

Jane Howell's BBC First Tetralogy: Theatrical and Televisual Manipulation

Jane Howell began her two-year project of taping the plays of Shakespeare's first tetralogy for **The BBC TV Shakespeare** with a conception of the sequence as a continuous whole. Further, she chose to use not only the same actors but the same production crew and set throughout.[1] Her "signature" is stylized and presentational: she is perfectly content to use television in the service of the theatrical and the artificial. Her basic televisual strategy is that of depth-of-field with ensemble compositions and long, continuous takes ("part of the production's fundamental approach"), recorded with wide-angle camera lenses (*BBC 3 Henry VI*, 23). She does use montage during the battle sequences from the end of **1 Henry VI** through ***Richard III***, but montage is the exception and not the rule—confined for the most part to recording the fighting.[2] That Howell directed all four plays allows us to explore the consequences of her particular approach to putting Shakespeare before us on the small screen.

Howell's rhetorical strategy is presentational rather than representational. Rejecting method acting, Howell insisted that her actors speak and respect Shakespeare's verse: ". . . what is the line, what is the intellectual sense, play the intellectual sense, stop mucking about with emotions. Let the emotions follow the intellect" (*BBC 2 Henry VI*, 24 and *BBC Richard III*, 22-23). Howell's respect for Shakespeare's verse is apparent in the manner in which the language is delivered in these four plays. The poetry is distinctly pronounced; metrically needed "ed's" are conspicuously heard. As for the prose, the dialects of Cade, his followers, Horner, Peter, and the other low characters, are especially emphasized. This stress is particularly true of Brenda Blethyn's Joan La Pucelle, whose exaggerated dialect signifies her character's lower-class origins. Howell also takes full advantage, when appropriate, of television's ability to permit actors to speak their lines in a much lower key than they could in the theatre. For example, in **2 Henry VI** in a torch-lit night scene, Gloucester, as he talks with his wife Eleanor, lowers his voice virtually to a whisper (1I.iv). Also, Peter Benson's Henry VI consistently speaks in a subdued pious voice, conveying his Christian quietism. As a result, it is dramatically effective when he raises his voice, as in act three, scene two of **2 Henry VI**, to rebuke Suffolk powerfully.

The theatrical aspects of this tetralogy are also handled presentationally. All four plays are staged on a single set based on English, "adventure playgrounds" (*BBC 1 Henry VI*, 23). This single set, however, changes dramatically over the course of the cycle. Starting in **1 Henry VI**, brightly painted in primary colors and largely open, it includes catwalks, platforms, stairs, walls, and many doors. The cyclorama behind, containing brilliant golds, is conspicuous even through open doors. Most of the staging area is used, including the upper levels. Taken as a whole, the set acts as a textured backdrop for the play that is filled with many actors and much action.

In **2 Henry VI**, the set looks darker than it was for **Part 1**. As Oliver Bayldon, the set designer, notes, "It's still a play park but it's not a place for playing games any more, it's got sinister. It's gone very sombre and textury—it's almost as though it has been boarded up and whitewashed and the whitewash has gone grey" (*BBC 2 Henry VI*, 20). Sometimes, the cyclorama is lit with a blue light, "effectively cutting out the brilliant golds in the cloth that had glimmered over the first play" (*BBC 2 Henry VI*, 19). At other times, the back wall is not even lit. Not as much of the set is used as in **Part 1** either, signifying the more confined, domestic scope of this play. At the beginning, some additional platforms have been erected, such as the one that opens the play, from which the actors enter and on which the title, **Henry VI Part 2**, is written. Gradually, these platforms disappear as the play proceeds. The cyclorama can no longer be seen behind the open doors; instead, we see a hanging rope netting placed in front of it.

In **3 Henry VI**, the set gets darker still: "By **Part 3** . . . the adventure playground has become burned and charred—colours have been subdued to black and grey and the colour of charred timber (Fenwick, *BBC 3 Henry VI*, 22). By now the primary colors have been completely painted over in shades of blue-gray. The cyclorama has been repainted with gray rolled over the gold-textured gauze, creating almost a natural wood effect (Bayldon, *BBC 3 Henry VI*, 22), and again, at times, the walls are completely dark. One of the main doors through which the actors enter and depart is now battered and darkened. The only exceptions to the bleakness of the set are the scenes at the French court.

By the time of **Richard III**, the set has become very enclosed. Free standing doors now fill in once open spaces, and the rope netting is looped up, suggesting dark clouds. The upper stages and stairs are seldom used. The entire set looks very dark, dominated by dark browns with only an occasional splash of

color. Unquestionably, Howell conceived of the progress through the tetralogy as a darkening one, reflecting “a historical development from an age of chivalry to an age of conscienceless, ruthless killing, a breakdown in order and ethics” (Fenwick, **BBC 2 Henry VI**, 18).

Costuming undergoes a similar transformation. In **I Henry VI**, the costumes are bright and heraldic until the death of Talbot when gray is literally sprayed over them. Costume designer John Peacock comments on this change: “Bright colours, primary colours, children’s colours. I suppose; then as the plays became more serious, the clothes became slightly more subdued. darker” (*BBC I Henry VI*, 25). As the plays proceed, the garments get darker and darker. Peacock explains some of the changes between **Part 1** and *Part 2*:

All the feathers have gone: we had huge plume in the first part but they've all disappeared. The tabards were all bright red and gold or bright blue and gold; in this play they are the same tabards but they have been sprayed down to make them more subtle. . . . At first the designs were costumes, but now they are becoming *clothes*. (*BBC 2 Henry VI* 18)

With so many characters on the set so often, costumes and flags are used to identify factions as well as to distinguish between the British and the French. However, by the time of **3 Henry VI**, not much difference exists between the uniforms of the troops on either side of the civil conflict—they are all generally gray, although some of the Lancastrians are costumed in dark reds. On the whole, the costumes have become progressively darker and more practical (Fenwick, **BBC 3 Henry VI**, 21). John Peacock relates that Howell in **Richard III** wanted “the effect of three-piece suits.” As for the armor in **Richard III**, it “is all nearly metal, very different from **Part 1** where it was all painted.” Also Oliver Bayldon points out that a touch of color was added: “Richard has these very shiny black and white banners, with a fiercely aggressive-looking boar; then when Richmond come[s] in his banners are green and white” (*BBC Richard III*, 24). Richard is dressed primarily in black throughout the play; in contrast, Richmond, when he appears, wears shiny silver armor. On the whole, the overall attitude toward clothes changes through the sequence as they become more practical and more modern (Fenwick, **BBC Richard III**, 24).

Lighting in Howell’s productions is similarly used metaphorically and symbolically. **1 Henry VI** is generally brightly lit. During the night scenes, however, the set is so dark that it tends to dissolve into that darkness. In **2 Henry VI**, the lighting is significantly darker than **Part 1**. During the night scenes here, only torches seem to provide light. At other times, the set is so dark that no background is visible. This darkening continues through *3 Henry VI* and **Richard III**.

Howell’s staging also reflects her presentational orientation. **Part 1** is the most consistently martial play of the tetralogy. There are flourishes and drums; alarms, excursions, and scalings; skirmishes, stormings, and individual combats, several staged with no cuts (such as that between the Dauphin and Pucelle in I.ii and that between Talbot and Pucelle in I.v). We also see the explosions at the deaths of Salisbury and Gargrave in I.iv and at the arrival of Talbot’s “substance” in II.iii. Howell uses the entire set, staging the play as it might have been staged in Shakespeare’s theatre. The upper and lower stages, as well as the stairs and doors, are regularly employed: armies run in from one set of doors and exit through others; characters do the same, sometimes followed by the camera through doors, up stairs, and across catwalks in battle sequences. Many characters often populate the stage, usually including soldiers of the French and British armies or bands of retainers of the English factions.

Because **2 Henry VI** is less martial and more conspiratorial than *Part 1*, fewer characters appear on the set at any given time; however, the staging remains, for the most part, presentational and theatrical: Howell makes no attempt to create the illusion of “realistic” lists in II.iii as David Giles had done in his **Richard II** for the BBC series. Less of the set is used in **Part 2** than in **Part 1**, still less in **Part 3**, symbolically signifying Howell’s conception of a constricting tetralogy—as the members of the House, of Lancaster and York are progressively murdered or killed.

In **Part 2**, individual combats, such as that between Clifford and York, are staged differently from the way they had been in **Part 1**. Instead of recording those combats from only one or two points of view in long takes, Howell now uses dissolves, slow motion, and cuts that signify the intensity and prolonged struggle between the two protagonists. Similar techniques appear during the fighting between the two

factions (such as in V.ii). In *3 Henry VI*, the fighting sequences also use dissolves and cuts. These staging and editing choices reflect Howell's idea about how violence was to be treated throughout the tetralogy. She wanted the early fighting in **Part 1** to be "a knockabout violence," "comic," and "to a certain extent romantic," with a "gung ho, sporting quality" (*BBC 1 Henry VI*, 27 and **BBC 2 Henry VI**, 20). Then with the major battles toward the end of **Part 1**, a slight change occurs: the battle that begins in IV.vi is recorded with a single camera as one continuous fight—something very unusual:

This climactic battle was carefully scored as a transition in term of style and in terms of the degree of violence inherent in the play. "We took it in stages," Howell explains. "The first stage was quite theatrical but the entire company was fighting in one space, which looked pretty spectacular but you knew it was theatrical. Then, after a bit of dialogue, it moved into another section: I took a bit of Talbot's speech out and did it in fighting terms -- showing how the French attack young Talbot. That was getting much more savage. Then there was another scene. Then we went into montage of very quick details, in which the killings were *awful*, brutal, savage; they were tight, fast and hard. Then followed Talbot's death, and that's when I started to slide the play into another gear in stylistic terms." (*BBC I Henry VI*, 27-28)

The battles and skirmishes in **Parts 2** and **3** reflect this change of mood in the violence: They become more fierce in **Part 2** and very fierce in **Part 3**: the battles become more and more real and more and more personal and more and more vicious in the will to survive and the will to destroy" (Fenwick, *BBC 2 Henry VI*, 21). This increasing viciousness is signified by what fight arranger Malcolm Ranson calls "the killing montage" (*BBC 2 Henry VI*, 22). **Part 3** signals yet another direction, as Ranson points out:

Though the only principal you see killed in a fight is Warwick . . . you do have a number of death where principal are killed -- York gets killed, the young Prince Edward gets killed. The taunting of York get rather nasty and his death and Edward's are quite brutal. (*BBC Henry VI* 24)

During the battles of *Part 3*, Ranson remarks, "It's not individual combat any more, it's lashing out in all directions" (*BBC 3 Henry VI*, 25).

Richard III uses the most enclosed set and also the tightest framing of all the plays in this tetralogy. While we may appreciate the metaphoric point being made, the more restrictive framing creates some staging problems. In act three, scene seven, we see Richard on the only upper stage used in this production while the crowd of Londoners appears on the lower, main set. Because Howell was generally framing her shots tighter in this production than she has in the other three, she chose not to put Richard and the crowd in the same shot and thereby denied us the chance to see the concurrent interactions between Richard and the crowd. Additional problems result from the staging of V.iii: Howell uses the same tent, table, and properties for both Richard and Richmond. Granted, an interesting parallel is established, but the cuts between the two often become disorienting. A more theatrical approach of placing the two camps on different sides of the more restricted main set and then panning or cutting between them would probably have been more effective in stressing the opposition developing between "good" and "evil."

The play, and thus the cycle, ends with a strikingly conceived image. The camera pans from the victorious Henry VII to the dead Richard III, whose chest is impaled with many spears and with Richmond's sword. Then, Howell dissolves to dead bodies in a heap, in the background the sound of laughter. The camera pans across the heap and tilts up to the top of it. There we see the laughing Margaret, holding in a reverse Pieta pose (Richard's head on Margaret's left arm) Richard's bloody, weapon-studded body—an image John O'Connor describes as a "stunning coda" (33). This set piece with "the whole company bloodied and finally bowed" is, as Fenwick writes, "an image that encapsulates the butchery and horror of the long civil wars" (*BBC Richard III, 26).

The acting in Howell's tetralogy also seems somewhat presentational and stylized. Following the stage directions groups of characters all speak at once, rare in the modern theatre where usually one character will speak for the group or characters will alternate lines. In these plays, soliloquies are sometimes directed to the camera (the Countess's in **I Henry VI**, II.iii) and sometimes delivered as if the character were thinking aloud (York's in **2 Henry VI***, I.i and III.i). In the former example, the character achieves an intimacy with the audience that in the latter case would be inappropriate. Asides are usually directed to the camera. At times, Howell will, as she does with Pucelle's aside in **I Henry VI**, I.ii, even have the camera behind the character and have the character turn his or her head to address it, an emphatic presentational strategy. Richard's asides are all addressed directly to the camera, creating the intimacy with his audience traditional to the Vice figure. Often they begin, in a long or medium shot; then either Richard will walk closer to the camera or more often the camera will tighten the shot on him. Richard may wink, smile, or laugh as he speaks; he often seems to finish a thought, turn to leave, only to walk back into the close-up to resume his aside. This action can occur several times before he finishes speaking and either leaves the set or enters a discussion in progress. These techniques create an elaborately explicit and intimate relationship between Richard and the viewing audience that is entirely appropriate to both the play and television.

Howell's televisual approach to this tetralogy, especially in **I Henry VI***, amounts to perhaps the purest example of the depth-of-field strategy in the entire BBC series. Her fundamental technique involves using long takes and deep-field ensemble compositions. Henry Fenwick introduces senior cameraman Jim Atkinson's observations about this approach:

The continuing problem of shooting Shakespeare for television has been that so many of his scenes involve large numbers of people, each of whom is important, so television two-shots will not serve the play. As Jim Atkinson points out . . . *With Shakespeare you need to see as many people all the time as you possibly can arrange without being slack and uninteresting. Since the language is flowing you never want to miss anybody.* Added to this demand is the developing practice, worked out as the plays have been in continual production, of *having long takes without cuts so that the action in the studio can run uninterrupted.* (*BBC **I Henry VI***, 28-29) [My emphasis]

The passages emphasized here reflect the appropriateness of the depth-of-field strategy for transferring any Shakespeare play to television. The importance of the people present and of the effect of the language on those people demands televisual techniques that record those characters and their speeches in deep-field compositions and long takes.

Howell's mastery of this strategy is evident in that many of her scenes, such as the one in which the Father kills his Son and the Son kills his Father (**3 Henry VI***, II.v), are recorded in a single take with no cuts. Other scenes, such as the one between Margaret, the Duchess of York, and Queen Elizabeth (**Richard III***, IV.iv), are done with long takes and few cuts. When Howell does cut, she usually does so during dialogue in which there is some contention or disharmony between individuals or factions. We might call these "cuts of opposition." Howell approaches cutting quite methodically:

Any text, I mark up into units and sections -- the units are where the thoughts change and the sections are like the paragraphs. The cuts tend to come on those marks. So, I am hoping that the cuts reinforce the sense because I am trying to cut with the argument, not ever arbitrarily. ("Interview")

Occasionally, Howell cuts to indicate a change in point of view, but usually these cuts are from one deep-field ensemble shot to another. As a result, we continue to experience reactions from those characters who remain in the shot, with associations still being established within the frame. Also, when Howell uses a reaction shot, it too normally includes other characters. Howell's takes are generally long, although as she proceeds through the tetralogy they get shorter. By this shortening, Howell emphasizes the growing tensions inherent in the plays. Nevertheless, there is always at least one scene in each of the four plays recorded in a single take with no cuts. As stated, Howell uses montage during battles and in some individual combats (especially in **3 Henry VI**) as visual punctuation, but rarely do

montage techniques appear under other circumstances until **Richard III**. As Giles does in Richard II's last soliloquy, Howell uses dissolves within a scene to suggest the passage of time (e.g., **1 Henry VI**, I.iv and V.iii; **2 Henry VI**, IV.viii). This interesting technique, employed often in the BBC series by Elijah Moshinsky, exploits a mechanical technology to make a visual interpretation of the text in a manner that cannot so easily be duplicated in live theatre.

Howell's **mise en scene** is characterized by a fluid camera combined with movement by the actors in ensemble shots, making her blocking exceptionally important. Her framing appears predominately loose, yet, as with her takes, it gets tighter as she proceeds through the four plays, reflecting the overall enclosing nature of the sequence as the attrition in the ranks of the major players in this deadly conflict occurs, in the end distilling the evil of the times into the distorted figure of Richard III. Tighter framing is reserved in the first two parts of **Henry VI** for conspiracies and arguments, such as the Temple Garden scene, signifying tensions present and to come—a visual preparation for the last two plays in the tetralogy.

To sum up, Howell makes notable changes in her style as she proceeds through the first tetralogy. These changes reflect a consciously planned symbolic and metaphoric manipulation of theatrical and televisual techniques. Her lighting changes from bright to dark; her set, from primary colored to dark gray and from open to enclosed; and her costumes, from colorful to black and gray. Furthermore, she moves from a textbook depth-of-field strategy to include montage techniques and point of view cutting as well as moving from very loose to increasingly tighter framing.

Besides her outstanding stylistic accomplishments, Jane Howell, in these four productions, launches an all-out assault on the assumption that televised Shakespeare must use "realistic" film techniques and naturalistic production designs.[3] Howell maintains that producing Shakespeare's plays for television differs greatly from doing them for film: "A great admirer of Orson Welles's **Falstaff** . . . she points out that nevertheless film techniques are largely irrelevant to the overall approach in these television Shakespeares" (Fenwick, **BBC 2 Henry VI**, 21). In fact, Howell consistently favors strategies subversive to representationalism.

The handling of soliloquies and asides manifests these differences among televisual approaches. Although direct address to the audience is common in the theatre, direct address by looking right into the camera is seldom used in narrative film since this strategy destroys the illusion of the transparency of the film image.[4] In Orson Welles's 1966 film **Falstaff: Chimes at Midnight**, for example, characters never look straight into the camera during asides and soliloquies. Welles even transforms Falstaff's catechism on honor into a direct address to Hal to prevent the possible artificiality of having a character looking into the camera. With the possible exception of voice-overs or eliminating them altogether, having asides to the audience and soliloquies spoken as if the character were thinking aloud and not looking at the camera is the most naturalistic way of dealing with them on television. In television, especially televised theatre that strives for presentationalism rather than representationalism, destroying the illusion of transparency by techniques such as direct address to the camera is not only appropriate but part of the very quality of television that makes it so intimate—its ability to establish a direct partnership between the actor on the screen and the often solitary spectator before the television set. What is significant is that a television director can, as Jane Howell has demonstrated, successfully use techniques at a film director would not even consider using.

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Notes

[1] The only major change among the production crew for the four plays was that Cecile Hay-Arthur replaced Cherry Alston as make-up artist.

[2] For a discussion of my distinction between the depth-of-field and the montage styles of presenting Shakespeare on television, see my article "Two **Lear*s* for Television: An Exploration of Televisual Strategies," **Literature/Film Quarterly** 14 (1986): 179-86, reprinted in **Shakespeare on Television: An Anthology of Essays and Reviews**, eds. J. C. Bulman and H. R.

Coursen (Hanover, NH: UP of New England) 122-29.

[3] See James C. Bulman's "The BBC Shakespeare and 'House Style,'" *SQ* 35 (1984): 571-81.

[4] For an excellent discussion of the transparency in narrative film see Chapter 3, "Coherence and Transparency in Classical Narrative Film," in George M. Wilson's *Narration in Light: Studies in Cinematic Point of View*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986.

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