remember Colin Welland as the toothy, down-to-earth P.C. Graham of *Z-Cars*, the BBC series which began in the mid-Sixties.

*Z-Cars*, with its then freshly minted documentary realism, tried to show life as it was in a contemporary Britain (and not how it might be, or never was) within the limits of a police series formula. It was the ideal finishing school for aspiring television writers, including such now established writers as John Hopkins, John McGrath and Alan Plater. Welland himself has at least four major television plays to his credit – *Bangelstein's Boys* (1969), *Roll On Four O'Clock* (1970), *Kisses at Fifty* (1973) and *Leeds United!* (1974).

It is too easy to pigeonhole his plays as 'slices of life' in the naturalistic mainstream which is the dominant aesthetic of television drama, though this certainly explains part of their appeal to a popular audience as well as to critics. Welland is a superb recorder of life in his Northern background (he was born in Lancashire and has lived in Leeds), with its bawdiness and exuberance and viciousness. But he also has the Dickensian virtues – not only a delight in people's foibles and follies as expressed in individual speech and action, but also the ability to manipulate and heighten received reality (or rather versions of reality) for dramatic purpose. To this end, Welland calculatedly integrates the licence of the dramatist with the freedom of television and its multiple techniques.

*How did you start writing for television?*

CW: As far as my drama education is concerned, the only modern plays I had any contact with were the plays of Shaw, *Saint Joan* and so on. This was as far as my grammar school GCE drama took me. I hadn't really come across any contemporary playwrights until I became an actor, and the first play I acted in was *The Birthday Party*. It took me completely by surprise to find myself learning and actually speaking language which you hear spoken every day. And not only was it everyday language, it was also vibrant and exciting and just as aesthetically satisfying as Shaw or Shakespeare. I was fascinated just sitting in a café and hearing it all around me, just how inventive ordinary speech is. And immediately I started writing plays, right from that early brush with Pinter. That was about 14 years ago.

The first play I wrote was called *The Room Orderly*, about National Service. It never saw the light of day, of course. And then a children's stage play, which also never saw the light of day. Then I went into *Z-Cars*, and of course I

couldn't resist having a go at *Z-Cars*. So I wrote two *Z-Cars* scripts, which were bought-and never saw the light of day. When I finished in *Z-Cars*, I was out of work, so I wrote a half-hour television play called *Say Goodnight to Your Grandma*. I sent it off, and a script editor sent it back saying, 'Very good, Colin,' patronising an actor trying to have a go at writing, 'but your characters are so real they're inclined to be boring.' So I put that one away. Then Ken Loach said, 'Why don't you write something about what you really know about, something nobody else has ever written about?'

So I wrote *Bangelstein's Boys* as a stage play – Ken was going to direct it at the Grand Theatre, Leeds, except that when the backers read it they were so horrified by the language that they refused to put up the money. So Ken Loach took it along to the BBC's *Play for Today*, where it languished for two years. Then Kestrel Films was formed to produce films and television plays. London Weekend Television commissioned Kestrel to make 12 television plays, and the first one Kenith Trodd produced was *Bangelstein's Boys*. We made it as a film, a television film. It was well received, and from there I've just carried on, writing about events which to me matter to the ordinary person.

What amazes me about people is that they live in such small worlds, the walls which surround their lives are so very close to them, and what happens within that little compound is just as important or emotionally stimulating or anger-arousing as anything on a larger scale. For instance, in a pub I go to there's trouble at the moment because of a mess-up about a Christmas domino handicap – putting new people on the highest handicap because they don't know them, whereas the regulars think they should be scratch because *they* don't know them – and that domino handicap is as important to them as something on a much larger scale is to people in as it were the outside world. A lot of my plays are about the energies that can be roused by people just living out their lives, communicating with the people around them, the effects certain events are going to have on them, what their neighbours will say and so on. It's that sort of chemistry on a small scale which can generate the emotional drive and power of a political play.

*That's especially true of Bangelstein's Boys and Slattery's Mounted Foot.*

It's true of those plays, and it's true of *Kisses at Fifty*, which is about the effect a man's leaving his wife has on his circle of friends, his pub and everything around him. And *Say Goodnight to Your Grandma* ... it looks so innocent just taking your baby to see your mother-in-law, but what happens is horrifying. Then *Jack Point* was about the political intrigues of replacing an older actor with a younger actor.

*Your plays are generally set in communities-families, pubs, clubs.*

Because that's where people are forthcoming. That's where I get most of my information from – the community centres. Pubs and clubs and so on are such an integral part of the sort of people I like and work with and write about that they always seem to turn up in my plays.

*Your first television play was originally written for the stage. How closely did you work with the director when it was being adapted for television?*

I had done three years on *Z-Cars* as an actor. That was live, so I did know the whole vocabulary of television. Luckily the play was written in a very televisual style – songs, and lots of short scenes, and so on. I had seen *Oh, What a Lovely War* and that had affected me tremendously. So it did convert very easily, it wasn't a straightforward proscenium play. But what did happen was something that has happened with every play, which is that the producer and director have been involved from the very concept. When I was researching *Leeds United!* in Leeds, the producer, Kenith Trodd, and the director, Roy Battersby, were up there working with me. We think of the director as part of the thing right from the beginning.

*So you take an idea rather than a script to a producer.*

Always. And to the producer who seems right for a particular idea. One producer is right for a studio-based, small cast play, another for something larger and more spread out, like *Roll On Four O'Clock*.

*Which of your television plays are you happiest with?*

I used to think *Roll On Four O'Clock* was the best I've done, but the one I got most kick out of was *Leeds United!*. It had its flaws, but it was something that no other television service in the world would have made. It was a real achievement to get that play on at all.

The one thing I'd say about writing for television is that I think realism has had its day. Something else has got to happen now, something more imaginative. I think *Leeds United!* was the ultimate in realism. Nobody is going to get away again with 15 extras pretending to be 500. *Leeds United!* signalled the end of documentary realism. It was a great watershed for me. I don't think I want to write realistically again. Not that what I've written has ever been really realistic, not flat Leach-type realism. But I'd like to put a bit of the theatre magic into television. Not kid yourself that it's really happening, but saying, 'It's not happening, but by God we can make you believe that it is – or can we, because it isn't really.'

**Paul Madden and David Wilson, 'The Communal Touch: The Television Plays of Colin Welland', *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1975**

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**SATURDAY NIGHT THEATRE: ROLL ON FOUR O'CLOCK**

*Directed by:* Roy Battersby  
*Production Company:* Granada Television  
*Producer:* Kenith Trodd  
*Script:* Colin Welland  
*Photography:* David Wood, Mike Whittaker, Charles Stewart  
*Editor:* Alan J. Cumner-Pryce  
*Designer:* Peter Caldwell  
*Music:* Bernard Wrigley  
*Recording:* Harry Brooks  
*Dubbing:* Tony Anscombe  
*Cast:*  
George A. Cooper (*Ted Crampton*)  
Bill Dean (*Arthur Foster*)  
Colin Edwynn (*Alan Johnson*)  
Frank Heaton (*Peter Latimer*)  
Arthur Lambert (*Reg Harris*)  
John Malcolm (*Tom Rathbone*)  
Tony Melody (*Jack Scott*)  
Tom O'Connor (*Bill Webley*)  
Jack Shepherd (*John Youngman*)  
Clive Swift (*Max Fielder*)  
Kenneth Watson (*Philip Staines*)  
Colin Welland (*Lennie Brown*)  
Geoffrey Whitehead (*Roy Gifford*)

ITV tx 19.12.1970  
57 mins

**PLAY FOR TODAY: KISSES AT FIFTY**

*Directed by:* Michael Apted  
*Production Company:* BBC  
*Producer:* Graeme McDonald  
*Script Editor:* Ann Scott  
*[Written] By:* Colin Welland  
*Film Cameraman:* Elmer Cossey  
*Lighting:* Dave Sydenham  
*Film Editor:* David Naden  
*Designer:* Stuart Walker  
*Songs by:* The Oldham Tinkers  
*Sound:* Chick Anthony  
*Cast:*  
Bill Maynard (*Harry*)  
Rosemarie Dunham (*Rene*)  
Marjorie Yates (*Audrey*)  
Lori Wells (*Sandra*)  
Maureen Callaghan (*Helen*)  
James Hazeldine (*Chris*)  
Robert Booth (*Keith*)  
Andrew Beaumont (*Kevin*)  
Christine Mountain (*Lorraine*)  
John Comer (*George*)  
Paul Luty (*Terry*)  
Ted Carroll (*mate*)  
Pat Wallis (*Flo*)  
Elizabeth Dawn (*Enid*)  
Christine Buckley (*Winnie*)  
John Alderson (*Audrey's husband*)  
Kathy Proctor (*social security clerk*)  
David Bradley (*policeman*)  
Bernard Atha (*social security man*)\*  
Fred McNaughton (*vicar*)\*  
Peter Russell \*

BBC1 tx 22.1.1973  
68 mins

\* Uncredited

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**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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