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Alan Clarke

NO DIRECTOR in British television's history stayed more true to the one-off play than Alan Clarke. From Alun Owen scripts for Associated Rediffusion in the middle Sixties to work in the late Eighties that, by television's lights, was positively *auteurist*, Clarke was an unswerving champion of the individual voice and the nonconformist vision.

He was born in Liverpool and never lost a certain scallywaggishness. Among the Oxbridge worriers, the Canadian barn-stormers and the myriad exotics who swarmed into the BBC to direct the "Wednesday Plays" in the days of teledrama plenty, Clarke and the gritty Scotsman James MacTaggart shone like good deeds.

In 1969, the year Alan Clarke directed his first "Wednesday Play" (Peter Terson's gently comic *The Last Train Through the Harecastle Tunnel*), that strand alone ran to 27 new productions: unthinkable now. A director might work across a wide range and Clarke did so, embracing Don Shaw's alarming army memoir *Sovereign's Company* and Douglas Livingstone's pawky seaside comedy *I Can't See My Little Willie*, Tony Parker's meticulous reproduction of prison in *A Life Is For Ever* and David Yallop's campaigning reconstruction of the Craig and Bentley case, *To Encourage the Others*.

Through the Seventies, he developed an enviable reputation as a writer's director. Colin Welland's first BBC play *The Hallelujah Handshake* and David Rudkin's *Penda's Fen* for BBC Birmingham both treated of individuals awkwardly placed in the Christian Church. The latter film, one of the most remarkable achievements in all television drama, enjoyed an unlikely repeat on Channel 4 on Sunday, in the last 36 hours of Clarke's life. Its special effects may have revealed its age but so did its seriousness and its power: contemporary television simply doesn't explore ideas as dangerous as these.

Notable too were David Hare's first teleplay *Man Above Men*, surely the best ever written about the judiciary, and two diversions into a more theatrical tradition, though tackled in the director's blithely irreverent manner: Solzhenitsyn's dour parable *The Love Girl and the Innocent* and Buchner's cerebrally enticing *Danton's Death*.

But a particularly happy working partnership with the writer Roy Minton (*Horace*, *Funny Farm*, *Fast Hands*) led to a famous row and a new thrust in Clarke's work. *Scum* (1977) was an uncompromising account of life in Borstal. Clarke shot it in a style of fast super-realism, but it was too super-realistic for the BBC, and the film was refused transmission. His subsequent feature film version of the same story missed the degree of verisimilitude the television play had achieved.

The protracted public debate over *Scum* was a watershed in Clarke's attitude to his work. He moved away from the conventional modes of his earlier productions and embraced highly stylised camerawork and editing, techniques that made formal or ritualistic or dreamlike a choice of material that was in various ways difficult: private, inert, frightening, arcane, privileged, brutal.



among business executives and Clarke shot it on a long lens so that the protagonists who strolled in pairs and negotiated deals never visibly progressed. *Psy-warriors* was a studio piece wherein the camera partook of the training of an anti-terrorist squad, the viewer being required to use almost as much initiative as the SAS men. And *Made in Britain* brought the full glue-sniffing rage of skin-head aggro into your living room and won the Prix Italia.

Out of this work came a fascination with Northern Ireland. Increasingly operating as his own writer or co-writer, Clarke made three graphic images of the benighted province: the relentlessly bleak domestic piece *Christine*; the almost wordless, Prix-Lo-carno-winning *Contact*, which recreated an army recon using a night-light camera; and the extraordinary *Elephant*, an entirely wordless, uncontextualised succession of sectarian slayings shot on the run in the streets and demonstrating beyond argument why the politicians have failed to solve the Irish conundrum.

His last two pieces were perhaps his finest. Jim Cartwright's *Road* was already a theatre hit of the highest originality, a rare example of rough stage poetry. Clarke reshaped it into something that owed nothing to the state yet reconceived with a steadicam the strange intimacy that Cartwright had achieved in a prom staging. And Al Hunter's *The Firm*, again controversial, took the audience where it had never been before, inside the head of the vocational football hooligan, Clarke daring to face the most excruciating cruelty in the quest for the meaning of these young men's rituals.

There were a couple of features — the widely liked *Rita*, *Sue and Bob Too* and the catastrophically misconceived *Billy the Kid and the Green Baize Vampire* — but Clarke's commitment was clearly to television. His body of work is as bold and as rich as any that the medium has played host to. Like that other provocative artist James MacTaggart, he has died wretchedly young (of spinal cancer) and largely unrecognised outside his profession. No director now building a television career can hope to enjoy the opportunities that Clarke's generation took for granted. And for that reason (but not only for that reason), television will never again be rewarded with the engagement and the courage of an Alan Clarke.

W. Stephen Gilbert

Alan Clarke, film director, born Liverpool 28 October 1935, married Jane Kinsey (one son, one daughter), died London 24 July 1990.