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Article

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Producing Classics on Outside Broadcast in the 1970s: *The Little Minister* (1975), *As You Like It* (1978) and *Henry VIII* (1979)

Billy Smart

Abstract

Cedric Messina, producer of *Play of the Month* (1967-77), the *BBC Television Shakespeare* (1978-80), and others, was responsible for the majority of BBC television adaptations of theatrical plays for over twenty years. This article examines three Messina Outside Broadcast (OB) productions, *The Little Minister* (1975), *As You Like It* (1978) and *Henry VIII* (1979), to explain the practice and significance of OB drama. Messina believed that recording in romantic real-life locations (castles, forests, stately homes) could inspire visual pleasure for viewers, an approach based upon the simultaneous, but perhaps contradictory, representation of the *decorative/spectacular*, and the (‘newsreel’/‘documentary’) *real*.

Key words: Cedric Messina, Shakespeare, BBC, outside broadcast, adaptation.

Few producers have ever dominated one single genre of television drama to the extent that Cedric Messina did with the classic play at the BBC. As producer of *Thursday Theatre* (1964-65), *Theatre 625* (1964-68), *Play of the Month* (1967-77), *Stage 2* (1971-73) and *The BBC Television Shakespeare* (1978-80) as well as many further one-off productions, Messina was responsible for the majority of BBC television theatrical adaptations for 20 years.

This article outlines the artistic ethos behind Messina's productions, made with the intention of creating an experience of visual pleasure, predicated around 'straightforward' storytelling, starring leading actors. It then considers Messina's conception of the TV theatrical adaptation through examining three productions made on Outside Broadcast (OB), a form of television that he particularly cherished, J. M. Barrie's *The Little Minister* (*Play of the Month*, 1975), *As You Like It* and *Henry VIII* (*The BBC Television Shakespeare*, 1978 and 1979). In order to fully elucidate the production context of these plays, the practice of OB and its particular significance within the changing technology of 1970s British television will be explained.

Messina believed that shooting plays in locations that were both romantic and realistic, such as castles, forests and stately homes, could create productions of tremendous visual pleasure for the television viewer, intending the entire *BBC Television Shakespeare* cycle to be made in this way, appointing his regular repertory of directors to oversee the creation of the definitive set of 'straightforward' Shakespeare productions (Willis 1991; Wiggins 2005). This ambition was unrealised, with only two productions made outside the television studio before his dismissal as producer after the first 12 plays, with many productions failing to impress critics¹ and his unadventurous approach institutionally unpopular within BBC drama (Sutton 1982; Willis 1991; Cellan Jones 2006).

Visual Pleasure and the Real: Outside Broadcast

One innovative development in the production of the theatrical adaptation that Messina particularly sought to encourage in the 1970s was the making of plays on OB, of which he produced or directed 10; *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1971), *The*

Duchess of Malfi (1972), *The Love-Girl & the Innocent* (1973), *The Recruiting Officer* (1973), *Twelfth Night* (1974), *The Little Minister* (1975), *Love's Labour's Lost* (1975), *London Assurance* (1976), *As You Like It* (1978) and *Henry VIII* (1979).

Unlike the great majority of stage adaptations, recorded 'as live' in the television studio, these plays were produced on location, shot by OB units working with videotape, rather than film. These adaptations were recorded on sites considered specifically suitable for their source material, recreating theatrical scenes in existing locations such as countryside, parks, streets and historic buildings.

An assumption underpinning OB drama was that, by being filmed in real fields, streets and houses, it could be seen as closer to reality, and therefore more authentic, than drama that recreated such locations in the studio. This assumption has different implications for theatrical adaptations as opposed to other forms of television drama, as stage plays are written for performance on artificial sets that recreate or represent actual locations, whereas screenplays can be written with the intention of being filmed on actual locations. Therefore, the process of theatrical adaptations being made on location raises questions, both of the implications of a more authentic realisation than might be expected in theatrical productions of the source plays, and of textual fidelity, through the potential 'opening out' of scripts to incorporate the dramatic potential of location and exterior recording.

All three Messina productions considered in this article are profitable sources to examine questions of authenticity, and of the particular challenges and conditions of adaptation when applied to OB production. All are historical plays of classic status that can feature exteriors, the interiors of grand buildings, and incorporate large-scale set pieces: riots, wrestling matches, court masques. While the plays' location

recording implies a greater sense of evoked reality, this sense of realism does not weaken the decorative aesthetic of visual pleasure that defines Messina's studio productions.

Messina's earliest OB productions are amongst the first systematic attempts in Britain to make television drama on OB, a development that started with the adoption of colour television in the late 1960s. [Since the inception of the television service Outside Broadcast technology had primarily been used to relay live events, especially sports, from exterior locations.](#) The sudden interest in developing OB drama at this time is explained by the much greater cost of colour film stock than monochrome stock (the routine way of filming location material for black and white drama), with alternative forms of programme-making being sought to save production budgets. Early colour OB television productions provided specific problems for the unwieldy existing Plumbicon colour cameras, which had been developed for use in more controlled studio lighting conditions, rather than in natural light or location interiors (Miles and Wood 2004, 27-9; Sutton 1982, 103). Production of drama made on OB became more frequent in the mid-1970s, when the introduction of the new technology of EMITRON cameras made OB a much more viable proposition for programme-makers. The considerably lighter EMITRON cameras, which could be hand-held, had been designed especially for location work, and required a smaller unit, of two cameras and a soundman, than was previously needed.

This new technology had major potential benefits for broadcasters, particularly the fiscal advantage of being cheaper than film. The amount of footage that could be recorded on OB made it much more productive than film, able to produce over ten minutes of drama in a day.² This footage could be immediately viewed on location and checked for errors on monitors, unlike the system of viewing

rushes at the end of a day's shooting on film, when it could be discovered that film stock was flawed, resulting in the complete loss of an entire day's work. Videotape was much more adaptable to changing states of natural light than film, and recording could continue in conditions such as drizzle that would stop production on film. Sound-recording was more immediate and less complex than on film, with actors having radio mikes, and the signal being fed directly into the tape, obviating the need to redub and post-synch. This sense of immediacy was also accentuated by the crisper image and greater depth of field that videotape could show, so that, for example, the detail of individual bracken and ferns in the open could be picked up by the camera, a potentially promising development for the drama of spectacle and decorative detail preferred by Messina. The mobility of the OB units also opened up the range of locations that could be used considerably, shooting in wildernesses miles from civilisation becoming practicable.

These advantages were balanced by equivalent disadvantages. The more immediate sound recording onto tape was also less defined than in post-dubbed film or studio sound, running the risk of dialogue becoming muffled by simultaneous local sound such as wind, footsteps or the echo of location interiors. The greater depth of field that could be achieved on videotape could also be distracting for the viewer, showing long takes of locations in complete and indiscriminating detail, rather than the more nuanced focusing that was an established part of film technique. The personnel of OB units were specialised technicians, specifically trained for working on OB and therefore with little experience of working with drama, unlike location film units who offered a well-established set-up, drawing upon decades of experience in the British film industry. Crews operating the new OB technology were still inexperienced in working with multiple angles and set-ups or dramatic framing and

grouping, techniques not needed in their experience of recording sports and events, leading to a preponderance of scenes recorded in long-shot, unlike in filmed or studio drama (Sutton 1982, 103).

The different circumstances and working methods of OB production altered the status of the director from that held in the studio or on film. While on film shoots the director would be on location controlling operations and giving instructions, and in the studio the director would be in close proximity to performers, viewing recording on the studio floor from the gallery, able to step in and intervene if necessary, on OB the director could be as far as a mile away from the scene being recorded, viewing events on a scanner.³ This meant that OB drama production was less of an auteur medium for directors than either the studio, where they had greater ability to control and react to events, or film, where they could reshape material in postproduction. Television directors tended to have a natural preference for the greater degree of control which film gave them over videotape:

For me, above all, films are made in the cutting room, by the slow and intensely satisfying collage-like process which gives such flexibility and control. (Michael Darlow, in Sutton 1982, 101)

Filmmaking is washing by hand, as against the launderette of the video process. (John Glenister, *ibid*)

This preference was accentuated by the aesthetic quality of the OB videotape image, generally held to be inferior to film, another director maintaining that:

The picture quality of exteriors shot on OB cameras is sometimes not as aesthetically pleasing as that shot on film. The picture quality on film can be further controlled in the processing stage. (Rodney Bennett, *ibid*)

Sutton suggests that OB was poorly suited to the type of exterior drama that most benefited from such directorial input in the cutting room, especially screenplays which required action sequences. Instead, Sutton foresaw a specific mode of drama particularly appropriate for OB production; ‘Where OB has the edge is with scripts that have long dialogue and group scenes; when the action is confined to a reasonably controllable area and the use of two cameras together can be an asset’ (1982, 102). This hypothesis would appear to particularly support the making of stage adaptations on OB. Theatrical plays are generally inherently rich in dialogue and continuity of performance, and detail of how speakers respond to each other could be better picked up by two cameras as opposed to one on film. The continual viewers’ complaint that studio representations of exterior locations were distractingly unrealistic could not be made about plays recorded in real exteriors. The economics of production also particularly suited stage adaptations. Because of their theatrical origin, stage plays generally made long television programmes of an hour and a half or over, and included long scenes of continuous action over a limited number of settings, the type of narrative which could be shot on OB cost-effectively.

Messina's willingness to make adaptations on OB can in part be attributed to his showman's instincts; historical locations such as castles and stately homes, set in landscaped gardens and verdant countryside, offered great opportunities for arresting spectacle and decorative detail. Sometimes the availability of a location dictated the choice of play, as with *Love's Labour's Lost*, one of Shakespeare's least performed and hardest to follow plays:

Well, we wanted to do another Shakespeare comedy. And I particularly wanted a play that was set in the open air. In this, all the action takes place in the open air. We recorded it at Glyndebourne. It looks lovely. All the girls are very, very pretty. They look like Botticelli paintings. (Drabble 1975, 17)

For Messina, the beauty of Glyndebourne as location acted as justification for the demanding choice of play; 'I hope that when people switch on, they will see all these glorious Renaissance creatures wandering around these beautiful gardens and they'll stay with it' (ibid). Historical exteriors were also more likely to garner publicity than studio recording because of the presence of star actors in public locations, and the owners of heritage sites wishing to promote them to an audience of potential visitors. *Radio Times* coverage for the 1974 production of *Twelfth Night* is a good example of how publicity could work to the advantage of both programme-makers and property-owners, with performers and Castle Howard on the front cover, and an extensive colour on-location feature, 'A Hard Day's Twelfth Night' (Anon 1974, 6-7) explaining the history of the rooms and grounds of the Castle to be seen onscreen.

Viewers' responses to Messina's OB adaptations (recorded in BBC Audience Research Reports) were decidedly mixed. Although many viewers generally responded favourably to locations' natural attractiveness, OB conditions also frequently made these productions hard for viewers to follow, with dialogue impaired by muffled exterior and echoing interior acoustics. As the form became more familiar, dissatisfaction became more prevalent and vocal, with complaints of distracting real-life weather and lighting and repetitive settings. By 1975 (*Love's Labour's Lost*), a section of viewers were prepared to pronounce that they 'dislike outdoor productions in general' (Smart 2014, 456-7).⁴

This reaction indicates a central paradox inherent to the form of OB productions of classic plays made in this period. OB technology allowed Messina to pursue his interest in creating an aesthetic of decorative visual pleasure through recording in castles, stately homes, gardens and forests, but also meant that these locations were experienced by the viewer with a degree of murkiness in terms of sound and lighting, with looming clouds and echoing floors undermining the attractive aesthetic through the uncomfortable constant presence of realism. These production circumstances also affected performances differently from in the studio, Ronnie Barker observing during the recording of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

The conditions, said Barker, 'are hell'. But he wasn't complaining.

'Because it's in the open air you feel you're *there*. It's like a documentary: the trees, the leaves and the mud are so real you can hardly believe that it's taking place at any other time. We're playing it 1865, but it feels so 'now' that it's almost like a newsreel. (Burn 1971, 8)

The terms documentary and newsreel provoke an expectation of realism on the part of the viewer, while the theatrical source material implies the creation of a fantastical and magical world. The three productions considered in this article provide suitable case studies through which to examine the dichotomy between these two expectations with reference to the specific production contexts for each play.

***Play of the Month: The Little Minister* (BBC1, 2 November 1975)**

Although *The Little Minister* was largely overlooked, receiving little publicity or critical reaction, it had far-reaching consequences for the future of the theatrical adaptation at the BBC, acting as a template for future OB productions. While directing the play on location at Glamis Castle, Messina found himself enchanted with the play's setting:

I went for the burn walk, and it seemed to me the most wonderful sort of forest. It occurred to me that if one were to do a production of *As You Like It*, then this was the place to do it. (Fenwick 1978, 20)

As Messina held a powerful position in BBC drama as the acknowledged leading producer of theatrical adaptations (Nicholson 1970; Drabble 1975; Willis 1991) he was able to pitch this idea quickly, expanded from one production of *As You Like It* into a grand project of all 37 Shakespeare plays, to the BBC's Director of

Programmes and Director General, receiving an ‘immediate and enthusiastic’ commission (Fenwick 1978, 6). In the light of its influence upon the development of the theatrical adaptation, as a model for production of the most expensive and ambitious television drama project undertaken by the BBC, *The Little Minister* is therefore a production of considerable historical significance. As the template for television adaptations of Shakespeare it should be studied for how it works as an adaptation designed for OB circumstances, and as to whether its specific qualities had a wider application to other plays.

Although written and first performed in 1897, *The Little Minister* is set 60 years earlier and, despite dealing with a Luddite riot in rural Scotland, could not be said to be overtly political in its intent. The play has narrative roots in a Shakespearean tradition of pastoral comedy, including comic rustics, a love plot based around confused identities (the mill owner’s daughter who incites the riot, Babbie (Helen Mirren), disguises herself as a gypsy) and a magical transformation culminating in a wedding between Babbie and Gavin Dishart, (Ian Ogilvy) the village’s ‘little minister’ who commits himself to marriage without knowing her true identity.

The Little Minister differs from its Shakespearean antecedents in following a much simpler Victorian dramatic construction than the loose, epic, structure of the Elizabethan open stage. The play is divided into four acts, each consisting of a single scene with a specific setting: woodland, cottage, castle, and garden. OB allowed the possibility of ‘opening out’ the play to an extent that was impractical in the studio, and expensive on film. Offstage scenes only described in Barrie’s play are shown; most notably the riotous meeting of the weavers, but also scenes of soldiers (including cavalry) on manoeuvres, impatient parishioners waiting in church for the delayed

minister, and a comic sequence of the waylaid pastor running from location to location when late for his service. This opening-out changes the narrative of the play, giving it a more spectacular feel, integrating locations where each setting has a tangible, topographical, relation for the viewer to each of the play's other settings, and a much less apparent sense of its theatrical origin than most other *Play of the Month* productions.

Many moments of spectacle in *The Little Minister* are presented to the viewer through techniques that could only have been practicably achieved through the mobility and comparative cheapness of OB production. The passage of time between acts is evoked through a shot of the entire village at dawn, taken from a high vantage point (presumably a steeple or turret). A great sense of distance, space and impending confrontation is created when Babbie's father (Peter Barkworth) arrives at the village through a lengthy continuous panning shot of his horse-drawn carriage travelling from wooded countryside into the township. Although such technically demanding effects had been seen in feature films, the time and expense needed to set them up on film meant that shots of this type had rarely been attempted in television drama before.

Within this expanded, opened-out structure, made possible by the new technology of OB, three distinctive types of location were used in the adaptation; countryside, village and castle. Each setting was approached differently in Messina's production, with variable results and effects. For countryside scenes, a greater expanse of space and variety of locations could be used than would have been possible on a West End proscenium arch stage of the 1890s, meaning that scenes of pursuit and eavesdropping could be realised in a different manner. While these conventions' success in theatrical performance are reliant upon the audience's willing suspension of disbelief, the ability of the multiple cameras of the OB unit to shoot

scenes from two different parts of a forest could show interrelated events occurring in separate parts of a wilderness, adding a sense of expansiveness. The depth of field of OB videotape enhances this sense of greater plausibility given to a pastoral narrative. The play starts with a group of villagers looking into the offstage distance at the Minister's cottage and discussing his recent arrival, verbally creating an impression of the pastor and community in the minds of the theatrical audience. In Messina's adaptation, both the villagers in woodland and the pastor's cottage are shown in long shot, making what was previously described a concrete actuality, removing a layer of imaginative work on the part of the viewer.

A problem with the woodland scenes is that sound recording is cramped and muffled, with actors' voices struggling to be heard against ambient conditions of babbling stream and (incongruous nocturnal) birdsong (an unfortunate consequence of night filming). Ambient sound adds authenticity to the scene, as one might expect to hear these noises in a forest, but realised at the expense of audibility. 1970s audio technology made it much easier for programme-makers in postproduction to dub sounds *into* a programme than to mute them *out*, a clear advantage of studio over OB recording.

Village scenes use more bodies than customary for television drama of the time, taking advantage of more cost-effective OB recording to reuse extras over a variety of scenes; riot, street and congregation. Being able to place this plethora of extras into a greater variety of locations created an unfamiliar, visually diverting, effect for viewers. Authentic period details on location could be incorporated into scenes more easily than in studio recording. For example, the weaver's cottage includes a working period loom, shown in action, a property difficult to obtain and insure for studio use.

Specific OB location problems are most apparent in Glamis Castle's interiors, where grand rooms are always shown in full extent, sometimes to the detriment of narrative and characterisation. For example, when the Minister first enters Babbie's father's vast drawing room his reaction is to look, overawed, at the ceiling. Messina shows this moment through a long panning shot following the Minister's point of view, emphasising the room's ornate painting and tremendous height, telling more about the Castle than character or situation. This tendency is most marked during the scene's crucial dramatic point, when two characters in conference together decide what action to take, an exchange shown in long shot against the full extent of the room's wall. This impresses the size of the room upon the viewer, while dissipating the scene's dramatic interest through being hard to follow and failing to show the room to best advantage by making detail of paintings and furnishings too small to discern easily. The dulling effect of long shots upon the viewer in castle scenes is further exacerbated by the problem of echoing floors that made it difficult for performers to both move and be heard at the same time.

Viewers' reactions (BBC WAC VR/75/627)⁵ indicate a paradoxical cognitive process of interpretation. Two terms of praise predominate, viewers responding to fairy-tale-like 'romance and whimsy', while understanding that the atmosphere of the unlikely and 'wholesome' story was accentuated by being placed in a 'realistic' historical background. That a production managed to combine fantastical and actual pleasures for viewers indicated the possibility of successfully producing much of the Shakespeare series on OB.

The BBC Television Shakespeare: As You Like It (BBC2, 17 December 1978)

While the similarities found by Messina between the pastoral comedies of *The Little Minister* and *As You Like It* are readily apparent, there are also great differences between Barrie's and Shakespeare's dramatic technique, disparities that prevented *As You Like It* from being approached in the same way. The Victorian play's specific setting anchors production design and aesthetic in the actual time and location of a nineteenth-century Scottish village, where historically-aware viewers might expect soldiers and weavers to appear and act in certain ways. Shakespeare's comedy is set on a much more abstract plane, with settings no more historically specific than court and forest, concluding with the appearance of the God Hymen acting as *deus ex machina*. While *The Little Minister* is entirely based around the immediate and actual circumstances of protagonists, *As You Like It* requires greater imaginative involvement on the part of viewers in order to engage completely in a poetic and philosophically speculative play, often told in long speeches.

As You Like It is located in two different settings, Act One at court with the remainder in the Forest of Arden. As with *The Little Minister*, this meant the production fell into separate court and countryside sections, each with different aesthetic and mood. Unlike *The Little Minister*, *As You Like It* lacks a third village setting, the populous streets of which bridge castle and forest in Barrie's play, providing a strong topographical sense of connection between the play's worlds. This results in a fissure in visual style of Shakespeare's play after half an hour, with an abrupt move from court to forest with no return. This change would be particularly apparent to viewers previously unfamiliar with the play, confounding aesthetic expectations as to what sort of drama they were seeing, while at the same time heightening the sense of banishment felt by characters. Director Basil Coleman justified this contrast as inherent to his reading of *As You Like It* as:

an anti-materialist play... About rediscovering Nature and our dependence on it... It touches on our responsibility to the environment, questions the reasons for courts and armies and self-protection. It rediscovers natural freedom. (Fenwick 1978, 26)

Bulman (1984) argues that Messina intended to create a unified style across *BBC Shakespeare* productions, ideally achieved through OB location recording. Location shooting was seen as creating a more cinematic mode of television than the studio, creating a sense of reality that accentuated the active dramatic elements of plays ahead of ideas and abstractions:

To play to film's strength, Messina advised his directors to keep the audience unaware of theatrical conventions, omit as much artifice as possible, and dedicate themselves to the principle that Shakespeare, to be done right, must be done *naturalistically*. (1984, 572)

This commitment to naturalism and plausibility manifests itself differently in the play's two sections. Court scenes are rooted in the concrete and plausible (conflicts between characters culminating in banishment) while fantastical and implausible aspects are more apparent in the forest. According to Bulman's reading, this division ought to have made the main body of *As You Like It* harder to realise (in a manner true to Messina's naturalistic intentions) than the court section.

Act one is shot in such a way as to make heritage production values highly visible, demonstrating the extensive access clearly granted to the historic site. The play provides many opportunities to use multiple locations for every separate grouping and encounter, a potential explored to maximum extent, with action occurring in several of the Castle's smaller rooms, hallways, stairways, courtyards, and gardens, as well as a specially constructed marquee for the wrestling match. This multiplicity creates an effect of continual visual spectacle, while failing to establish any fixed spatial sense of dramatic setting. No individual location is ever returned to, requiring viewers to be especially attentive to follow the plot and keep track of characters. The distraction created by the many castle settings in the court section is augmented by costume decisions, in particular Rosalind (Helen Mirren) and Celia's (Angharad Rees) elaborate pointed headdresses which add a foot to the actresses' height.

Using OB for pastoral scenes was potentially problematic, placing a series of unrealistic situations into a forest that would clearly be identified as real by the viewer. Neither minimalist nor elaborate design could be achieved in a natural exterior open to the elements, so Coleman's production emphasised the contrast between an idealised pastoral world and realistic actual forest. Problems of filming in the Scottish countryside are undisguised, with performers having to be heard over high winds and swish midges away from their faces. This realist approach is particularly realised through the gestures of James Bolam's morose Touchstone, shivering against the wind and stepping into sheep dung.

For Bulman this approach gives the production a sceptical tone, giving weight to the play's more cynical and worldly characters, Jaques (Richard Pasco) and Touchstone (James Bolam). This emphasis acts as an alienation effect, discouraging

suspension of disbelief about the effectiveness of Rosalind's breeches disguise or the resolution created by Hymen's appearance as *deus ex machina*. Bulman sees this alienation as an inevitable corollary of the realist view created by Messina's stipulation that the play be given a naturalistic setting (1984, 176). This sceptical tone, undermining the magical transformative implications of the pastoral space, might not have reaffirmed audience expectations of signifiers of heritage in a production shot in a historical location. American reviewers expressed a different response to the programme than British critics (who were much more likely to be familiar with Scottish countryside), reading a level of enchantment into the setting:

It's too bad that the entire canon can't be moved to the great outdoors...

This colorful production is escapist entertainment at its most sublime.

(Don Shirley, *Washington Post*, 28 February 1979 quoted in Bulman and Coursen 1988, 251)

The springtime colors of the Scottish countryside match the springtime lilt of the romantic play. (Cecil Smith, *Los Angeles Times*, 28 February 1979 quoted in *ibid.*, 251)

BBC audience research did not share British critical disdain for the production, nor did the sample report find scepticism and alienation in Coleman's interpretation. Viewers expressed unqualified approval for the production's visual and performance style:

The use of outside locations greatly enhanced enjoyment of the production for many, who described the combination of lovely locations and beautiful costumes as ‘virtually perfect’. A handful said they liked this type of production with ‘no gimmicks’. (BBC WAC VR/78/551)

***The BBC Television Shakespeare: Henry VIII* (BBC2, 25 February 1979)**

Only one other OB production ended up being made for the *BBC Shakespeare*, Kevin Billington's *Henry VIII*. The decision to appoint a non-BBC director with a film background for this particularly elaborate and demanding project was made by BBC heads of drama against Messina's wishes, indicating an institutional sense that OB adaptations would have to be rethought:

Cedric was finding it difficult to get good directors. There was a lot of work about and he was not over popular. He appointed a very ordinary staff director to do *Henry VIII*. I, for once, trod on this and suggested Kevin Billington, an experienced film director who, in the end, shot it at Leeds Castle and made a lovely job of it. (Cellan Jones 2006, 68)

Unlike *As You Like It*, recording was spread across three separate historic locations, Leeds, Hever, and Penshurst Castles. Although recorded in disparate locations the production presents one unified world of court, returning back to specific rooms and places throughout the play, building up a spatial sense of where sources of power and territory are found, particularly in the case of Cardinal Wolsey's quarters. This use of location is particularly suitable for a play preoccupied with plotting and secrecy. The

full expanse and range of castle locations are exploited to achieve dramatic understanding of the power implications of each scene; courtiers hurriedly plot in alcoves while the object of their plotting is seen, initially from a distance, crossing a forecourt towards them; characters start scenes by meeting in crowded taverns then move outdoors for the part of their plans for which secrecy is most required.

Whispered delivery of such secretive scenes appears less artificial here than in studio realisations of conspiracies, as performers respond to the 'real-life' acoustics of the settings. Responding to these authentic locations, the performance style of *Henry VIII* is more muted and intimate than other productions of histories in the BBC series.

Although recorded entirely on location, *Henry VIII* is the OB adaptation that bears most affinity to studio technique. This is largely due to the expansive space created by the castles' great halls, allowing cameras better opportunities to track and pan, as in the large purpose-built television studio. This means that the viewer is less continually aware of the location than in other OB adaptations, as the production's rhythm and pace are more similar to other television dramas, until specific details become apparent which augment the sense of realism. For example, when Henry VIII is introduced over the course of a tracking shot, it gradually becomes apparent to the viewer that the courtroom has a ceiling, creating a sense of actual location that becomes more precise and detailed once the viewer sees the performers' breath in the cold, neither effect one that could be achieved in the television studio.

Critical responses reported a sense of motion and distance created by use of real locations:

Those long Tudor corridors picking up people like telescopes; the blazing blocks of cardinal red which, shot from the eye level of the menaced queen, looked like fat tongues of fire; the eyes of courtiers glittering as the camera caught them; Henry's trick of circling round and round his archbishops. (Banks-Smith, *Guardian*, 25 February 1979 quoted in Richmond 1994, 110)

Unlike other Messina productions, the decorative aesthetic of *Henry VIII* stems from the actuality of locations, where beautiful furnishings and decorations form integral details of the architecture of existing rooms. For Richmond (1994), this realness gives Billington's production a subdued aesthetic, lacking the heightened style required for a play formed of grand processions and tableaux and baroque and melodramatic scenes. The combined effect of actual locations and muted performance leads Richmond to find affinities between *Henry VIII* and docudrama (1994, 108), not something that could be said of the studio realisations of the history plays, which make no attempt at literal realism.

Audience response to *Henry VIII* was enthusiastic, achieving an exceptionally high Reaction Index of 80 (BBC VR/79/101). Although much of this affirmation can be attributed to an unfamiliar play about historical figures of perennial interest, it is also clear that OB production enhanced viewers' enjoyment:

Although a small number of people criticised the production for being too dark, in general the lavish sets and costumes received much approbation,

as did the appropriate use of locations. Several viewers mentioned how well the atmosphere of intrigue had been conveyed by the production.

(BBC VR/79/101)

This report shows the production achieving two separate things, being understood to be simultaneously ‘lavish’ and ‘appropriate’, both providing opportunities for visual pleasure while creating an ambience especially suited to a conspiracy. By being placed in their precise historical location attractive details such as costume were recognised by critics as being entirely authentic: ‘The magnificent velvets, furs, and jewels of Tudor Costume glowed in the kind of grey-stone setting for which they were intended’ (Sylvia Clayton, *Daily Telegraph*, 26 February 1979 quoted in Bulman and Coursen 1988, 256).

Although the integration of location and source material in *Henry VIII* made it one of the most successful and co-ordinated OB adaptations, it was also the final BBC Shakespeare production to be made in this way, the prohibitive expense of the three locations (Willis 1991, 189) and greater time needed to record proving too demanding for the process to be repeated.⁶ This leaves *Henry VIII* as an anomalous production in the canon of OB adaptations, providing a model for how the form might have progressed, with disparate locations thoughtfully edited together to create an integrated whole, but also possibly a successful adaptation because the marriage between OB form and source play, with a historically precise setting and emphasis on pageantry and choreography, was particularly well-matched. It is ironic that the popular and critically-acclaimed *Henry VIII*, with its director appointed against Cedric Messina’s wishes should have turned out to be the production closest to Messina’s

ideal conception of television Shakespeare, and unfortunate for Messina's subsequent reputation that he was not able to attempt further productions that achieved *Henry VIII's* successful balance between the decorative and the real.

This division, between the decorative or spectacular and the real, is a useful distinction to bear in mind when tracking the subsequent development of British television drama during the 1980s and 1990s. While contemporary popular drama in a realist idiom adopted extensive outside broadcast production (such as the purpose-built housing development setting of *Brookside* (1982-2003), or the verité feel of real-life London settings in police series *The Bill* (1984-2010), the use of OB in period dramas fell away, although large-scale serials such as *The Pickwick Papers* (1985) and *Vanity Fair* (1987) adopted the technology to present diverting spectacles over a wide range of locations. Our understanding of the development of television drama is enhanced through research into how technical innovation affected production circumstances and the aesthetic feel of programmes. This research methodology becomes particularly enlightening when combined with biographical consideration of different approaches towards the application of technology taken by individual practitioners, especially producers, directors and designers. Every programme-maker had a unique sense of what might be possible or viable uses of new technology in their productions, determined by specific career experiences and individual conceptions of what television drama could be. Although the impresario Messina was an exceptional figure, this case study has wider relevance in highlighting how, throughout the history of television drama, producers have been deciding when and how to adopt innovative new technologies.

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The BBC Television Shakespeare. 1978-85. BBC2.

BBC Television Shakespeare, The: As You Like It. 1978. First broadcast 17 December by BBC2. Directed by Basil Coleman, written by William Shakespeare and produced by Cedric Messina.

BBC Television Shakespeare, The: Henry VIII. 1979. First broadcast 25 February by BBC2. Directed by Kevin Billington, written by William Shakespeare and produced by Cedric Messina.

Bill. The. 1984-2010. Thames/ITV.

Brookside. 1982-2003. Mersey Television/Channel 4.

Pickwick Papers, The. 1985. BBC1.

Play of the Month. 1965-83. BBC1.

Play of the Month: The Little Minister, The. 1975. First broadcast 2 November by BBC1. Directed by Cedric Messina, written by J. M. Barrie and produced by Alan Shallcross.

Play of the Month: London Assurance. 1976. First broadcast 10 October by BBC1. Directed by Ronald Wilson, written by Dion Boucicault and produced by Cedric Messina.

Play of the Month: The Love-Girl & the Innocent. 1973. First broadcast 16 September by BBC1. Directed by Alan Clarke, written by Alexander Solzhenitsyn and produced by Cedric Messina.

Play of the Month: Love's Labour's Lost. 1975. First broadcast 14 December by BBC1. Directed by Basil Coleman, written by William Shakespeare and produced by Cedric Messina.

Play of the Month: A Midsummer Night's Dream. 1971. First broadcast 26 September by BBC1. Directed by James Cellan Jones, written by William Shakespeare and produced by Cedric Messina.

Play of the Month: The Recruiting Officer. 1973. First broadcast 18 November by BBC1. Directed by David Giles, written by George Farquhar and produced by Cedric Messina.

Stage 2. 1971-73. BBC2.

Stage 2: The Duchess of Malfi. 1972. First broadcast 10 October by BBC2. Directed by James MacTaggart, written by John Webster and produced by Cedric Messina.

Theatre 625. 1964-68. BBC2.

Thursday Theatre., 1964-65. BBC2.

Twelfth Night. 1974. First broadcast 14 May by BBC2. Directed by David Giles, written by William Shakespeare and produced by Cedric Messina.

Vanity Fair. 1987. BBC1.

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¹ However, audiences received the first two series of *The BBC Television Shakespeare* very positively. The average RI index for the first two series of the programme was 76, the highest individual figure 80 for *Henry VIII* and the lowest, 68 for *The Tempest* (BBC WAC VR/80/242).

² The average rate of footage produced per day on OB for BBC drama in 1979 was six minutes, as opposed to two and a half on film (Sutton 1982, 99). Early *Play of the Month* OB productions experimented with tighter schedules, James Cellan Jones' 1971 *Midsummer Night's Dream* being filmed at Scotney Castle over just four days, an exercise that Cellan Jones retrospectively considered to have been logistical "madness" and artistically unsuccessful (2006, 48).

³ An example of an OB production that took advantage of a scanner van being located at this distance from recording is the *Doctor Who* story *The Sontaran Experiment* (BBC1, 1975) recorded in remote and inaccessible parts of Dartmoor (Pixley 1996).

⁴ Observations taken from BBC Audience Research reports for *Play of the Month: A Midsummer*

Night's Dream (BBC1, 1971) (BBC WAC VR/71/388), *Play of the Month: The Recruiting Officer* (BBC1, 1973) (BBC WAC VR/73/666), *Twelfth Night* (BBC2, 1974) (BBC WAC VR/74/307) and *Play of the Month: Love's Labours Lost* (BBC1, 1975) (BBC WAC VR/75/701).

⁵ “It is estimated that the audience for this broadcast was 3.6% of the United Kingdom population. Programmes on BBC2 and ITV at the time were seen by 6.8% and 17.4% (averages)” (BBC WAC VR/75/627)

⁶ Willis (1991: 319-20) provides a table of the recording time taken for each play in the Shakespeare series. While the average production spent a week in the studio, *Henry VIII* was shot between 27 November 1978 and January 7 1979.