What about TV Acting?

"Serial Drama Ensembles as Repertory Companies: The Case of *E.R.*"
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This paper argues for a new consideration of television acting based on the theater repertory model applied to serial dramas. I think of this as a thought experiment that traces backwards from *E.R.*'s serial ensemble drama to an alternative historical trajectory of acting beginning with live theater, moving through live radio, to soaps and to early television. I posit that we can see how serial ensemble dramas adopted the repertory model of theater, where actors and crew remain the same, but where directors and showrunners depart through the length of a series. Rep transformed in television production from a rotating stable of material to stable characters - where serial arcs still rewarded performers with new acting challenges, but where stable employment eliminated the need to change plots from week to week. That audiences were drawn to serial narratives and the characters within them allows me to recenter actors within the serial drama - if not television more broadly.

In traditional rep settings, a central cast remains the same and they work on new plays on a bi-weekly or monthly basis. In this model, directors came and went, but the artistic director and the cast remained intact. The rep model demands versatile actors, who are able to stretch themselves into different roles and play multiple characters. Moreover, these actors need to be durable, quick learners and must be able to endure performing at least 8 shows a week. Since they are ultimately the ones who appear on stage, these actors retain a great deal of autonomy regarding their work.

Because of the fast pace of early radio production, the repertory model was perfectly suited to the intense demands of the new medium but was modified into the ongoing serial ensemble. This was especially true of soap operas, including "The Guiding Light," where soap casts actually referred to themselves a "repertory companies." With the coming of television, the repertory ensemble was modified once again. Instead of playing new characters every week, the serial drama actor played new aspects of their expanding serial arc -- all the while earning a steady income.

E.R. provides an excellent case study to apply my theory. One of NBC's most successful shows at the height of the "must-see TV" era, much of the initial critical discourse surrounding the program highlighted the cast and their efforts on screen. The series lasted for 15 seasons and experienced several cast turnovers, similar to the ways in which repertory companies replace actors as 'talent' comes and goes. In supplementary DVD features, the cast talked frankly about their efforts to provide notes to their fellow actors during screenings, in addition to coming up with an acting style that highlighted verisimilitude and realism, that with the overall orthodoxy of the show. That the original six cast members came and went, first with the departure of Sherry Stringfield, George Clooney, Julianna Marguiles and Anthony Edwards (among many others), and that these actors were replaced without incident or great loss of audience speaks to the durability of the rep model and its extension to the serial drama setting.

Using the example of *E.R.'s* live episode "Ambush" is illustrative in this regard. The brainchild of Anthony Edwards and George Clooney - avowed fans of the live television era - the episode was presented twice in one evening, first for East coast audiences and then again for the West. The element of liveness in this episode is important, especially as it links back to television and radio's live origins, but also because it is essentially a play performed for television cameras. The episode also proves that the cast are extremely skilled and adaptable, and that *E.R.'s* signature aesthetic - long "oners" that last upwards of 5 minutes long - essentially dictated that the cast were performing was essentially a play broken up into smaller pieces. That actors in this and other serial dramas are asked to utilize extreme levels of stagecraft to embody their characters (not to mention the long hours) in these fast-paced settings reverses the orthodoxy surrounding television actors as mere "cattle" and places them at the forefront of television production.

By considering *E.R.* as a case study of that utilizes the repertory model, we can potentially reverse conventional accounts of television which remain stubbornly "auteur-and-showrunner-centric" to reconsider actors as the forefront of television agency and production. This is a feasible step in this direction and points outwards towards sitcoms, soaps and other important TV genres.