

Short Essay: Chayefsky, Serling and
Rose's Nationwide Impact
Through Live Television Drama

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COM FT 712: The Golden Age of Television

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The stereotype of 1950s America evokes peaceful, comfortable sameness. That environment did exist, at least as the post-WWII ideal of “the white American suburban middle-class family”¹ surrounded by ethnically and economically similar neighbors.² Yet even then, some observers recognized the dark side of that bright image. Writers Paddy Chayefsky, Rod Serling and Reginald Rose presented alternative views of American society that resonated because they showed the reality of people’s lives. The intimacy and reach of that rising medium, live television drama, only intensified the impact of their themes.

Chayefsky moved the public so because his works exposed the universal in the mundane³ through warts-and-all staging that undermined the decade’s shiny ideals. Teleplays like *The Mother* and *Printer’s Measure* addressed aging, an inevitability for all, and its “sadness and loneliness,”⁴ a possible fear for all. Not all adults had endured epic romances or spectacular shipwrecks but they could sympathize with the basic professional and personal struggles⁵ featured in a story like *The Big Deal*.⁶ Particularly in the 1953 *Goodyear Television Playhouse* teleplay *Marty*, Chayefsky dignified the informal conversation,⁷ physical plainness and romantic pain of working-class men like Marty and women like Clare. They represented the majority of Americans who did not have the glamour the era’s advertisers celebrated.⁸ With tight, up-close shots of modest characters on modest sets, directors helped highlight messy private emotions in relatable circumstances. Through the communal experience of TV, Chayefsky’s tales bonded millions in soul-deep ways.

¹ Mary Beth Haralovich, “Sit-coms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker,” *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer*, Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 113.

² *Ibid.*, 119.

³ Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 163.

⁴ Delbert Mann, “The Playhouse Continues: 1952-1954,” *Looking Back at Live Television and Other Matters* (Los Angeles: Directors Guild of America Publication, 1998), 51.

⁵ Erik Barnouw, *Ibid.*, 163.

⁶ Frank Sturcken, “Entering the Fifties,” *Live Television: The Golden Age of 1946-1958 in New York* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1990), 50.

⁷ Erik Barnouw, *Ibid.*, 157.

⁸ William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 83.

Serling's themes greatly affected mid-20th-century Americans through social starkness and surprise. Colorful milieus like the cutthroat corporation in 1955's *Patterns* or the smoky, sweaty venues of 1956's *Requiem for a Heavyweight* were concrete and graspable even for those who did not do business or box. Highly dramatic but understandable conflicts, from the humiliation of an aging colleague to the clash between willful dignity and feverish ambition to betrayal by a longtime supporter, became ever more palpable with live drama's close-ups and limited spaces. As Serling's "seamy, desperate little worlds"⁹ hooked viewers, his "obligatory voice of conscience"¹⁰ stood out against the era's backdrop of ethical as well as social homogeneity. Unlike ads that promised clear solutions to consumer problems, Serling's resolutions often took unexpected turns. *Patterns*'s decent businessman joined his nemesis to beat him; *Requiem*'s metaphorically dying boxer got a new lease on life. Morally and dramatically striking, Serling's teleplays woke viewers to the incongruous desires and hovering hopes that could lead to better lives.

Meanwhile, Rose, as "live television drama's controversial social-thesis playwright,"¹¹ stirred the public with hot-button topics. *Thunder on Sycamore Street* illustrated 1950s conformity-unto-mob-mentality as a convict (originally a Negro, later interpreted by viewers as every kind of outcast) coped with prejudiced neighbors.¹² *Crime in the Streets* featured not-so-innocent juveniles.¹³ *The Defender* and *12 Angry Men* weakened blind assumptions about guilt and pitted a man's beliefs against professional duty or hostile peers. In the 1954-55 *Studio One* season that included three Rose works, his "themes were daring" and "his plays [were]...a more vigorous type of drama."¹⁴ Live TV's focused structure surely strengthened the punches his plots

⁹ Michael Kerbel, "The Golden Age of TV Drama," *Seeing Television*, 59.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹¹ Frank Sturcken, "1953-54 and 1954-55: Kraft, Hallmark and U.S. Steel," *Ibid.*, 91.

¹² Erik Barnouw, *Ibid.*, 164-165.

¹³ Frank Sturcken, *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

worked so hard to throw. With eyes forced open, viewers learned to question their own and others' place in society at a time when they were supposed to simply bask in it.

Chayefsky, Serling and Rose's works hold up today because they critiqued the 1950s' socioeconomic ideals as we do now. Live TV dramas aired just once, but with their enduring themes and clear, potent delivery, time has not diluted their impact.