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**An Intimate and Intermedial Form: Early Television Shakespeare  
from the BBC, 1937-39**

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**An intimate and intermedial form:  
early television Shakespeare from the BBC, 1937-39**

In the twenty-seven months between February 1937 and April 1939 the fledgling BBC television service from Alexandra Palace broadcast more than twenty Shakespeare adaptations.<sup>1</sup> The majority of these productions were short programmes featuring ‘scenes from...’ the plays, although there were also substantial adaptations of *Othello* (1937), *Julius Caesar* (1938), *Twelfth Night* and *The Tempest* (both 1939) as well as a presentation of David Garrick’s 1754 version of *The Taming of the Shrew, Katharine and Petruchio* (1939). There were other Shakespeare-related programmes as well, and the playwright himself appeared in three distinct historical dramas. In large part because no recordings exist of these transmissions (or of any British television Shakespeare before 1955), these ‘lost’ adaptations have received little scholarly attention. In this article I explore the traces that remain of these pre-war broadcasts, paying particular attention to *Scenes from Cymbeline*, *Macbeth* and *Othello* (all 1937) as well as *Katharine and Petruchio*. The surviving records include scripts and production notes preserved in the BBC Written Archives Centre (WAC) at Caversham, listings and articles in *Radio Times*, and reviews and recollections. I also outline the the production environment and cultural context for interwar television Shakespeare, and detail some of the intermedial connections of these productions with the theatre, radio and the cinema of the 1930s.

Pre-war television Shakespeare in Britain features only minimally in the extensive literature focussed on small-screen adaptations of the plays. In his foundational *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television*, Kenneth Rothwell gave brief details of certain pre-war productions and quoted from a small number of contemporary reviews. Critical analysis of these broadcasts, however, has been limited because all television drama until the mid-1950s was played live before electronic cameras, and in the medium’s

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<sup>1</sup> Research for this article was undertaken as part of AHRC-funded Screen Plays: Theatre Plays on British Television research project at the University of Westminster.

first decade recording technology had not been invented. The first BBC television Shakespeare production of which even a partial archival copy is preserved is the 1955 studio production of *Romeo and Juliet* with Tony Britton and Virginia McKenna as the lovers.<sup>2</sup> This was captured using the recently introduced technique of tele-recording, which involved filming the screen of an electronic monitor on which the live broadcast was being shown. Tele-recordings exist of a number of BBC productions from the 1950s, including *Othello* (1955) directed by Tony Richardson, and *The Life of Henry V* (1957) with John Neville as the king. By the mid-1960s videotape recording was also being utilised widely, although some later broadcasts have also been lost, including the second half of the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1968 staging by John Barton of *All's Well That Ends Well* and *The Tempest* (1968, BBC) with Michael Redgrave as Prospero.

Writing about the first years of television drama, John Caughie has suggested that the lack of recordings 'makes the recovery of the early history of television form and style an archaeological, rather than a strictly historical procedure.'<sup>3</sup> In his book *The Intimate Screen: Early British Television Drama*, Jason Jacobs developed just such an archaeological study, acknowledging that the WAC resources were central to his work. 'This *written* archive,' Jacob detailed, 'provided programme and policy information—studio plans, camera scripts, memos, etc. - which was invaluable in the process of reconstructing the visual sense of early television drama [emphasis in original].'<sup>4</sup> Jacobs noted that other published sources were also important, including reviews and criticism published in *Radio Times*, *The Listener* and *BBC Quarterly*. He was more sceptical about the use of stills, because 'the vast majority of them are production stills, presumably taken during camera rehearsals'<sup>5</sup>, but such images can nonetheless offer useful information as well as a resonant visual

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<sup>2</sup> The BUFVC *Shakespeare* database is an exceptional resource for information about all BBC television adaptations, including whether or not an archival copy is known to exist; <http://bufvc.ac.uk/shakespeare/>

<sup>3</sup> John Caughie, 'Before the Golden Age: Early Television Drama', in John Corner, ed., *Popular Television in Britain* (London 1991), pp. 24-5.

<sup>4</sup> Jason Jacobs, *The Intimate Screen: Early British Television Drama* (Oxford 2000), p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Jacobs, p. 5.

sense of the moment. Technical manuals, anecdotal and biographical sources and oral history interviews can also be valuable for the interrogation of this period of television drama.

These traces from the period reveal key concerns about the new medium, including the importance of 'live-ness' and a sense of 'intimacy'. 'The live immediacy of television is its defining characteristic,' Jacobs wrote of the ways in the medium was discussed in these years. Moreover, 'television is a medium of "intimacy"; it is the delivery of images to the private domestic sphere..., and the visual "closeness" described by the television close-up, that are the characteristic features of television.'<sup>6</sup> One aspect of this 'intimacy' is demonstrated by the way in which two or three actors in early television broadcasts are invariably bunched together in publicity photographs, grouped in such a way as to be visible most effectively to the studio cameras with their narrow fields of vision and minimal depth of focus. John Caughie has argued that 'the absence of expressive *mise en scene* and editing - the absence, in other words, of "style"' in this period 'was the logical aesthetic of a technology whose essence was conceived in terms of immediacy, relay and the "live".'<sup>7</sup> Pre-war television was also a profoundly *intermedial* form that was shaped in significant ways by radio, by the theatre and to an extent by the cinema of the time. The only models available to television producers were those of pre-existing forms of performance, and throughout the writings of both practitioners and commentators, early television is constantly compared with radio, theatre and cinema. Recalling his earliest BBC television broadcasts from Alexandra Palace, the service's programme planner Cecil Madden, who had been a theatre playwright, wrote,

The only technique I knew was of the stage, so I divided up the studio into three stages behind one another, separated by curtains. The three cameras were placed roughly in line but at different heights... We played an act on stage one, then the curtains parted and cameras moved on to stage two, and then again to stage three. It worked quite well, saved time, was continuous, since

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<sup>6</sup> Jacobs, p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> Caughie, p. 32.

cameras could not cut as in films and as television can cut today. Only fades could take one camera to another.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, like most television producers, Madden was dissatisfied by the reliance on stage techniques. 'I wanted to create something that would be pure television, owing nothing to stage or films,' he wrote in his memoirs.<sup>9</sup>

Radio was the other determining medium on early television, and the new form's presentation of Shakespeare extended, as it did in many other contexts, BBC radio's dramatisations of the plays. The first radio transmission of a Shakespeare scene appears to have been almost exactly fourteen years before the first extract from the plays on television. Although the account is disputed, the invariably accurate BBC Programme Record details that a broadcast on 16 February 1923 from Marconi House in London's Strand via the 2LO transmitter included the "tent scene" (Julius Caesar, 4:3) with Shayle Gardner and Hubert Carter.<sup>10</sup> By the end of 1923, in addition to further transmissions of excerpts, some accompanied by critical commentary from Professor Cyril Brett, producer Cathleen Nesbit had adapted and broadcast full-length productions of *Twelfth Night* (in which she took the role of Viola), *The Merchant of Venice*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In 1936, the year of the start of the television service, BBC radio broadcast six full-length Shakespeare plays, including a version of B. Iden Payne's Shakespeare Memorial Theatre production of *Much Ado About Nothing*. Various excerpts were also broadcast, with a programme on 9 July featuring scenes from Robert Atkins' Open Air Theatre presentation of *As You Like It* with Margaretta Scott, a production that the following year would also feature in television's first such broadcast.

Central to the production of early Shakespeare on radio, as was also be the case for the first television broadcasts of the plays, were relationships with the

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<sup>8</sup> Cecil Madden, *Starlight Days: The Memoirs of Cecil Madden*, ed. Jennifer Lewis, (London 2007), p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Madden, p. 89.

<sup>10</sup> See BUFVC, 'Scenes from Shakespeare [16/02/1923]', *Shakespeare* database, <http://bufvc.ac.uk/shakespeare/index.php/title/av37818>; accessed 5 October 2014.

London theatre of the day. Several of the earliest television broadcasts were derived from contemporary stagings, as is explored below, and actors invariably had extensive theatre experience. In 1964 J. C. Trewin offered a summary of the state of Shakespeare in the capital during television's pre-war years:

From 1933 until the war an addict could usually get a London performance somewhere: at the Old Vic for eight months of the year...; at the Open Air Theatre in Regent's Park during the summer; and frequently, at any season, in the West End, which had in seven years a mixed score of revivals.<sup>11</sup>

Trewin despaired at the lack of accomplished Shakespeare in the provinces throughout the 1930s, and he felt that the achievement of the Festival company in Stratford-upon-Avon was mixed at best. Describing the 1937 season there, Trewin wrote of 'the Sargasso weed of Memorial Theatre conservatism.'<sup>12</sup> For Trewin the most consistent centre of Shakespeare performance was the Old Vic, where producer Tyrone Guthrie and others could regularly call on actors of the calibre of Laurence Olivier and Ralph Richardson, both of whom appeared in early television broadcasts.

Although John Logie Baird had organised experimental television broadcasts in Britain from May 1932 to September 1935, regular transmissions began on 2 November 1936 from two small BBC studios at Alexandra Palace. Just prior to this, broadcasts had been made from Alexandra Palace to the annual 'Radio Show' exhibition at Olympia. In what *The Times* described as 'the first organised television programmes in this country' a mixed programme of variety, comedy, newsreels and film excerpts was broadcast solely for the exhibition twice daily between 26 August and 5 September.<sup>13</sup> Among the half-hour compilation of excerpts from feature films was a scene with Elisabeth Bergner and Laurence Olivier from director Paul Czinner's movie *As You Like It*, which was released on 3 September. *As You Like It* was also the play chosen for the first known British television broadcast of Shakespeare. Three months after the

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<sup>11</sup> J. C. Trewin, *Shakespeare on the English Stage 100-1964* (London 1964), p. 144.

<sup>12</sup> Trewin, p. 172.

<sup>13</sup> *The Times*, 'First television broadcast', 26 August 1936.

start of the regular television service, in the afternoon of 5 February 1937, Act 3 Scene 2 of the play was given in an 11-minute transmission with Margaretta Scott as Rosalind and Ion Swinley as Orlando. When the service began it could be received by just a few hundred viewers who lived close to the transmitter at Alexandra Palace, and the range had hardly been extended by the time the service closed down at the start of World War Two. By this point, however, the number of predominantly middle-class viewers (for the sets were expensive) had risen to perhaps 30,000. Initially, there was an hour of programmes in the afternoon from 3.00pm to 4.00pm and an hour from 9.00pm in the evening (which was soon extended to two). Sunday broadcasts were prohibited until 3 April 1938, when a seven-days-a-week service was inaugurated with a performance of Clemence Dane's drama *Will Shakespeare*. But television remained very much the poor relation of radio, with constant internal arguments about funding. Only after the Treasury provided extra finance was the BBC able to approach its target of twenty hours of broadcasts each week.<sup>14</sup>

The television service's programme planner Cecil Madden wrote later that "a play a day" was the target we set ourselves at the outset, and so it turned out'.<sup>15</sup> The pre-war service broadcast more than 400 excerpts and adaptations of plays, all but a handful of which had been written for the theatre. While this total fell some way short of Madden's aspiration, television nonetheless presented a remarkable range of work. In the three months before the *As You Like It* excerpt, the service had offered scenes from fourteen plays including the Scottish comedy *Marigold*, T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, and Lady Gregory's one-act comedy *The Workhouse Ward*. All but three of these presentations were drawn directly from current theatre productions and involved the stage cast going into one of two small studios and acting out a scene conceived for the stage in front of two or three electronic cameras. The two studios were of the same size, with a narrow production space of roughly 20 metres by 10 metres. The sets initially were exceptionally spare and generic, in part because the studios were on the first floor and there was no

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<sup>14</sup> Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, Volume II: The Golden Age of Wireless*, (Oxford 1965), p. 616.

<sup>15</sup> Madden, p. 104.

goods lift and in part because the same studios were needed almost immediately before and after each transmission for variety shows or discussion programmes.<sup>16</sup>

**[Insert Fig. 1]**

The connections between Shakespeare in the British theatre and television's first productions began with Margaretta Scott reprising her Rosalind from the 1936 Regent's Park open-air theatre production. Robert Atkins, who was running the Regent's Park theatre with its founder Sydney Carroll and who was to become a key figure in television Shakespeare across the next decade, is credited as the producer of the 5 February broadcast. Stephen Thomas, who was a staff producer for the BBC, 'presented' the broadcast for television, which indicated that the performances and staging had been imported and Thomas' responsibility was the disposition of the cameras. There was a similar relationship between theatre and television for Margaretta Scott's next television appearance in Shakespeare, just six days after the scene from *As You Like It*. In January the actress had played Beatrice in a limited number of performances of *Much Ado About Nothing* for the Bankside Players.<sup>17</sup> This company, also run by Robert Atkins, had conjured up a temporary theatre known as The Ring in a boxing arena at Blackfriars. On the semblance of an Elizabethan platform stage, Ms Scott performed here with Jack Hawkins as Benedick, but when she returned to the BBC television studio for a 10-minute excerpt from the play on 11 February 1937 her foil was Henry Oscar.

Between February and April there were eleven brief Shakespeare broadcasts, including scenes from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (18 February), *Twelfth Night* (distinct excerpts on 20 February and 12 March) and *Richard III* (9 April). Henry Oscar was the actor who appeared most frequently in these, playing

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<sup>16</sup> See Martin Kempton's online resource 'The BBC's TV studios in London', <http://www.tvstudiohistory.co.uk/old%20bbc%20studios.htm#alexandra>; accessed 10 October 2014.

<sup>17</sup> 'G. W. B.' (George W. Bishop), '*Much Ado About Nothing*', *The Sunday Times*, 24 January 1937.



Henry V to Yvonne Arnaud's Katherine in the evening of 5 February, giving Mark Anthony's funeral oration from *Julius Caesar* in the afternoon of 11 February, and on 25 March playing Macbeth 3:4 opposite Margaret Rawlings. With its running time of 34 minutes, this broadcast by producer George More O'Ferrall was a step towards more ambitious productions later in the year, as was his compilation of scenes from *Twelfth Night*, which also ran for 34 minutes on 7 May. The close relationship of television's first 'scenes' with contemporary theatrical productions is also demonstrated by the presentation from Alexandra Palace on 12 March of the 'letter scene' (2:1) from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. *Radio Times* billed this as being performed by Robert Atkins' Bankside Players, with Violet Vanbrugh as Mistress Ford and Irene Vanbrugh as Mistress Page. Atkins was presenting *The Merry Wives of Windsor* with the Vanbrugh sisters at the Ring on Sunday evenings, and just three days after the broadcast, the reviewer for *The Times* was complimentary about the stage production: 'The wives... conduct their mischief with a graciousness which puts even its victim in a pleasant light. Not that their performances, though free from malice, miss any facet of the fun. [...] It is an extremely lively production, and Mr Robert Atkins, using the Elizabethan stage as to the manner born, has gained pace and a rare measure of intimacy.'<sup>18</sup>

Broadcasting well-known scenes from Shakespeare's plays during television's first year paralleled not only the practice at the beginnings of BBC radio but also that of early cinema. As Judith Buchanan has written, 'The pioneering years of cinema (1895-c.1906) saw the release of a handful of films offering brief, cinematically animated, visual quotations from Shakespeare plays. This approach was in tune with the era's film-making impulses in relation to adaptation more generally, which typically privileged brief cameo references to literary works over a consistent narrative drive.'<sup>19</sup> Even before silent Shakespeare films began in Britain in 1899 with W. K. L. Dickson's scenes from Herbert Beerbohm Tree's staging of *King John*, there was an earlier tradition of

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<sup>18</sup> *The Times*, 'Blackfriars Ring: *The Merry Wives of Windsor*', *The Times*, 15 March 1937.

<sup>19</sup> Judith Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Silent Film: An Excellent Dumb Discourse*, (Cambridge 2009), p. 74.

such 'scenes' in other cultural forms, including magic lantern slides and pantomime. For all its novelty as a technology, television extended an approach to Shakespeare that would have been familiar to audiences and accepted by them in other contexts. The new medium was also soon to follow the older one, the progress of which has been further described by Buchanan: In the transitional era (c. 1907-1913)... this cherry-picking approach to a literary or theatrical source ceded to more sustained engagements with story-telling and to a desire to tell autonomous narratives cinematically. A parallel, related, development in the film industry during this period was the increase in the lengths of films.<sup>20</sup>

Television Shakespeare demonstrated its intermedial relationship with radio when extracts from *Julius Caesar* were shown on 1 April 1937 with Malcolm Keen as Brutus, Robert Holmes as Cassius and Mary Hinton as Portia. This broadcast was presented for television by Stephen Thomas 'in conjunction with Peter Creswell's sound programme production'.<sup>21</sup> On the previous Sunday Creswell had produced for the BBC's National Programme a live two-hour adaptation of Shakespeare's play. In the published cast-list for this, however, Malcolm Keen is credited as Mark Anthony and Brutus was Ion Swinley. Cast members of the radio production had gone to Alexandra Palace four days after the radio broadcast to reprise scenes before the cameras. The success of early television transmissions such as this was recognised in July 1937, when the television critic of *The Observer*, who was reviewing *Pyramus and Thisbe*, adapted by producer Jan Bussell as a standalone excerpt of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, suggested that, 'The television studios have been very successful in giving us bits and pieces of Shakespeare'.<sup>22</sup> A less laudatory response is recorded in a *Radio Times* article headed 'View of a Viewer' in June 1937. Jean Bartlett outlined her impressions after watching television for six months, and she compared the Shakespeare adaptations unfavourably with broadcasts of excerpts from West End plays:

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<sup>20</sup> Buchanan, p. 75.

<sup>21</sup> *BBC Television Programme Records, Vol. I 1937-38*, (London 1939), p. 25.

<sup>22</sup> *The Observer*, 'Television', 11 July 1937.

Shakespeare... invariably falls flat, even when distinguished artists are playing the selected arts [sic]. Non-Shakespeareans are frankly bored — they cannot get the hang of the thing before it is over; and lovers of Shakespeare are irritated by brief episodes suspended in mid-air and inevitably devoid of the play's original stagecraft, and viewed from two cameras alternately at rather uninteresting angles.<sup>23</sup>

By the autumn the service was planning more ambitious broadcasts, although the relationship with the theatre remained central. The first production regarded as being 'full-length' was the 67-minute adaptation of *Othello*, produced by George More O'Ferrall on 14 December, but before this the television studios were visited by two more productions from the theatre. On 25 October 1937, in a half-hour afternoon broadcast, scenes were given from *Measure for Measure* by the cast of Tyrone's Guthrie Old Vic production. Just a month later, in both the afternoon and the evening of 29 November *Scenes from Cymbeline* were re-staged by nine cast members from Andre van Gyseghem's production of the play at the Embassy Theatre. Van Gyseghem's production of *Cymbeline* for the Embassy Theatre opened on 16 November 1937, thirteen days before the television broadcast. The staging is notable for being the first to use George Bernard Shaw's variation for Act 5, although the broadcast scenes were selected only from Acts 1 and 2. The broadcast is the first Shakespeare broadcast for which a WAC production file exists, and included within it is a detailed camera script that offers a strong sense of the 'look' of early television drama.<sup>24</sup> The presentation began with a music cue played from a 78rpm disc of the London Symphony Orchestra performing Rimsky-Korsakov's *Cortege des Nobles*. The announcer spoke over the on-screen caption, '*Cymbeline*': 'Now we are to see scenes from Andre van Gyseghem's production of *Cymbeline* from the Embassy Theatre, by permission of Ronald Adam.' With the caption still in place, the minor actors were introduced by name before a mix to a shot of one actor accompanied by an explanatory voice-over, 'Iachimo is played by George Hayes', and then another mix to a shot of three characters: 'The Queen

<sup>23</sup> Jean Bartlett, 'View of a Viewer', *Radio Times Television Supplement*, 4 June 1937.

<sup>24</sup> BBC WAC T5/121 Drama: *Cymbeline* 1937-1956.

by Olga Lindo, Posthumus by Geoffrey Toon and Imogen by Joyce Bland.’ The next mix revealed a further caption – ‘The Palace Garden’ – and then the television image returned to the previous three-shot. On a cue from the cameraman, the Queen began to speak. Each of these mixes at this time would have taken four to six seconds to complete; cutting live between studio cameras was impossible until 1946.

The first scene was drawn from 1:1 and ran from the entry of the Queen, Posthumus and Imogen. After the repeat of the caption ‘The Palace Garden’ and a brief music cue, 1:3 was played in full with Imogen, Pisanio and, for the final lines out of the total of 48, a Lady. Both of these ‘Palace Garden’ scenes were acted in the No.1 studio at Alexandra Palace in front of a minimal setting that included three trees in tubs. Both garden scenes were also covered by just two fixed-lens cameras, which were mounted on dollies allowing forward and backward movement. In the first of these scenes, which might have lasted perhaps six minutes, there were just four shot-changes by mixing from one camera to the other; the second, which would probably have run for between two and three minutes, was played in a single shot. The scene then shifted to (another caption) ‘Philario’s House in Rome’ for 1:4, and then to ‘Imogen’s Bedroom’ for, first, the ‘wooing scene’ (1:6), and then the ‘trunk scene’ (2:2). The final element of the selection returned to ‘Philario’s House in Rome’ for 2:4, the first 192 lines of which were played – which might have lasted a further six minutes or more. The whole of this scene appears to have been shot by camera no. 4. The timings, of course, are approximate, but if the presentation did indeed play its total of 790 lines in thirty minutes – an average of twenty-six lines per minute, not allowing for breaks or music – the verse-speaking would have had to be very fast. It is quite possible, however, that the broadcast overran its allocated slot, as many did in those days, sometimes by as much again as the scheduled time. In contrast, and judged by later standards, the visual rhythm would have seemed funereally slow. There were perhaps just twenty-five shot changes during the broadcast, and half of these were accounted for by captions.

In retrospect, perhaps the most notable pre-war 'scenes from...' Shakespeare broadcast, and the one of which most historians would covet a recording, was the half-hour presentation of scenes from *Macbeth* with Laurence Olivier. Olivier opened in Michel St Denis' production of the Scottish play at the Old Vic on 26 November 1937, the first night having been postponed for three days because of the complexity of the production. Earlier that year Olivier had played Hamlet and Henry V for the company as well as Sir Toby Belch in *Twelfth Night*, and he was still to take on the role of Iago to Ralph Richardson's Othello. *Macbeth* had settings and costumes by the design team Motley and incidental music composed by Darius Milhaud. The presence of the Queen at a matinee on 29 November indicated how significant an event this was in the theatre season. But her presence may also have been because Lilian Baylis, the indefatigable founder of the Old Vic, died on the eve of the opening night at the age of sixty-three. *The Times* celebrated the staging as 'lucid' while recognising that its 'outstanding merit' was Olivier's performance, of which the critic wrote:

Sometimes still he misses the full music of Shakesperian [sic] verse, but his speaking has gained in rhythm and strength, and his attack upon the part itself, his nervous intensity, his dignity of movement and swiftness of thought, above all his tracing of the process of deterioration in a man not naturally evil give to his performance a rare consistency and power.<sup>25</sup>

The production and responses to it are documented in reviews, biographies and in photographs that preserve its bizarre costumes, headdresses and décor. J. C. Trewin noted also that it was played in 'excessive gloom'.<sup>26</sup> Two weeks after the opening, on Friday 10 December, members of the company made the journey up the hill to Alexandra Palace to play scenes from their staging before the cameras. (*Radio Times* had announced the broadcast for the previous week, but Lilian Baylis' death presumably delayed this.) The live transmission that afternoon was witnessed by a correspondent for *The Times*, and the brief review reveals that it included at least one of the scenes with the witches, Lady

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<sup>25</sup> *The Times*, 'Old Vic', 27 November 1937.

<sup>26</sup> Trewin, p. 174.

Macbeth reading her husband's letter in 1:5, the exchange with his wife before Macbeth goes off to murder Duncan, and the appearance of Banquo's ghost at the banquet. The anonymous reviewer pointed out advantages that television had over the theatre:

The weird sisters [...] were able to use the resources of the television camera in order to vanish in a most convincing way. Banquo's ghost, too, was more effective than in the stage production, for, instead of a masked effigy, the real Banquo was there, and then he faded away, leaving Macbeth staring at the spot where he had been.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time the article acknowledged how the technical limitations of the television image at this point in the medium's development. 'Few of the characters [around the table],' the review observed, 'were shown on the screen at the same time, and there was no complete picture of the banquet.' The limitations of early cameras ensured that it was the intimacy of the exchanges between the murderous couple that were most successful.

The main problem for the reviewer of this stage-to-screen translation was one that has remained a concern through to the present day in discussions of multi-camera presentations of staged plays:

Mr Laurence Olivier and Miss Judith Anderson [as Lady Macbeth] were also extremely effective, though they made no attempt to moderate their voices to television scale, and still spoke to the utmost recesses of an imaginary theatre, whereas their smallest whispers would have been heard by the unseen audience. *The conventions of the theatre must be got rid of if television is to stand on its own* [emphasis added].

As in Cecil Madden's writing, the review reveals the desire and the prescription that for the medium 'to stand on its own' it must be liberated from its fundamental theatricality. The reviewer continued the intermedial comparisons by praising the 'cinematic' qualities of another recent television broadcast, also of a stage play although not of a specific theatre presentation. Eric Crozier had mounted on the afternoon of 6 December a studio production of Moss Hart and George Kaufman's comedy about Hollywood, *Once in a Lifetime*. 'The

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<sup>27</sup> *The Times*, 'Broadcasting: Televised Drama', 13 December 1937.

technique of the cinema [...] was freely drawn on for *Once in a Lifetime*, which was excellent entertainment from the first moment to the last, and the ingenuity by which the scenes were made to succeed one another without loss of time was remarkable. *If television can be as good as this, it will be real rival to the films* [emphasis added].'

*Othello* followed *Scenes from Macbeth* just four days later, and was announced in its *Radio Times* listing on 14 December 1937 with simply the title of the play. In the published *BBC Programme Records*, however, the broadcast is listed as *Scenes from Othello*. The *Radio Times* schedule featured George More O'Ferrall's broadcast lasting 35 minutes from 3.25pm until 4.00pm, much as had his 34-minute adaptation of scenes from *Twelfth Night* back in May. A repeat presentation was listed for 9.00pm on Saturday 18 December. *Radio Times* also promised a cast headed by Diana Wynyard as Desdemona and Ralph Richardson as Othello, along with the television regular Henry Oscar as Iago, Olga Lindo as Bianca and Dorothy Black as Emilia. Production documents in the BBC Written Archive, however, as well as *BBC Programme Records*, confirm that while Dorothy Black and Olga Lindo appeared, the casting for the three principals was entirely different. As it does with *Scenes from Cymbeline*, a production file for this *Othello* transmission exists, and this reveals that just 15 days before transmission, the expected casting of the principals was Richardson, Oscar and, as Desdemona, Jessica Tandy. Producer George O'Ferrall was also looking after the broadcast of the Old Vic's *Macbeth*, and he was clearly concerned about the lack of time. 'I will be rehearsing *Macbeth* and *Othello* simultaneously,' he noted. 'I will have very little ordinary rehearsal before coming to the studio, and *Othello* is going to be a bigger production than anything I have so far contemplated.'<sup>28</sup> Director of Television Gerald Cock had his own concerns about the broadcast, and on 3 December he issued a memo with the following caution to be read out before the programme: 'This great tragedy of Shakespeare contains passages which may be considered unsuitable for children. We are sure viewers will use their discretion on this occasion.' By 8 December the cast featured Celia Johnson as

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<sup>28</sup> BBC WAC T5/379 TV Drama: *Othello* 1937-1950.

Desdemona, Baliol Holloway as Othello and D. A. Clarke-Smith as Iago. Anthony Quayle was also on board as Cassio. This is confirmed by another memo from O'Ferrall, this time to the wardrobe department, which specified that the costumes should be “‘Venetian’ period’, and that Celia Johnson would ‘need to wear her night robe for the bedroom scene beneath her day gown’.

The production file includes an opening page to the script as well as a page for the conclusion but between the introduction of the cast (single shots of the principals speaking a fragment of text) and the final credits there is only the frustrating typed instruction ‘Play as rehearsed’. No detailed reconstruction is possible as can be done with *Scenes from Cymbeline*, although a simple floor plan on a sheet of foolscap paper is preserved. This indicates the relative positions of basic rostra, steps and balustrades, an Italian chest and a bed, as well as the three studio cameras. And there is a further trace of the production in another *Times* review. ‘The watching of televised drama,’ the critic wrote, ‘especially of Shakespearian drama, is an astonishing experience to the spectator who is completely new to the medium.’ And after expressions of reservations about the distance of figures on a screen must be ‘from the stage and the tradition of Shakespeare’, the reviewer was grudgingly admiring: There are times, especially when Iago is alone on the screen—although it is by no means Mr D A Clarke-Smith’s fault—when the memories of the primitive cinema are irresistibly conjured up, but there are other times when the tiny screen seems magnified to the proportions of the theatre and Othello is the great man, spiritually and physically, that he was... at the end of this constricted but fluid adaptation of *Othello*, the impression is that a great play, and not merely a conjuring trick, has been performed.<sup>29</sup>

Once again, there are the intermedial references to both film and the stage. A second, and similarly positive, review of this production amounts to only two sentences. ‘*Othello*... was an unqualified success,’ a writer identified as ‘E. H. R.’ recorded. ‘It had been rehearsed for television, which is essential if the best is to be got out of a play.’<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *The Times*, ‘Televised drama’, , 15 December 1937.

<sup>30</sup> ‘E. H. R.’, ‘Television’, *The Observer*, 19 December 1937.



After the war George More O’Ferrall reflected on his experience producing early plays for the medium, asserting that ‘[f]rom the beginning of television I felt that it was a good medium for Shakespeare.’ In an article for *Radio Times* alongside his 1947 presentation of *Hamlet*, the producer reflected on the quality of intimacy in two forms divided by nearly four hundred years: [I]n its method of presentation [television] comes nearer to the Elizabethan theatre, for which the plays were written, than the modern theatre can do... The Elizabethan theatre was often only about 80 feet square, so that an actor playing, say, the part of Hamlet, was able to come right out on to the apron stage to speak the lines “To be or not to be...” with the audience all round him, and some of them only a few feet away. Shakespeare wrote the speech with such conditions in mind, and I feel that in television we get as near these conditions as possible, with the actor playing Hamlet in close-up and the whole of his audience now numbered in many thousands, sitting only eight to ten feet away from him.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to the excerpts from his plays, Shakespeare was a prominent presence in other early programming. On 5 March 1937 Irene Vanbrugh and the scholar and critic G.B. Harrison introduced a 15-minute programme in which were shown ‘models and costumes from the Shakespeare Exhibition to be held the following week in aid of the Shoreditch Housing Association’.<sup>32</sup> The following month, on Shakespeare’s birthday, the television service offered a masque to Mendelssohn’s music based on the fairy scenes of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, with choreography by Andrée Howard. Another significant dance work drawn from Shakespeare was *Cross-Garter’d*, a 20-minute work choreographed by Wendy Toye to music by Frescobaldi for Marie Rambert’s dance company and based on the letter scene from *Twelfth Night*. Back in 1931 Anthony Tudor had choreographed an earlier ballet on the theme for the company while Toye’s version was presented at the tiny Mercury Theatre on 14 November 1937. On 3 December Toye danced the role of Olivia for the

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<sup>31</sup> George More O’Ferrall, ‘Televising *Hamlet*’, *Radio Times*, 5 December 1947.

<sup>32</sup> *Radio Times*, 26 February 1937

cameras, although as Janet Rowson David has written, 'The ballet misfired on television because the changes in Malvolio's dress were not apparent. On his first entrance he was seen only from the waist up, so on his next entrance there was nothing with which to compare the cross-garter'd hose.'<sup>33</sup> One final Shakespeare trace during 1937 was a version on 16 December by producer Eric Crozier of Ferenc Molnár's playlet comedy *Prologue to King Lear*. An actor, played on screen by William Devlin, is so taken over by the role of Lear that he begins to speak in Shakespearean verse.

Three different actors also played William Shakespeare in historical dramas during 1937 and 1938, although it appears that we can only be certain of two of them. Henry Oscar portrayed the playwright in Clemence Dane's biographical drama *Will Shakespeare* on 3 April 1938, and then on November 27 Clement McCallin was the suitor in *The Wooing of Anne Hathaway* by Grace Carlton. Before these two full-lengths plays, in the summer of 1937 producer Royston Morley presented Maurice Baring's one-act comedy *The Rehearsal*, published in 1919. During preparations for *Macbeth* at the Globe in 1595 (which was the date of the first performance according to early twentieth-century scholarship) Mr Shakespeare has to respond to Richard Burbage's truculence by quickly composing 'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow'. Although *BBC Programme Records*, unlike *Radio Times*, lists the cast, it is not possible to match these names with roles. Clemence Dane's popular fantasy, first produced on the stage in 1921 and broadcast several times on the radio in the 1930s, speculates about connections between the playwright, the 'Dark Lady' who is identified as Mary Fitton and Christopher Marlowe. Writing for the *Observer*, 'E.H.R.' hailed this as 'the best dramatic production we have had from Alexandra Palace... the whole play was a thrill for viewers and a triumph for television.'<sup>34</sup> Grace Carlton's play is set in the Hathaways's cottage between 1581 and 1597 and had been staged by the Birmingham Repertory Company from 5-18 November before it was given in the Alexandra Palace studio five days after its final theatre performance.

<sup>33</sup> Janet Rowson Davies, 'Ballet on British Television, 1933-1939', *Dance Chronicle*, 5 (3), p. 265.

<sup>34</sup> 'E. H. R.', 'Television', *The Observer*, 10 April 1938.

After *Othello* had demonstrated that Shakespeare's own plays could be presented at longer than an hour, BBC television mounted in 1938 and 1939 three 'full-length' productions of Shakespeare's plays together with David Garrick's version of *The Taming of the Shrew* before the war shut down transmissions on 1 September 1939. Producer Dallas Bower was involved in each of these ambitious productions,<sup>35</sup> beginning with a two-hour presentation in late July 1938 of *Julius Caesar* set in a contemporary fascist state. The critic for *The Times* approved of Bower's approach: 'the play, stripped of its classical trappings, becomes a present-day drama of power politics, and the atmosphere of intrigue and unrest is unfortunately but too real in certain countries today.'<sup>36</sup> The review was written just six weeks before the Munich crisis. Bower was one of the first two senior producers appointed to the BBC Television service in 1936, having previously worked in the film industry as a sound technician, editor and director. He was the assistant director on the 1936 feature film of *As You Like It* and Olivier later acknowledged that it was Bower who gave him the idea to make his wartime film of *Henry V*, on which he receives an associate producer credit. In his personnel file at Caversham there is a 1939 note by Director of Television Gerald Cock describing Bower as 'incorrigibly "highbrow" – and as such valuable'.

After *Julius Caesar* Bower oversaw the first outside broadcast of a Shakespeare play from the theatre, when *Twelfth Night* was transmitted live from the Phoenix Theatre on 2 January 1939, with Peggy Ashcroft as Viola in Michel St Denis' staging. A production photograph (Fig. 2) shows the central camera of three that were mounted in the circle. This was only the second outside broadcast of a play from the theatre, and critics were among those getting used to the visual language. Reflecting that the production's 'lyric beauty defies the vigilance of mechanical eyes which alter their range minute by minute,' the reviewer for *The Times* recorded that 'the impression given was one of extreme restlessness. Viola was now a tiny figure scarcely

<sup>35</sup> See John Wyver, 'Dallas Bower: A producer for television's early years', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 9.1 (2012), pp. 26-39.

<sup>36</sup> *The Times*, 'Televised drama: Julius Caesar in modern dress', 1 August 1938.

distinguishable from half-a-dozen others equally diminutive and now rather more than life-size, taking up half the screen.<sup>37</sup> Grace Wyndham Goldie, writing for *The Listener*, was considerably more enthusiastic:

I sat in my own sitting room the other night and watched *Twelfth Night* being performed on the stage of the Phoenix Theatre. And the miracle of television came home to me afresh. There was the actual feeling of being in a theatre.<sup>38</sup>

**[Insert Fig. 2]**

A month after *Twelfth Night*, Bower was back in the studio with an adaptation of *The Tempest*, with the incidental music for the play written by Sibelius and Peggy Ashcroft as Miranda. The ambitious production was plagued by technical problems, and Bower wrote a memo to Director of Television Gerald Cock summarising the reasons for ‘the disastrous results’.<sup>39</sup> Despite this, the aspirations and the achievement of the broadcast were recognised by at least one critic: ‘picture after picture of Prospero and Miranda were memorable as being beautifully placed on the screen and giving us an intimate picture of the two, more intimate than any theatre performance can be.’<sup>40</sup> The traces that remain of Bower’s productions in these months, which also included a bold version of Pirandello’s *Henry IV*, indicate that this is a moment of confident experimentation, even if not always of creative success, in television drama.

Dallas Bower was also the producer of television’s last pre-war Shakespeare adaptation. On 12 April 1939 he presented *Katharine and Petruchio* (often spelt as *Catharine* with a “C”) from Garrick’s 1754 “acting edition” of *The Taming of the Shrew*. The one-hour broadcast was live, and the matinee repeat ten days later meant that the company had to return to the studio to play it once again. Garrick conceived *Catharine and Petruchio*, ‘altered from Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*, with alterations and additions’ as an hour-long

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<sup>37</sup> *The Times*, ‘Television from a Theatre’, , 3 January 1938.

<sup>38</sup> Grace Wyndham Goldie, ‘Television: From the Stalls’, *The Listener*, 19 January 1939.

<sup>39</sup> BBC WAC T5/508, *TV Drama: Tempest, The 1938-51*.

<sup>40</sup> *The Times*, ‘Televised performance of *The Tempest*’, 7 February 1939.

entertainment to follow a full-length play. The Christopher Sly frame of Shakespeare's original is dropped and the play begins after Bianca is married. Much of comic business is also excised and the romance between Katharine and Petruchio is emphasized. As with the other productions considered here, the *Radio Times* listing is one of the key traces of this 'lost' broadcast. *Radio Times* in these early years of television is often infuriatingly inconsistent in the credits it provides, but in this case there is what appears to be a full cast list and, at three names, a rather fuller list of creatives than is often the case.

From the cast members, Austin Trevor, who took the lead as Petruchio, was known in the 1930s for playing Hercule Poirot in the first three feature film adaptations of Agatha Christie's novels. Margaretta Scott, who played Katharine, has already featured prominently in this discussion of pre-war Shakespeare. Like Ms Scott, Vera Lindsay (Bianca) was a regular at The Old Vic in the 1930s, she was Olivia in Michel Saint-Denis' 1939 production of *Twelfth Night* with Peggy Ashcroft, and she was Iris in Bower's studio production of *The Tempest*. Also in that *Tempest*, and taking roles in *Katharine and Petruchio*, were Alan Wheatley (Hortensio), Stuart Latham (Biondello) and Erik Chitty (Tailor). After only just over two years there is a strong sense of a repertory company, albeit loosely defined, at Alexandra Palace. These actors, with their newly developed expertise of playing before the electronic cameras, could be called on by a production like Bower's, which was one of four new drama presentations that week alone. And that group had extensive links with the classical and the experimental theatre of the day, as well as with the feature film industry. As for the creatives, the incidental music credit to James Hartley acknowledges a BBC staff composer who had also created music for Dallas Bower's *Julius Caesar*. More notable, perhaps, is the "Costumes by Elizabeth Haffenden" credit, because a "Costumes" credit is exceptionally rare on any pre-war television drama. In 1939 Elizabeth Haffenden was right at the start of an illustrious career which would embrace costumes for most of the Gainsborough melodramas of the 1940s as well as Oscars for best costume design on *Ben Hur* in 1959 and *A Man for all Seasons* in 1966. Her involvement in *Katharine and Petruchio*, and her credit in *Radio Times*,

suggests that visual excess was perhaps more important to this production than to many others made within tight budget constraints in a tiny Alexandra Palace studio for a fuzzy monochrome screen image. But there is no credit for Alexandra Palace in-house designer Malcolm Baker-Smith, who we learn from a review in *The Times*, created ‘a charming Italian setting’, which complemented the “beautiful’ costumes.<sup>41</sup>

Other traces of *Katharine and Petruchio* include *Playback*, an unpublished autobiographical fragment by producer Dallas Bower in which he misremembers *Katharine and Petruchio* as ‘the first Shakespeare play to be seen on television’. Bower also suggests that Garrick’s shortening of Shakespeare ‘greatly improv[ed] the overall shape of the play’, and he celebrates the fact that he secured ‘a whole fourteen days’ rehearsal.<sup>42</sup> The recovery of *Katharine and Petruchio* is also assisted by two contemporary reviews : a short note from ‘E.H.R.’ for *The Observer*, and a rather more extensive – and more approving – anonymous review from *The Times*. Asserting that Garrick’s text features only the most uproarious elements of a play that is ‘undoubtedly a farce’, ‘E.H.R.’ lamented that the words were spoken so quickly that fully ‘fifty per cent of the words were unintelligible’.<sup>43</sup> Yet the speed of the verse seemed not to have concerned the writer for *The Times*. ‘Much care had been taken,’ the reviewer reflected, ‘by Mr Dallas Bower in preparing the production, which, unlike some television plays, was planned down to the last detail... The first sight of Katharine (Miss Margaretta Scott) and Bianca (Miss Vera Lindsay) in their loggia was a lovely picture and the changes from long shots to close-ups were particularly successful.’<sup>44</sup> As in other early reviews, a critical vocabulary is beginning to emerge for this new form of television drama, which is developed further when the reviewer observes that all of this achieved ‘a unity which at once brought home how different a planned production is on the screen from one that is adapted from the theatre.’ A concern is again apparent to establish the medium’s specificity, and the desire for it not to be beholden to radio, to the

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<sup>41</sup> *The Times*, ‘Televised Plays’, 17 April 1939.

<sup>42</sup> *Playback*, unpaginated ms in author’s possession.

<sup>43</sup> ‘E.H.R.’, ‘Television’, *The Observer*, 16 April 1939.

<sup>44</sup> *The Times*, ‘Televised Plays’, 17 April 1939.

cinema or to the theatre, despite the centrality of each of these to television's formation.

This production of *Katharine and Petruchio* can also be understood as an element of the Georgian revival of the 1930s, when as Alexandra Harris has outlined many aspects of the literary and visual styles of the eighteenth-century were being recovered and celebrated by writers and artists of the moment.<sup>45</sup> Harris has detailed how this revival, related perhaps paradoxically to the concerns of modernism, can be recognised in the writings of Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf, in the picturesque art of John Piper and the poems of Geoffrey Grigson, and in the renewed enthusiasm for Georgian design demonstrated by figures including the visual artists Eric Ravilious and Edward Bawden. Bower's production appears to have shared their concerns.

In early April 1939, around a fortnight before *Katharine and Petruchio*, new productions of *The Taming of the Shrew* opened both in London and at the Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon. At the Old Vic Tyrone Guthrie produced a pantomimic *Shrew* in which, for Ivor Brown for *The Manchester Guardian*, 'Old Padua is but New Palladium writ small. Mr Guthrie, evidently feeling for moderns that "the *Shrew*" won't do, leads Shakespeare up the Crazy pavement... Shakespearean slap-stick never slapped harder.'<sup>46</sup> In Stratford on 3 April 1939 the director Komisarjevsky opened a spectacular production with Alec Clunes and Vivienne Bennett. Of this Ivor Brown wrote that it had been conceived 'half as a Restoration *raree*-show, half as Italy's old comedy of pantaloons and clown.'<sup>47</sup> And as he also observed, 'The people who grumble at the Stratford theatre as being timid and parochial overlook the licence annually granted to our Russian genius to make antic hay with the less important comedies.'

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<sup>45</sup> See Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper*, (London 2010), pp. 59-85.

<sup>46</sup> Ivor Brown, 'Old Vic: *The Taming of the Shrew*', *The Observer*, 2 April 1939.

<sup>47</sup> Ivor Brown, 'The Stratford Festival', *The Observer*, 9 April 1939.

Dallas Bower's choice of *Katharine and Petruchio* may have been a competitive response to these two high-profile exuberant productions. And how better to do that than to turn 'a riotous comedy' into what the *Times* reviewer described as 'a polite entertainment' – Shakespeare, courtesy of David Garrick, 'pruned and tidied up'? Such speculation takes the argument here beyond the knowledge that can be achieved of the 'lost' pre-war Shakespeare productions. Despite the absence of recordings of these broadcasts, aspects of their achievement *can* be recovered, as is demonstrated in this article by research into *Scenes from Cymbeline*, *Macbeth* and *Othello* as well as *Katharine and Petruchio*. Despite, or perhaps because, of its tiny audience pre-war television and its rich range of Shakespeare adaptations saw a good deal of bold experiment in an intimate and fundamentally intermedial form – a form which was searching for, and starting to forge, its own specificity while being entwined with the radio, with the theatre and with the cinema of the time.