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## **“‘As In Life, So in Drama’: COVID, the NHS and the ‘Very Special’ Return of *Casualty*”**

**Hannah Hamad**

On January 2, 2021 the BBC continuing medical drama *Casualty* (1986-present) returned to UK television screens for the start of its thirty-fifth series, with the premiere serving as the first episode of the show to have been produced and broadcast since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic caused production to stop suddenly in March 2020. It was, in many ways, a ‘Very Special Episode,’ and not least because it was the first new episode of the series to be seen by audiences for four months. (Pre-pandemic, *Casualty* would typically air forty-two to forty-six episodes per year.) Set during the spring and summer of 2020, the episode begins with a title card that reads “June 2020. Days into the lockdown: 90.” It thus takes an *in medias res* approach to depicting the devastation that three months of COVID-19 has wrought at the fictional Holby City General Hospital on its staff, its patients, and the local community. However, this depiction of the onset of COVID-19 in the UK in March—and the gradual realisation by staff at this National Health Service (NHS) hospital that something gravely extraordinary was in the rapid process of upending their lives—is incorporated via judiciously spaced flashback scenes that juxtapose chillingly with the devastation and trauma of three months later. Its impact on viewers was acute and immediate, and the critical reception reflected this, with words like “emotional,” (Molina-Whyte 2020) “raw” (Lindsay 2021) and “heartbreaking” (Hegarty 2021) rising to prominence in reviewer responses to the episode in the run-up to its broadcast and in the days that followed. At the time of writing, the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) lists the untitled “Episode #35.1” as the fifth

highest rated of all the 1,265 episodes of *Casualty* that have been produced and aired to date.

This article takes the position that this first episode of *Casualty* to screen on UK television following the March 2020 production shutdown is productively understood in terms of its status as a 'Very Special Episode' (VSE) in a number of ways and for a number of reasons. Jonathan Cohn and Jennifer Porst point to intent on the part of producers of an existing television series with an established diegesis to single out a particular episode and use it to "address topical and challenging" or "deeply painful social issues" in ways that "diverge from their series' typical formats" and are "produced in response to particular cultural traumas and concerns" as some of the key defining features of the 'Very Special Episode' (2021, pp. 1-2). As Christine Becker has rightly noted in her work on the BBC soap opera *Eastenders* (1985-present), BBC television's continuing serials open themselves up readily to a reading that any given episode has the potential to meet some baseline expectations of VSE status due to what she characterises as the weightiness of the show's context (2021, p. 201). Specifically, Becker elaborates, this weight is produced by the public service mandate under which the BBC operates due to its status as a license fee funded public service broadcaster; by the fact that confronting and depicting the social issues of the day is a longstanding feature of BBC continuing dramas and soaps; and by the commitment shown by programmes like these to continued adherence to the traditions of social realism.

By this rationale, it is also the case in a series like *Casualty*, which has been understood from its earliest incarnations as an "issues drama" (Dyer 1989, p. 45), one in which every episode has the potential to be construed as 'very special' by virtue of the show's deliberate commitment to social relevance which is arguably inherent to its status as a drama set in an NHS hospital. Taking his examples solely from the then-

current fourth series of *Casualty* that aired in 1989, Richard Dyer (1989, p. 45) reels off issue after issue that permeated the storylines of episodes that year: “Above all, the issue of the adequacy, and especially the funding, of a public health service, but also such dilemmas as prejudices about AIDS, habitual racism, medical ethics, mental handicap, female circumcision, [and] the plight of the elderly (to select at random from the current series).”

Some issues and contexts are weightier than others, however, enabling distinctions to be drawn between regular, special and *very special* episodes of social issue dramas like *Eastenders* and *Casualty*, and none more so in the history of any of the BBC’s continuing dramas than the truly life-altering context of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, *Casualty* has been no stranger to the concept of the VSE over the years, with standout instances that have been led by purposeful social commentary including episodes contrived to showcase ‘ripped-from-the-headlines’ storylines that are intended to be responsive and timely to flashpoint social and cultural events and current affairs.<sup>2</sup> For example, in July of 2012 there was a pairing of ‘Very Special Episodes’ that thematised the 2011 civil unrest in London that ensued after the death of Londoner Mark Duggan at the hands of the police; these episodes aired on consecutive nights rather than weeks, and this break from the usual scheduling pattern further signalled their status as ‘very special.’ However, despite *Casualty*’s relatively long history of making use of the Very Special Episode, and notwithstanding the status of its premise and situation as already quite likely to give occasional rise to the use of this off-pattern format, the way in which the show made use of the VSE changed because of the pandemic, just as the pandemic changed the way it became possible to make *Casualty*, and indeed all drama television at that time, at all. As the remainder of this article aims to showcase, we see this reflected in the use of various narrative and aesthetic

techniques, all differently employed, on the one hand, to work within and around the production constraints that making television during an ongoing pandemic inevitably necessitated. On the other hand, these techniques functioned to crystallise the unique position in which *Casualty*, as a long running and beloved NHS drama, found itself as UK television's continuing series best placed to act as a cultural barometer and channel of catharsis to negotiate the nation's experience of the first wave of the pandemic.

### ***Casualty*: From “Political Hot Potato” to “Invisible Television”?**

Notwithstanding the excellent academic work on the series that has been undertaken by scholars like Patricia Holland, Hugh Chignell and Sherryl Wilson (Wilson 2012; Holland et al 2013), in recent years *Casualty* has tended to fly under the radar of critics and commentators who have often been reticent to recognise and acknowledge the aforementioned political charge inherent to its premise. Specifically, that throughout its run, *Casualty* has centred itself on depicting the working lives of staff in the accident and emergency department of an NHS hospital and the experiences of their patients. As one journalist notes, even to locate the action in an A&E department was seen as a “risqué” move in the 1980s (Dainty 2021) since to do so was necessarily to comment on and often to critique government health policy, the working conditions of hospital staff and the funding and resourcing of healthcare in the UK. Given the steadfastness of its presence on the Saturday evening BBC television schedules for almost four decades, and its history-making status as the world's longest running medical drama (Holland et al 2013, p. 169), the extent to which it has, arguably, been overlooked adheres in some ways to Brett Mills' conceptualisation of what he calls “invisible television” (2010, p. 1), or “those television programmes, which, despite being long-running and consistently

garnering high audience ratings, are repeatedly ignored by the vast majority of academic work.” To give some brief historical context to *Casualty*'s status in this regard, it came as part of an already established tradition of arguably middlebrow medical drama in the history of UK television that began in the postwar decades with shows like the relatively politically uncontroversial *Emergency Ward 10* (BBC, 1957-1967), *Dr Finlay's Casebook* (BBC, 1962-1971) and *General Hospital* (ITV, 1972-1979). However, by the time that *Casualty* began production in 1986, the genre's development over time had already given rise to some turns towards social realism and increased levels of political charge in the storytelling, beginning in the mid-1970s with shows like *Angels* (BBC, 1975-1983) and later *The Nation's Health* (Channel 4, 1983). As discussed in more detail hereafter, *Casualty* followed with its quiet radicalism, which, in early seasons especially, tipped the balance further towards political commentary and away from the dramas of interpersonal relationships that characterised some of its middlebrow forebears. However, that balance tipped back over time as *Casualty* became more soap-like in its treatments of interpersonal and romantic relationships between characters relative to its treatments of the political side of healthcare provision. This has added weight and given event status to the occasional appearance of a VSE.

In its early years, however, *Casualty* was far from 'invisible.' Instead, it drew ire from Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government who, as unlikely as this would have seemed in some of its subsequent decades, viewed it as ideologically left wing, and as potentially impactful enough to warrant an intervention to stop the BBC from continuing to make it. Famously, Edwina Currie, a junior health minister in Thatcher's government at the time, openly attacked the series in Parliament, again on the ostensible grounds of its Leftism (Dyer 1989, p. 48), accusing it of being "propagandist," thereby placing public pressure on then-BBC director general Alasdair Milne, on the ostensible grounds that

the national broadcaster was demonstrating itself to be vulnerable to the influence of the left wing values that they saw manifesting in the storytelling in this hospital drama (Lawrence 2016). In this way, *Casualty* became totemic as an example of medical television's potential to be viewed by audiences and institutions alike as deeply political and ideological. Nevertheless, the threat to axe the series was never acted upon.

It is true that from its earliest beginnings the makers of *Casualty* presented the series as openly critical of the government, and as ideologically simpatico with the political philosophy that brought the NHS into being (i.e. a socialist welfare state). In this way, *Casualty* was critical, sometimes to the point of being quietly radical. The show's creators Paul Unwin and Jeremy Brock first pitched the series to the BBC with a proposal that was tantamount to a political manifesto (Kingsley 1993, p. 4), and which began as searingly critical of what they perceived to be the damage then being wrought to the NHS by cuts to its provision, and later the outsourcing of services, with the following statement: "In 1948 a dream was born: a National Health Service. In 1985 the dream is in tatters." (Holland et al 2013, p. 169). As Julia Hallam (2000, p. 190) writes, *Casualty* then "began... with a bitter attack on government policy [which] manifested in dramatic terms through an acute shortage of beds for critically ill patients," going on to suggest that "the BBC decided to risk producing a decidedly partisan drama in the interests of supporting one of Britain's best loved institutions," such was the severity of the threat to its continued existence under which the health service was perceived to be. In the words of Holland, Chignell, and Wilson (2013, pp. 169-170), *Casualty* "antagonised the government" with its "critical edge," and its depiction of the NHS that "left no doubt that those who worked in it were unhappy with the way things were going." For these reasons then, as Dyer opined in 1989 (p. 45), "I can't help wondering why... [*Casualty*] has received so little attention from the Left... We should be blowing

the trumpet for people trying to give a progressive inflection to mainstream television... [but] we seem almost wilful in our neglect of those remarkable programmes that manage to be both radical *and* popular.” This idea of *Casualty* as both radical *and* popular, as both politically engaged in some ways *and* mainstream middlebrow fare on the other, returns us to the notion of quiet radicalism, wherein ideas and values defined by their oppositional political charge can be negotiated through the understated veneer of something that appears on the surface in the guise of the traditional, the conservative, or the apparently unchallenging. As indicated earlier, quiet radicalism is something that has characterised UK medical dramas since the 1970s. Even as the uncaring market-driven attitudes and values of neoliberalism became embedded into the provision of the nation’s healthcare, the medical drama has remained relatively steadfast in its (differently) discursive pushback against this. It continues to serve as an oppositional popular cultural form in this regard. This can be seen more recently in the quietly radical Sunday night period drama *Call the Midwife* (BBC, 2012-present), which has always been noteworthy for bearing an iron fist in a velvet glove with respect to its staunch advocacy of welfare state provision of healthcare and its searing critique of class inequalities and the social derogation of those in poverty (albeit one heavily negotiated through an often saccharinely nostalgic vision of a postwar Britain where the problems inherent to patriarchy, postcolonialism and social injustice are resolvable thanks to the benevolence of NHS figureheads).

In these ways and others then, *Casualty*’s early life can be understood in terms of its status, as one journalist appositely characterised it, as “a political hot potato” (Lawrence 2016). This is in contradistinction to some of its subsequent years when the interpersonal relationships between staff members would take narrative precedence over its confrontation of social issues and its critique of healthcare policy. The



production cultures in which the makers of *Casualty* were working have seen much change over time though, as have the political debates over NHS funding. While it is beyond the scope of this article to be able to determine causality between the waning radicalism of *Casualty* over time as the Thatcher era gave way to the centrist Blair years (during which the neoliberalisation of the NHS that began towards the end of Thatcher's last government with outsourcing of services accelerated), it remains the case that text and context can be seen to go hand in hand in this regard. As indicated earlier, the human drama of interpersonal relationships rose to increasing prominence in the show's storytelling, often at the expense of explicit political critique. All the same, this did make space for the subsequent occasional use of the Very Special Episode to take on added significance as a break from format when it was later deployed to respond to acute social crises. And in a context in which the national broadcaster was under ever increasing scrutiny from the government to either avoid or carefully manage its treatment of politically tendentious issues such as the resourcing of the health service.

Recalling her experiences as a writer for *Casualty* in its early series Susan Wilkins observes that then, "You could slip something subversive under the radar. Now I believe that, at the BBC, there is an overarching management structure where an idea for a series has to go to commissioners and controllers who try and manage the risk. I'm sure they are anxious about whether the Government will get upset" (quoted in Lawrence 2016). It is in this BBC management and production context that *Casualty* was being produced when the pandemic hit, and this context in relation to which the "very special" nature of the show's return to screen after the shutdown of production must be understood.

## Production Shutdown, 'Pandemic TV' and *Casualty's* "Very Special" Return

As the global spread and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic intensified dramatically over the course of March 2020, on Wednesday 18 March the BBC announced that the production of both *Casualty* and its sister series *Holby City*, along with that of the rest of the BBC's continuing dramas—including *Eastenders*, *Doctors* (2000-present), *River City* (2002-present) and *Pobol Y Cym* (1974-present)—was stopping "until further notice" ("Coronavirus" 2020). Production eventually resumed six months later, in September 2020, after four months of lockdown and with COVID-19 safety measures now a quotidian fact of everyday life. All television was now 'pandemic television' in one way or another. At the level of production, COVID-19 necessitated changes to the way television was made, such as re-writes that altered scenarios or changes to production practices that would enable the safety of cast and crew (such as the involvement of actors' real-world partners as stand-ins for kissing scenes). At the level of content and subject matter, COVID-19 incited debates on whether or not to acknowledge or incorporate the pandemic into a programme's diegetic world, and to what extent and for how long it should be thematised or signified.

The decision taken to thematise the real-time and real-world phenomenon of the pandemic in *Casualty's* post-shutdown return to television is noteworthy for several reasons. Some contemporaneously produced UK drama series in the latter months of 2020 deliberately took the opposite decision, opting against the incorporation of COVID-19 into their diegetic worlds and deciding instead to omit any mention of it. This was seemingly on the grounds of an assumed audience need or desire for compelling media content that would provide an escape from pandemic related fare rather than, say, thematising it, with a view to enabling catharsis, like the "very special" return of *Casualty*

ostensibly did, as emotional reactions to the episode by fans on Twitter attested to (Hegarty 2021).

A particularly high-profile example of this in UK television drama that year was the sixth season of the extraordinarily popular police corruption thriller *Line of Duty* (BBC 2012-2021),<sup>3</sup> the narrative events of which unfolded in apparently real time (with on-screen timecodes visible in the episodes as they aired showing the narrative action taking place during November 2020, which corresponded with *Line of Duty's* dates of filming). But these narrative events were (selectively) unmoored from events that took place in the UK in November 2020. Rather, the sixth series of *Line of Duty* takes place in an alternate 2020 in which the pandemic seems not to have happened. In addition to making no verbal or written reference to it, the series is also devoid of other signifiers that we have come to associate with living life during the pandemic that would have placed the diegesis in a more credibly real-world frame. Signifiers such as hand sanitiser, face masks and characters working from home (as opposed to in the open-plan offices that served as key stages upon which so much of the show's most intense drama took place).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, while the cast and crew were dutybound to adhere to the government mandated COVID-19 protocols around social distancing and the ventilation of indoor spaces, sets were re-designed (such as through the removal of rooves to enable ventilation) and edits were used judiciously (such as to suggest proximity between actors who were filmed separately or at a distance from one another) to convey the impression that the characters were under no such restrictions (Cremona 2021). Declining to incorporate the pandemic into the diegetic world of *Line of Duty* was a deliberate move on the part of the producers (Carr 2020). As cast member Martin Compston explained, he met this decision with relief, viewing it as “a welcome break” from the pandemic which “is consuming our lives” (Barr 2021).

However, as a hospital-based medical television series with a long and well-established history of engaging with debates affecting the provision of care in the NHS, it would have been a bold and questionable move for the producers of *Casualty* to continue to avoid representing the pandemic in perpetuity. Instead, the makers of the show leaned into it, returning it to viewers' screens with a hard-hitting depiction of the horrors of the first wave of COVID-19 as they manifested in the working lives of the staff at Holby City General. And such were the perceived stakes of the episode's ostensible realism, that the announcer on the night of broadcast issued a caveat to audiences that in the episode "masks and PPE [Personal Protective Equipment] are used with dramatic license," and thus that their use in the episode was not to be taken as a model of real-world good practice to be followed by viewers.<sup>5</sup>

Deliberations about whether and the extent to which *Casualty* could, should or would take a stance in this episode on the impact of the pandemic on the NHS workers, patients and services that was ostensibly political took place at the highest levels of the BBC. This went all the way to the top to include the involvement and input of the incoming Director General Tim Davie, who had made renewing the corporation's "commitment to impartiality" (BBC Media Centre 2020) the number one priority for the BBC going forward in his introductory speech upon taking up the role. This speech was given in Cardiff, Wales—where *Casualty* is filmed—in September 2020, just as the series was resuming production in the city after its six-month-long hiatus.

It is difficult to view "Episode #35.1" with the sense that ensuring a politically impartial take on the onset and early months of COVID-19 was the number one priority informing *Casualty's* storytelling at that time. In its depiction of the truly high stakes scenarios germane to the work done at hospitals during a severe outbreak of a deadly and highly transmissible virus, the episode instead prioritises things like candour and

empathy—for those who were ill or dying of COVID-19 and its effects, for those members of society disproportionately affected by it as a result of their extant marginalisation and disenfranchisement, and above all for frontline NHS workers (many of who themselves died of COVID-19) who were thrown to the pandemic's wolves with inadequate PPE while government cronyism ensured that their friends in business enriched themselves with fast-track contracts to provide this inadequate PPE. Further, and channelling the political charge and social justice impetus of its early seasons especially, the “very special” return of *Casualty* goes to lengths to highlight the devastating impact of a string of government policy positions, planning failures and decisions taken in its handling of the onset of the pandemic. However, it should be added, it does not do so without the careful writing in of some dissenting voices, seemingly in the interest of offsetting this critique by way of a degree of balance.

By far one of the most scandalous of the British government's failures in this regard was its implementation of a policy intended to make NHS beds available to patients infected with COVID-19, but which resulted in care home residents being transferred from hospitals either without having been tested for the virus or despite having tested positive for it, which produced outbreaks and deaths amongst that sector of the population on a devastating scale (Reality Check Team 2021). *Casualty* declined to hold back from depicting and responding to this, with senior nurse Charlie Fairhead (the longest running character on the series, played by actor Derek Thompson) openly referring to Holby's transfer of one woman to a care home without having tested her for COVID-19 first as “a ticking time bomb.” The crisis of outbreaks and deaths in UK care homes during the early stages of the pandemic is also dramatized elsewhere in the acclaimed one-off drama *Help* (Channel 4, 2021), which is set in a care home in

Liverpool in the spring of 2020, and which stars Jodie Comer as a beleaguered care worker.

Later in the episode, senior doctor and Clinical Lead Connie Beauchamp (Amanda Mealing) is equally candid in attributing the responsibility for her staff's threadbare ability to cope with the intense demands of providing emergency healthcare in the throes of a killer viral pandemic to the government's mismanagement of the health service: "You know why we're struggling? Why it's so tough? It's because the NHS was on its knees already. And then we get hit with a pandemic and they expect us to perform miracles." Connie's observation that the NHS was struggling badly to operate effectively *before* the extraordinary demands placed on it by the pandemic is a clear reference to the perceived negative impact of government policy on the NHS through the decades, and while her use of "they" is perhaps intentionally ambiguous, it is certainly no stretch to infer that "they" constitutes a combination of the current government, the mainstream media, and the public at large. As I have argued elsewhere (and as have many others):

The Tories have been attacking and eroding the NHS with damaging policy reform and legislation for decades. From the Thatcher government's introduction of competitive tendering, outsourcing and the marketisation of internal services, through the introduction of 'Private Finance Initiatives' under Major, the implementation of the Health and Social Care Act of 2012 under Cameron, and his ill-judged EU referendum—the outcome of which has produced a crisis in the NHS workforce like no other—the Tories have enacted change after damaging change to the detriment of the ability of beleaguered frontline workers to do their jobs as effectively and safely as they should (Hamad 2020, p. 18)

Moreover, a key contributing factor to why the NHS was “on its knees already” at the time that the pandemic hit, was the fact that Brexit had produced an acute staffing crisis, especially in frontline care roles like nursing and healthcare assistance, following “the exodus from the service of EU-citizen NHS workers who have left [the UK] in their thousands in the years since the [Brexit] referendum” (Hamad 2020, p. 19). For example, at the start of the pandemic—again, the worst healthcare crisis in the history of the NHS—there were 43,000 vacancies in the UK nursing profession. The level of pressure that this placed on the beleaguered workforce who staffed the nation’s hospitals is incalculable. This is what *Casualty*’s “very special” return dug so deep to try to communicate to viewers, and in ways that align with Brock and Unwin’s original aspirations and ambitions for the series back in the mid-1980s: “We thought we could make a series which could change people’s perceptions and show how important the NHS was” (quoted in Lawrence 2016).

As indicated earlier, going back to its earliest episodes, *Casualty* has a long history of generating dramatic storylines underpinned by counter-hegemonic political sentiment, of contriving character dynamics that appear designed to showcase some of the hot-button political issues concerning the provision of healthcare in Britain, and of storytelling that is directly responsive to UK government policy. On occasion, as we have seen, the ostensibly fictional drama in *Casualty* has even made waves in real-world UK politics and government, thanks in large part to its “open criticism of Margaret Thatcher’s cuts to the Health Service” (Lawrence 2016) back in the 1980s. It was because of this, as cast member Cathy Shipton avers, “We knew that we were going to be a thorn in the government’s side” (quoted in Lawrence 2016).

“Episode #35.1” runs with its “very special” status to make use of formal divergences from its usual practices in service to enabling the audience to experience

catharsis while ostensibly revisiting trauma in the form of realist media fiction. In so doing it employs judicious use of flashback from the depicted present of June 2020 to the early onset of the pandemic three months earlier in March 2020 to at once enable this catharsis, but also to join up its political critique with its event status as a Very Special Episode in heretofore unseen ways.

Brock and Unwin have been candid in stating that their ambition in conceiving and creating *Casualty* in the mid-1980s was “to portray the NHS as a front line” (Dainty 2021)—so much so that *Front Line* had been their original working title for the series before they later settled on *Casualty*. The analogy has proven apt over the years and decades, but extraordinarily so in the context of the pandemic. Nothing has demonstrated this aptness more vividly. And few media fictions have conveyed it with quite the combination of emotional impact and political charge than did the “very special” return of *Casualty* to UK television in January 2021.

*This article is dedicated to NHS workers in Britain and healthcare workers across the world who have lost their lives due to COVID-19.*

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<sup>1</sup> Here I am referring not to the plethora of *Casualty* webisodes, charity sketches, or segments filmed as crossovers/tributes to other BBC shows that have been produced over the years (although many of these have been produced as follow-ons to stories established in series episodes) and which are generally referred to as

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'special' episodes. Instead, my focus here is on those full-length special episodes that are incorporated into the show's continuing drama, that air in its regular Saturday evening timeslot, and that are included as part of the ongoing storytelling of the main series, all of which contributes to their status as *very special*.

<sup>2</sup> On the relationship between text and context in 'ripped-from-the-headlines' dramatic narratives and the "politicisation of fiction" (Moro 2021, p. 10) to which this mode of storytelling so readily lends itself, Sabrina Moro elucidates how it informs approaches taken to the representation of sexual assault and its narrativization in US police procedural *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (NBC, 1999-present).

<sup>3</sup> The 12.8 million viewers (on average) of the finale of the sixth series of *Line of Duty* who watched it as it aired on BBC1 on the evening of Sunday 2 May 2021 accounted for 56.6% of the UK's television audience share, making it the most watched episode of a drama series (excluding soaps) since contemporary ratings records began in 2002 (Wills and Saunders 2021; Campbell 2021).

<sup>4</sup> To an extent, *Line of Duty* already had a less-than-straightforward relationship to realism. For example, something that had always kept it at a slight remove from an anchoring real-world reference point was the decision to set the action in an unspecified fictional urban space that is never referred to by name (although its central England location and considerable size is strongly suggestive of Birmingham). This is notwithstanding the extent to which the police corruption storylines, despite lacking realism in their plotting and execution, lend themselves well to viewing the series as a social issues drama in the realist tradition.

<sup>5</sup> In this way, actors were not always wearing the appropriate mask for the situation depicted or were shown maskless or having removed their mask to enable the drama written upon actors' faces to be seen by audiences, even if this sometimes

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made for depicted scenarios in which characters violated protocols of masking in real-world Britain at the time.