

13/12

Classics on TV: Jacobean Tragedy on the Small Screen

With Dame Diana Rigg & Artistic Director of the RSC Gregory Doran onstage



Launching on March 25 and continuing throughout April at **BFI Southbank** will be a season of **Jacobean Tragedy** plays which have been adapted for the small screen. Television has only occasionally tackled the extremes of vengeance, violence and sexuality so central to Jacobean tragedy, and this season will include rare screenings of powerful productions such as **Tis Pity She's A Whore** (BBC 1980), **The Duchess of Malfi** (BBC, 1972) and **The Changeling** (BBC, 1993). The season also provides a chance to see luminaries of the stage and screen in some of their early roles, including **Eileen Atkins**, **Helen Mirren**, **Elizabeth McGovern** and **Bob Hoskins**. The season will begin with a screening of **Women Beware Women** (Granada, 1965), which will be followed by a panel discussion featuring the star of that particular production, **Dame Diana Rigg**, as well as the **Artistic Director of the RSC, Gregory Doran**. Along with producer and season curator **John Wyver** (whose credits include recent TV adaptations of *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*) they will discuss Jacobean Tragedy on television and the significance of these great neglected plays, which are as relevant and as powerful today as they were in the world of James I.

While British television has sustained a strong – and largely reverential – relationship with the plays of our ‘national poet’ **William Shakespeare**, the dark and psychologically complex dramas written by **Thomas Middleton**, **John Webster** and **John Ford** in the decades just after the Bard’s pre-eminence have enjoyed far fewer adaptations. The murky worlds of revenge tragedy, full of murder, sin, madness and scenes of carnage have attracted some of television’s most accomplished and original directors and actors. Written in 1599, *Hamlet* is not strictly Jacobean, but it arguably provided the template for the revenge tragedies that would follow, therefore included in the season will be a screening of **Philip Saville’s Hamlet at Elsinore** (BBC-DR, 1964). The production is the earliest of

television's location-shot classic dramas and was filmed at the site in Denmark that Shakespeare imagined for its action. **James MacTaggart** also took multiple outside broadcast cameras to an authentically Jacobean location to frame John Webster's compelling drama *The Duchess of Malfi* (BBC, 1972), starring the magnificent Eileen Atkins in the titular role. Also screening will be the most recent presentation of a non-Shakespearean drama on television, *The Changeling* (BBC, 1993) starring Elizabeth McGovern and Bob Hoskins. Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's 1622 play focuses on an affair between the beautiful aristocrat Beatrice-Joanna and the facially disfigured arriviste De Flores. Following this screening will be a 20-minute extract from **Play of the Month: The Changeling** (BBC 1974). Directed by Anthony Page, Helen Mirren and Stanley Baker offer a fascinating contrast to McGovern and Hoskins in their differing approaches to acting Jacobean drama. **Roland Joffé** transported John Ford's incest drama **'Tis Pity She's a Whore** (BBC, 1980) to a Victorian setting, then shot it employing the techniques of a 1970s social-realist film and with the passion of a contemporary response to Thatcherism. Meanwhile **Women Beware Women** (Granada, 1965) provides an effective studio adaptation of Thomas Middleton's drama of illicit desire, starring Diana Rigg. Retitled **Compulsion** (Size 9 Productions-ITV, 2009) *The Changeling's* modern resonances are made explicit in **Joshua St Johnston's** adaptation, directed by **Sarah Harding**, updating it to the Asian community of 21st-century London. An exceptionally polished and provocative adaptation, the film brings the spirit of self-destruction in Jacobean tragedy to contemporary primetime drama.

Programmed in association with **Screen Plays: Theatre Plays on British Television**, an AHRC-funded research project from the School of Media, Arts and Design, University of Westminster.

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Screenings taking place in the season:

Women Beware Women

Blood and Thunder. Granada 1965. Dir Gordon Flemyng. With Diana Rigg, William Gaunt, Gene Anderson, Karin Fernald. 73min.

'A thundering production,' wrote Mary Crozier in the *Guardian* about this tightly effective studio adaptation of Thomas Middleton's drama of illicit desire. There had been no modern staging before a 1962 Royal Shakespeare Company presentation, so this was a bold choice for Granada. Diana Rigg stars, just before she debuted as *The Avengers'* Emma Peel, and Gordon Flemyng's cameras make the most of grilles, screens and staircases to conjure a rich visual style for the fiercely melodramatic action.

+ Panel & Q&A

We are delighted to welcome a panel including **Dame Diana Rigg** and the Artistic Director of the RSC, **Gregory Doran**, to discuss Jacobean tragedy on television. Illustrated with clips from such works as the rarely seen *Women Beware Women* (BBC-Open University 1981), the session will be chaired by producer and season curator John Wyver, whose recent TV credits include *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*.

Mon 25 Mar 18:10 NFT3

Hamlet at Elsinore

BBC-DR1964. Dir Philip Saville. With Christopher Plummer, Robert Shaw, Michael Caine, Roy Kinnear. 170min

Made with outside broadcast cameras recording to videotape, this ambitious version of Shakespeare's play (written in 1599, and so not strictly Jacobean but arguably providing the template for those revenge tragedies to follow) employs settings in and around Kronborg castle to brilliant effect. Marlon Brando turned down the lead, but Christopher Plummer delivers an impressively deranged and hesitant Prince. There are many moments (not least for 'To be or not to be') when Philip Saville demonstrates his mastery, and there are a decent number of laughs too, notably from Roy Kinnear's grave-digger cameo.

Mon 1 Apr 16:00 NFT2

The Duchess of Malfi

Stage 2. BBC 1972. Dir James MacTaggart. With Eileen Atkins, TP McKenna, Charles Kay, Michael Bryant. 123min

James MacTaggart makes dazzling use of the rooms, staircases, doorways and fireplaces of Chastleton House to reveal the complexities, both personal and political, of John Webster's masterpiece. The play was written c1612, the year that Chastleton was completed, and the production achieves an appropriately elaborate and detailed Jacobean style while avoiding picture-book spectacle. Delivering the verse with respectful intelligence, Eileen Atkins is quietly magnificent as the tragic Duchess and Michael Bryant is pitch-perfect as the scheming servant Bosola.

Wed 10 Apr 18:20 NFT2

The Changeling

Performance. BBC 1993. Dir Simon Curtis. With Elizabeth McGovern, Bob Hoskins, Hugh Grant, Leslie Phillips. 92min

Playwright Michael Hastings adapted Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's 1622 play and ruthlessly excised the asylum sub-plot. The cuts tighten the focus on the transgressive affair between the beautiful aristocrat Beatrice-Joanna and the facially disfigured arriviste De Flores. A poised performance from Elizabeth McGovern and a brave and daring embrace of his role by Bob Hoskins are key reasons to see what is, after 20 years, television's most recent presentation of a non-Shakespearean early modern drama. Plus a 20-minute extract from **Play of the Month: The Changeling** (BBC 1974): As directed by Anthony Page, Helen Mirren and Stanley Baker offer a fascinating contrast to McGovern and Hoskins in their differing approaches to acting Jacobean drama.

Fri 26 Apr 18:20 NFT2

Compulsion

Size 9 Productions-ITV 2009. Dir Sarah Harding. With Parminder Nagra, Ray Winstone, Ben Aldridge. 93min

Inspired by Rowley and Middleton's *The Changeling*, Joshua St Johnston's screenplay is set in modern-day London. Anjika is the daughter of a wealthy Indian businessman who seeks help from family chauffeur Don Flowers (De Flores in the original play) to avoid an arranged marriage. Flowers' obsession prompts a demand for sexual favours in return. An exceptionally polished and provocative adaptation, the film brings the spirit of self destruction in Jacobean tragedy to contemporary primetime drama. Plus an extract from

The Changeling (Granada 1965. Dir Derek Bennett. With Derek Godfrey, Kika Markham, Hal Hamilton. 20min)

Mon 29 Apr 18:20 NFT2

'Tis Pity She's a Whore

Play for Today. BBC 1980. Dir Roland Joffé. With Cherie Lunghi, Tim Pigott-Smith, Kenneth Cranham. 135min

In the 1970s Roland Joffé directed some of television's finest social-realist films, and he applied the approach to this truly remarkable version of John Ford's drama. A tale of

incestuous passion written around 1629 is translated to the early Victorian period and turned to critique the sexual and economic hypocrisies of the 19th century – and of the first years of Thatcherism. As for *The Duchess of Malfi*, the location is Chastleton House, but cinematographer Nat Crosby's austere beautiful images give to this radical adaptation a style that is unique among stage plays on the small screen.

Thu 18 Apr 18:20 NFT2

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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