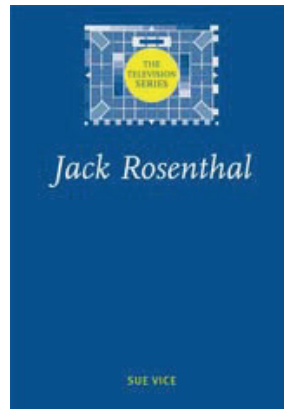


Jack Rosenthal



by Sue Vice
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by Helena Sheehan
Dublin City University

The Television Series is a collection of books advancing television studies by focusing on the oeuvre of seminal writers of television drama. Already published are books on such authors as Alan Bennett, Trevor Griffiths, Tony Garnett, Andrew Davies, Alan Clarke, Troy Kennedy Martin and Lynda La Plante.

In reviewing a number of earlier titles in the series, Robin Nelson has noted:

Following a period in which the death of the author has been much vaunted, this new series tackles head-on the issue of authorial contribution ...
This refreshing, overall approach allows due credit to be given to exceptional, creative individuals while fully recognizing that broadcast television production is a complex

and collaborative industrial process over which no one individual can have total control ...

The Television Series mobilizes a dialogue between different perspectives and critical approaches. In boldly celebrating the achievements of individuals, the accounts of careers also illustrate the collaborative process of television production and the powerplays and tensions involved in trying to articulate a distinctive vision. (Nelson 2007)

Because of nature of television production, there is a complex dialectic and often tension of individual vision and creativity with other forces involved. This book captures that dynamic well. Both the series and this book make a useful contribution to television studies by focusing on the role played by certain key authors within the larger dynamics of television production.

Jack Rosenthal (1931-2004) hailed from working class Manchester, descended from Russian Jewish immigrants who endured poverty and hard times. He studied literature at University of Sheffield and, upon graduation, did his national service in the navy. He worked briefly in advertising before beginning his 40 year career as a television writer. He was part of what some now see as a golden age: the formative period of television drama, which was giving scope to new writers, who were involved in a new medium in the process of defining itself, breaking free from theatrical conventions and creating something new and full of revelatory possibilities.

Rosenthal's first script was an episode of *Coronation Street* in 1961. He worked on more than a hundred episodes of the series. Subsequently he wrote many television plays and series of his own. His preference was for the self-contained play as opposed to serial forms. Some of his best known plays were: *The Knowledge*, *The Chain*, *The Evacuees*, *Another Sunday* and *Sweet FA*, *Eskimo Day*, *Bar Mitzvah Boy*, *P'tang*, *Yang*, *Kipperbang* and *Spend, Spend, Spend*. Some of his series were: *The Dustbinmen*, *Moving Story* and *London's Burning*. He also contributed to other series, adapted fiction for television and wrote the film script for *Yentl*.

Sue Vice, whether co-incidentally or not, is a professor of literature at University of Sheffield. She brings the skills and perspectives of literary criticism to bear on analysis of television drama, on the whole to very good effect. She is very strong on textual analysis, although not quite so strong on the sort of socio-historical context that I prefer to see fused with textual analysis.

Her close reading of his work begins with *Coronation Street*, where she shows how his dramatic style was forged in this arena. She even sees the young Ken Barlow as a prototype for protagonists in his later plays. She observes that political topicality was rare in the series, but even then, when there were occasional references to the atom bomb or the Vietnam war, always subordinated to the local and personal. She quotes Frank Barlow saying to Ken: 'Kruschev and Kennedy don't live in Coronation Street and Elsie Tanner does'. Vice takes this to act metafictionally as an expression of the serial's priorities.

Coming to the 1970s, Vice contends that Rosenthal found the best fit between his dramatic preferences and the priorities of television commissioning. His plays of this era centred on 'people's self-delusions, aspirations and small-scale concerns as set against such institutions as English amateur football, the legacy of Empire and democracy itself' (p33) He tended to deal with matters such as shifts in social mores and contrasts in class perspectives in terms of small situations comedically portrayed rather than in terms of clearly articulated ideological positions.

In the 1980s he was at odds with Thatcherism, although he did not write overtly anti-consensual drama, but went for an ironic and sceptical take on the consensus, dealing in his own way with the increasing individualism and eroding social fabric.

Throughout Rosenthal's career, his style was to go for a gentle drama of everyday life, suffused with a sharp sense of its ironies and contradictions. The comic absurdities of daily life were registered in misrecognition, non-sequitur, self-delusion, ironic juxtaposition, role reversal. He set his dramas in workplaces, homes, sporting events, political elections, religious rituals, even the making of television drama itself. He dramatised the domestic and working lives of dustbinmen, fire fighters, taxi drivers, politicians and actors.

Vice sees Rosenthal's influence in such contemporary television series as *The Royle Family* and *The Office*.

The representation of class was a dominant theme, but always as shown in small signifiers rather than big declarations. Vice suggests that Rosenthal's representation of class changed over time, following shifts in media norms and perhaps his own rising status, but does not detail how this manifested itself in his texts.

Much of his material was autobiographical: from the experience of being a war time evacuee as a child to being a parent seeing his children off to university to the frustrations of being a television writer over the decades. When he finally wrote an explicit autobiography, he did so as a script. (Rosenthal 2005)

Particularly interesting is Vice's exegesis of two versions of the play *Ready when you are, Mr McGill* in 1976 and 2005 as registering the changes in the television industry. She sees the later play as a kind of valedictory broadside at a status quo in which he was out of sympathy. The later version was far more self-reflexive with television drama flaunting its status as television drama. A character in the 2005 play pronounces: 'Tv is quizzes or cooking or gardening or diy or drama. And drama is either handcuffs or stethoscopes'. It also highlights such aspects as the fragmentation of television production and the downgrading of the writer. It shows, for example, a writer being given the recommendations of a focus group for script changes

Vice writes in a way that conveys these dramas well, from the overall plot to the intricacies of crucial scenes. Nevertheless, in our multimedia age, it is hard not to want to click on a clip instead of reading a description. It might have been good to have incorporated some screen shots at least. It stood to me that I remembered

many of these dramas from viewing them when they were originally transmitted. I was pleased to discover that many of these plays are now available as DVDs and easy to buy online. For those who did not see these dramas, or even for those who have, it would be useful to view these along side reading this book.

Unfortunately, the book ends with a jolt, stopping somewhat up in the air on a specific point rather than drawing various points together to come to an effective conclusion.

It is all the same a fine book, a serious and competent analysis of a major television writer. At £50 it might not be flying off the shelves in airport bookshops, but it should be ordered by libraries and recommended to students and scholars of television history. It would be a good idea to order DVDs of his work as well.

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