

The Criterion Collection's The Golden Age of Television

Not quite golden, but still valuable

By Charles Bogle
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The Golden Age of Television (The Criterion Collection), 2009. Three discs, Criterion store price, \$39.00.

The Criterion Collection has released a boxed set of eight teleplays from the “golden age of American television.” First aired in the years 1953 to 1958, these teleplays were rebroadcast in the early 1980s on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS); the Criterion Collection releases these rebroadcasts with commentaries and a booklet containing an introduction to the period and notes on each program.

The term “golden age” must be understood in its relativity and its proper context. By the time of television’s emergence as a mass medium after World War II, it had long since been determined that profit-driven, private ownership of media was the way to represent the “public interests” in the US. The medium would generate billions in profits and propagandize tirelessly on behalf of the ruling elite over the next half-century.

However, such was not always the case. When radio first came to national prominence, a large majority of broadcasters were non-profit affiliates of colleges and universities. Corporate interests pressured the federal government into passing the Radio Act in 1927, resulting in the Federal Radio Commission’s (FRC’s) decision to reserve nearly half the large 50,000-watt clear channels for only one owner each, with a predictable reduction in the number of broadcasters within two years.

Public opposition to the private takeover of the airwaves was almost immediate. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, however, responded to the nascent communications industry, and the corporate broadcasters pushed the Communications Acts through Congress in 1934, which gave the for-profit broadcasters near complete control of airtime.

By the dawn of the television era, the communications industry had been consolidated into a few large companies, and the public no longer had any say whatsoever about media content or ownership.

Postwar political and artistic expression also suffered due to the stifling atmosphere of the Cold War. The ultra-right House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) led the way, conducting “anti-red” witch-hunts. Both the Hollywood movie studios and television networks buckled under to the pressure and drew up blacklists and loyalty oaths to banish and/or control suspected subversives (the CBS blacklist and loyalty oath from 1950 are available at thekisseloffcollection.com).

In her essay “‘Golden Age’ of Television Drama,” Anna Everett notes that the combination of corporate control over live productions and the Cold War era and McCarthyism often resulted in teleplays that featured “simplistic morality tales” with weak characters who confronted problems largely of their own making and frequent pro-American and anti-communist references.

The purging of left-wing elements and the virtual criminalization of socialist views resulted in a terrible narrowing of US television’s scope in the 1950s, although many remarkably talented individuals continued to work in the industry, or entered it for the first time, sometimes as political exiles from Hollywood (for example, blacklisted director Abe Polonsky

and screenwriter Walter Bernstein).

None of the Criterion Collection’s teleplays includes anti-communist references, but several otherwise gripping productions do contain elements of the aforementioned simplistic moralizing. The collection also, however, offers several live performances that are probably as “golden” as anything American television has ever produced. A number of the television plays were later made into films, with varying degrees of success.

The earliest of the collected teleplays (1953), *Marty*, was written by Paddy Chayefsky and directed by Delbert Mann. A first-generation American, the title character (played by Rod Steiger) is a 36-year-old bachelor whose life revolves around his place of work (a tiny butcher shop), a bar, and the home of his widowed Italian mother (Esther Minciotti), where he exists as a self-described “fat little, ugly man who has had enough pain.”

Marty’s outlook changes when he meets a plain, 29-year-old schoolteacher, Clara Davis (Nancy Marchand), at the Waverly Club, a local singles dance club. Clara’s vulnerability and shyness gradually make Marty forget his own problems and reveal his gentle, protective nature to her. Marty’s affection gives Clara the courage to stand up to Marty’s mother when she, fearing being left alone, attempts to come between Clara and her son. The conclusion, unfortunately, is marred by Marty’s all too-rapid transformation.

Chayefsky’s screenplay is an honest portrayal of a post-World War II working class family confronting a rapidly changing America. Marty’s “old world ways”—the result of being the “good son” to his mother—are most evident when he appears bewildered by the superficial, sometimes cruel behavior of the men toward women at the Waverly Club. Steiger gives an equally honest performance free of the strain that sometimes undermined his later work in movies.

Two years later, the movie version of *Marty* (with different lead actors) would win several Academy Awards. By then, honest (or any) portrayals of working class, especially “ethnic,” families had pretty much disappeared from television screens, largely due to the advertisers’ insistence that they could not sell glistening chrome appliances and the middle-class, suburban lifestyle in the midst of such settings.

The most acclaimed television program of 1955 was the Kraft Television Theatre hour-long production, *Patterns*. Written by Rod Serling (later of *Twilight Zone* fame) and directed by Fielder Cook, the drama, like *Marty*, portrays a post-World War II America in the throes of wrenching change. All the men are expected to bow to Mr. Ramsie (Everett Sloane), CEO of Ramsie & Co., while all the women, wives as well as employees, are little more than handmaids to the men.

An aging executive, Andy Sloane (Ed Begley), breaks this pattern by arguing that labor deserves some share of the company profits—an attitude left over from the prewar “New Deal”—and thus runs up against Mr. Ramsie’s cost-cutting mentality. There’s no place for the Andy Sloanes in this new corporate world, and several scenes dramatize Mr. Ramsie’s

effort to force Sloane into retirement by humiliating him in front of the other executives.

By the time Fred Staples (Richard Kiley)—a young executive recently promoted to corporate headquarters—realizes he has been promoted to replace Andy Sloane (whom he admires and agrees with, philosophically), he has already become entrapped by corporate position and remuneration—i.e., he knows his actions are morally wrong, but he can't refuse success.

Everett Sloane and Ed Begley give particularly effective performances, and the crisp dialogue and close-ups capture the ruthless, profit-first corporate atmosphere, but the resolution of Staples's moral conflict—deciding to stay on because he feels he can change Mr. Ramsie—suffers from the time-worn Hollywood theme of the heroic individual, à la Frank Capra's 1940s movies, capable of reforming America's social problems.

No Time For Sergeants, from 1955 as well, is the only comedy in the collection, and it's also the weakest work. Directed by Alex Segal and starring Andy Griffith as Will Stockdale, *No Time for Sergeants* is little more than a vehicle for Griffith to revisit the premise of his early 1950s recordings when he played a "dumb as a fox" Southerner, whose monologues, most famously "What it was, was football," made fun of America's pastimes.

In *No Times for Sergeants*, Griffith, who is also the first-person narrator, directs his character's down-home philosophy against the corruption and inefficiency of the peacetime American armed services. Griffith's Stockdale is entirely believable without becoming a crude stereotype, and he does elicit laughs, but the laughs wear thin as the same routine is repeated in predictable settings with equally predictable reactions from the bumbling officers.

On the other hand, one reason to applaud the re-release of these eight teleplays is the inclusion of *A Wind from the South* (the United States Steel Hour, 1955), directed by Daniel Petrie and written by James Costigan. Often poetic and graced by Julie Harris's memorable performance as the 30-year-old single Irish woman Shevawn, *A Wind from the South* is a serious exploration of the emotional price we pay for unrealizable dreams.

Trapped in the Irish inn she and her practical brother Liam (Michael Higgins) inherited from their father, Shevawn has dreams of finding love if she could only travel, dreams that are fed by the American tourists who visit the inn.

One middle-aged, married American, Robert (Donald Woods), himself a dreamer, entreats her to stop listening to what others tell her she should do and be, and instead "listen to her heart." These appeals are born of a memory of which Robert can't let go, a memory of a young Irish woman he loved and foolishly lost years before during his first trip to Ireland.

Shevawn does decide to listen to her heart, and in one night puts an abrupt end to her dangerously extended innocence. At a local dance (which she attends for the first time), she rejects her first kiss from a younger man, because, as she later tells Robert, he wanted "a girl, not Shevawn"; and then she passionately embraces, kisses, and professes love for Robert, who responds in kind.

At the end, Robert and Shevawn are transformed by the experience, but not as one might expect. Each, with visible regret, comes to terms with his or her more prosaic fate, leaving the audience in much the same situation.

A Wind from the South is, in the very best sense of the word, adult programming. The dialogue, especially the exchanges between Shevawn and Robert, asks the viewer to consider critically his or her own dreams. Julie Harris's live performance reminds us that the movie camera never quite caught the stunning immediacy she could bring to a performance.

The U.S. Steel Hour's 1956 presentation of *Bang the Drum Slowly*, directed by Daniel Petrie and written by Arnold Schulman, stars a young Paul Newman as Henry Wiggen, a successful, if selfish professional

baseball pitcher, who is forced to think of someone else for a change when his friend, third-string catcher Bruce Pearson (Albert Salmi), contracts incurable cancer.

Wiggen's selfishness, supposedly exemplified by his holding out for a bigger salary, is countered by Pearson's matter-of-fact response to learning that he has cancer; in fact, his first concern is whether the manager will fire him.

Newman, who also narrates the television drama, plays the Wiggen character as an urban self-promoter who learns humility from his friend's understated struggle with cancer. At times, Newman overacts, especially in scenes that call for emotional depth—a trait that would remain with him after he discovered his moviemaking persona—but for the most part, he gives a credible performance.

One feels all along that the dying Bruce should have been at the center of this production, a sentiment validated by the superior 1973 movie version's decision to make Bruce's plight (the catcher was played by Robert De Niro) the focus while softening Henry Wiggen (Michael Moriarty).

The 1958 Playhouse 90 production of *Requiem for a Heavyweight* was written by Rod Serling and directed by Ralph Nelson. The storyline is not a new one: a washed-up boxer, Mountain McClintock (Jack Palance), is sold out by his manager, Maish (Keenan Wynn), and must confront life after boxing.

With a ninth-grade education, Mountain has few choices, and Maish's solution to Mountain's dilemma is to force him to become little more than a geek—i.e., a wrestler—complete with frontier outfit.

Grace Carney (Kim Hunter), a claims examiner for a New York unemployment office, offers Mountain hope and compassion and ultimately lands him a job working with children.

What distinguishes *Requiem* from other boxing productions with a similar story line (with the exception of the excellent 1949 movie *The Set-Up*, starring Robert Ryan and Audrey Totter) is the writing and acting.

Serling creates a palpable tension between the animalistic language used to describe the fight game and the language of compassion and genuine paths that informs that relationship between Mountain and Grace.

Palance's Mountain McClintock is both vulnerable and principled, and rightfully proud of what he has accomplished. Keenan Wynn, Ed Wynn (as Army, Mountain's aged trainer) and Kim Hunter also deliver sensitive interpretations of full-bodied characters.

Above all else, Serling's script is a searing critique of the boxing business. Himself a one-time boxer, Serling brought first-hand knowledge to his portrait of a sport where exploitation of human beings is an accepted part of the business, as attested to by the painful depictions of one-time boxers throwing punches at invisible adversaries.

Serling also adapted *The Comedian* from Ernest Lehman's novella of the same name. Directed by John Frankenheimer, the 1957 Playhouse 90 production focuses on an exceptionally gifted, egomaniacal comedian, Sammy Hogarth (Mickey Rooney), as he prepares for his first 90-minute televised variety show.

Capable of either raging or cajoling to get his way, Hogarth ricochets from one crisis to the next, the most serious being a pilfered script that threatens not only his own career but also the lives and careers of those who surround him. The public applause for the final product masks the turmoil and dismantled lives behind the curtain, an apt metaphor for television itself.

As a number of critics have argued, this is perhaps Rooney's finest performance; he leavens the bullying Hogarth with just enough moments of insecurity to make him human. As head writer Al Preston, Edmond O'Brien ably expresses his character's movement from an initial internal conflict over his diminishing writing talents to a final acceptance. Mel Torme as Lester Hogarth, his older brother's lackey, makes us initially sympathize with and finally look with disgust upon (as does his wife) a

man who uses his brother's success as an excuse for never facing his own shortcomings. And Kim Hunter as Lester's wife, Julie, brings a remarkable sensitivity to her portrayal of a woman whose inner strength is finally overcome by her willingness to debase herself for the sake of her husband's job.

Frankenheimer's use of camera angles to establish character relationships and close-ups to create the sense of capturing characters in unguarded, "real" moments can be overdone at times, but otherwise his direction is well paced and allows the actors to explore their respective characters.

By 1957, Serling had grown disgusted with television's corruption and its unwillingness to air the truth. In *The Comedian*, he found a vehicle for dramatizing that disgust.

Another Playhouse 90 production, 1958's *The Days of Wine and Roses*, is the final selection. Also directed by Frankenheimer, Joe Clay (Cliff Robertson) and Kirsten Arnesen (Piper Laurie) are two young employees of an advertising agency who meet at an office party and form a bond cemented partly by their shared recognition of the corruption inherent in their jobs and partly by a love of alcohol.

Eventually, Joe loses job after job and Kirsten sets fire to their apartment, resulting in the two of them living in hovel while trying to stop drinking and Kirsten's father, Ellis Arnesen (Charles Bickford), taking their daughter to live with him until they recover.

Instead, the couple continues drinking—at the same time denying they are alcoholics—until they hit rock bottom and Kirsten's father takes them to his farm where they work and live, sometimes sober and sometimes inebriated.

From here on out, *The Days of Wine and Roses* deteriorates into an endorsement for Alcoholics Anonymous, or at least a polemic against alcoholism instead of a dramatization of its consequences. One also loses the earlier sense that the couple's alcoholism is at least partly the result of a corporate world that expects its employees to drink.

Robertson's Joe Clay is more believable as a slick-talking salesman with a drinking problem than as a down-and-out alcoholic fighting for his life; his movements while drunk are too choreographed and his monologues during solitary drinking bouts too measured. Piper Laurie, on the hand, is highly believable as an intelligent young woman whose cynicism masks an underlying romantic idealization of the world.

The companion booklet contains useful information on the productions and stars, but it can sometimes read like promotional material for television.

On the other hand, the commentaries are consistently informative. A number of the artists involved in the productions speak openly about their memories (invariably fond) of making live television. Finally, when Rod Serling's widow speaks to her late husband's run-ins with the blacklist and censorship, we are rightfully reminded of the environment in which these teleplays were produced.

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