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SHAKESPEARE ET LA GUERRE

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Illustration de la couverture : DERRICKE'S *Image of Ireland*, 1586

Représentations télévisuelles de la guerre

Table ronde avec Jane Howell, réalisatrice des *Henry VI* et de *Richard III* pour la BBC, Dominique Goy-Blanquet (Amiens), Michael Hattaway (Sheffield) et Michèle Willems (Rouen)

Michèle WILLEMS introduces Jane HOWELL who worked in the theatre for 15 years (particularly at the Royal Court), then directed a number of studio-films (among which *The Winter's Tale*, *Titus Andronicus* and the first tetralogy for the BBC Shakespeare) and has now started working for the cinema (she has just completed *Take me with you* which should be on British screens in April). She thanks Jane HOWELL for accepting to talk about plays which she directed quite some time ago, in 1981-82. As the TV films may not be fresh in everyone's mind and as it has proved impossible to have them re-broadcast on FR3 (where they were originally broadcast in 1984), a montage of significant extracts is going to be shown as a starting point for the discussion.

First of all, I.ii and I.v of *I Henry VI* are shown to familiarize the audience with the setting, costumes and the general style of the productions.

Jane HOWELL then explains how she was asked to take on the first tetralogy (she had never read the *Henries* before) because she «happened to be in the right corridor at the right time» when Jonathan Miller was looking for a director. She agreed on the condition she could recruit a company of actors with whom she could relate. But she

had to have one set for all the plays and abide by the other rules of the BBC Shakespeare: five weeks' rehearsal. 5 or 6 days to record each play, and she had to do them in sequence. When she first read *I Henry VI*, she wanted to tear the contract up as the play seemed ludicrous and appalling. But she then realised that it was funny and probably deliberately naive. The comedy seemed to her very strange until she realised that things got darker in the fourth act. «At the beginning of the play, war, chivalry is a game. With the removal of Henry V, the language seems to be that of the school-ground. The great lords are arguing and bickering like school boys». This vision of the play resulted in the pantomine style of the first scenes. Then values change throughout the play. Waves of people come in destroying old values.

The costumes of the beginning were made of patchwork, ragged, naive. As the plays progressed, they got nearer to modern dress (especially in *Richard*). For the armours, the designer worked from the idea of modern sport, particularly American football. Again, these got more serious, more purposeful as the plays progressed. The violence and the reality of violence also developed from play to play.

There were fourteen and a half hours of television to be produced. There was a regular company of 25. There was a second company of 40 to 60 who did all the fights. For each play, the first company would rehearse for three weeks and then the entire company for two more weeks.

«Because we could only have one set, I did not want to get involved in Book of Hours images of medieval castles: I did not want the audience's imagination limited. We had to get the setting right, because whatever we had, we had for seven months. I believe quite strongly that technical solutions and artistic solutions are usually one and the same thing. We needed fast entrance and exits: we needed a space that could be both inside and outside, which is Shakespeare's stage with upper levels as well. I also needed a space where I could have five cameras moving very fast. These boring technical considerations

are in some particular way a partial inspiration for a director. I knew this setting was in the street. You find things in the street which relate to Shakespeare all the time. I was in a car when I saw the setting for the *Henries*. It was a play-park with poles painted by children and rough wooden constructions which they play on. It was medieval and modern all at once».

Dominique GOY-BLANQUET brings up the problem of doubling, which, she says, is no problem in most cases, but is more difficult to accept when Talbot comes back as Jack Cade or when Montague comes back as Buckingham without any attempt to disguise the fact. This, she thinks, is more difficult to accept in a film than in the theatre.

Jane HOWELL answers that television is a peculiar medium, somewhere in the middle between film and theatre. The banner at the beginning of the first play saying «*Henri VI*, Part one», is a signal saying «this theatre». «The set is trying to leave space for the viewer's imagination which is so often blocked by television».

Dominique GOY-BLANQUET: «You keep reminding us that this is theatre, but we keep forgetting and some scenes are quite naturalistic».

Michèle WILLEMS disagrees with this and suggests that, on the contrary, Jane HOWELL seems to have found a stylized visual idiom for these plays. Some critics have described her tactics as Brechtian and this is what makes the originality and the quality of these films.

Jane HOWELL: «The thing you really lose on television is the live response of an audience which teaches the actors how to play. Also, when you record, you do not go in story order. Television is an odd medium, but it did allow the public to see the three parts of *Henri VI* practically Uncut».

Michael HATTAWAY explains that he will approach the problem from a different angle. For the last ten years he has been preparing an edition of the *Henries* for the Cambridge Shakespeare. Not being trained as a statistician, he does not feel qualified to suggest, like the editors

of the Oxford Shakespeare, that the first part of *Henri VI* was definitely written by Shakespeare, and written after the second two parts. He feels, like Jane, that the first part is traditional in tone, a tone which can be located in plays that go back to the XVth century, and is very present in Peele and Greene. «*Henry VI*, part one», gestures towards a form of art which Shakespeare is both engaging with and repudiating. The setting of Jane's productions reminds one of the fact that so many plays in that period are games. The French start off singing «oh what a lovely war» and then they find themselves in the killing fields towards the end of the play. Shakespeare was capable of using a large number of registers in this period, not always artfully perhaps... But on the whole, the artlessness of the first part is won by a great deal of art».

Michèle WILLEMS then introduces the montage of extracts which can serve as a starting point for a discussion of the treatment of war. These have not been selected to provide a summary of the War of the Roses but to offer samples of representations of war in Jane's film, of her use of televisual resources, also of the rising tide of violence which she follows from play to play. The montage begins with Gloucester and Exeter skirmishing on hobby-horses (*I Henry VI*, I.iii, which was cut on French television). It then includes the death of Talbot, the battle of Towton, the battle of Tewkesbury, filmed in the snow, and it ends with the death of Richard, showing another sequence which was cut on French television (where the 14 hours of the original were pared down to 10). This is the finale, for which the camera pans over piles and piles of bodies and eventually discovers Margaret sitting at the top, laughing demoniacally and holding the body of Richard in an image of reversed Pieta.

The discussion is then resumed on the subject of televisual techniques.

Jane HOWELL: «when we got to episode three, there seemed to be nothing but war. This was purely

subjective, but the armies seemed to increase in size and I had a great desire to have many more actors, which we could not have. So I used mirrors for the battle of Towton. It was an invention born of necessity. For Tewkesbury, we did not have much time. The battle lasted a few minutes in action and the rest was done in editing. We used slow motion. Historically, the snow fell on another battle, but history does not worry me when I am doing a play. Essentially, the blizzard emphasized the absurdity of war. The company said: «it's insanity out there». It was the end of the last of the battles.

Single combats we first tended to take in one shot. They got progressively more violent. The worst was the death of Warwick... quite horrendous. War, like revenge, feeds upon it self. It is never ending. We used some slow motion for the fight between York and old Clifford, to get the sense of the length of the fight. Also, as we progressed, the fights became very messy: people were pushing and shoving and kicking so that it was not balletic, although the snow fight had a peculiar choreography. The last image may annoy many people. I discovered, once I had finished the film, that the reversed Pieta is the classic image for revenge, which I did not know at the time... It is inferred in the text that Richmond may represent a new beginning but I am also quite cynical, because there was no new beginning. There are wars, there have been wars, there still are wars. For me, the last image of the film is an intuitive image, not an intellectual one. Richmond is here, but what was the cost, what is the cost now, what is the cost to come? If you ask me about war... the general bickering at court, the lack of trust, all this seems to me what happens in our own lives. Wars don't happen by accident. Wars happen because of us. We are all responsible. Wars start with unkindness, jealousy and self-interest between people. The result is that heap of bodies and the gods are laughing at us. I will not, I cannot justify that last image... I have tried to explain. I don't often do this».

Michèle WILLEMS points out that there is a coherence between this last image and those which link up the

various plays and confirm the rising arc of violence within the tetralogy. «All this conveys the senselessness of war. Would you agree that yours is a very modern view of war? Would you agree with Michael Bogdanov who said last night that he wanted to make Shakespeare his contemporary? And what would you answer to those critics who say that you sacrificed historicity to modernity?»

Jane HOWELL: «When I have to do a play, I do a certain amount of research but there comes a point when I feel I am beginning to think about history and not the play. I will use history shamelessly, like the battle in the snow, to suit myself and to suit the play. Shakespeare plagiarizes. Why shouldn't I? I am always amazed to discover, when I work on a Shakespeare play, that human nature hasn't changed an awful lot. I suspect the word «brother», the word «king», the word «son», all these words had a power which now we only sense but do not really think about. I talk about social history with the actors: York goes to Ireland. By confusion he is given an army — where do the English armies train? they train in Ireland. It is still the same. My work is not directly political, like Michael Bogdanov's... I think I am a humanist, but I am not quite sure».

Michael HATTAWAY: «Watching that montage, I thought that this is where film can score over the theatre, because some of those scenes can get dull in the theatre. In film, there is a larger variety of modes of use. These can give the scenes a bravura quality without encouraging that dangerous tendency to empathize with the skill of the actor and destroying the moral point. Another point: the killing of Richard, stabbed in the back, quotes a gesture that's significant at the beginning of *Henry VI*, where one of the things that we learn about the early defeat of Talbot is that he was stabbed in the back by «a base Walloon», and this obviously signals the end of the age of chivalry: the only way of destroying that monster, Richard III, is not by assuming that war is going to be a trial, because you can't trust God to bring about the triumph of right. You've got to take might into your own hands and, if necessary, do the dirty work behind the hero's back».

D. GOY-BLANQUET: «I think the history of that period is fairly shapeless in the Chronicles but in the plays, it's very definite. There is a progression, and very often theatre productions find it difficult to mark those stages, because, after the first part, it's difficult to go from dark to darker to darkest».

Jane HOWELL: «The change comes on slowly when Talbot loses power. Once the new lords start arguing in the Temple Gardens, once Talbot is killed by a cannonball shot by a boy, chivalry is finished. Whenever Talbot says «Henry», he sees Henry V, (this is a note to the actor). He does not know who Henry VI is; he serves the values of Henry V. He has brought his son up with the values of chivalry; he wants his son to run away, because he knows they're in a trap: his son won't go. So you have this extraordinary scene, in naive rhyming couplets, but amazingly moving. Talbot comes face to face with what his own code means. War means you will kill your son or your son may kill you. There are so many things happening between fathers and sons. Clifford sees his father dead and he becomes psychotic and a monster... not a monster, because there's no evil people, but people with problems».

A question is then asked by a member of the audience about the possibility of a panoramic reconstitution of at least the initial order of battle, such as one can see it in a film like *Ran*.

Jane HOWELL: «I only had 40 people. Shakespeare says «please excuse our ragged fells» in *Henry V*. I presume his actors came in through one door, fought brilliantly, and then were off. But the energy level was important. I always try to be aware of the original rules, because if you don't, then you are on slippery ground».

Jean-Marie MAGUIN asks whether given other conditions, Jane would have envisaged filming on location.

Jane HOWELL: «No, never. If someone comes on and says «this is the forest of Arden» and you are shooting

outside, there is no point in having the line. If I was given the chance to film outside, I would make a personal statement. I would take great liberties with the text. Our brief was «do as much of the text as possible». Really, the brief was «do it all». I would have liked to have been freer with the costuming... But the main difficulty is that nowadays people are not used to having to listen on television. You have to say to your audience, by the style you choose: «excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, would you please listen!»

Russell JACKSON asks whether Jane has ever been tempted to do radio Shakespeare and she answers that she would never have gone into the theatre if it hadn't been for radio plays to which she used to listen as a child; but she has never done any radio work.

Dominique GOY-BLANQUET remarks that the set, which is omnipresent at the beginning, disappears in the course of the plays. Michèle WILLEMS makes the point that it is indeed hardly noticeable in *Richard III* which gives the impression of being filmed in a stifling indoor environment, but that in the course of the trilogy it becomes charred and dark — especially after the Jack Cade rebellion — as the violence grows and war is seen as more and more absurd.

Dominique GOY-BLANQUET then asks a question about the way in which close-ups are used «Did you use one each time a character has to make an important statement, which applies both to images and to speeches?»

Jane HOWEEL: «It's instinctive. In television, the director is in charge of the camera script, unlike in films where you work with a cameraman who will make suggestions. You have to write down: «M.C.U., the Duke of York (meaning: medium close-up...)» or «over the shoulder shot, Duke of York, sixteen people». It's an extremely long and laborious process, but it has to be done. The close-ups I remember were the close-ups for the asides, which I do like. Especially the Duke of York (Bernard Hill) used that with great elan. There is a rhythm in speech and you cut on the rhythm. You cut on an energy which

passes between people. When I work on any play, I always do what I call my units — I go through the play, and where a thought changes, I just make a line. And then I collect all those lines together and I find groups of thoughts, which is like a paragraph. I am really marking the rhythm which you can hear as you go through. I try to cut to clarify the sense but it's also instinctive».

Michael HATTAWAY «Is there an analogy between direct address to the camera and direct address to the audience? One of the things we have all learnt from «the Swan», the new theatre in Stratford, is how easy it is to turn from representation to presentation, to break the illusion and suddenly address a line to an audience; because it's that kind of theatre where the actors are being themselves as well as being a character».

Two short extracts illustrating the Jack Cade Rebellion are then shown (*I Henry VI*, IV.ii and IV.vi) and this is followed by a brief discussion of the film's representation of the Rebellion, Michael HATTAWAY considering that it offers too critical a view of its leader, which is not borne out by historical records, whereas Jane HOWELL defends her interpretation on the grounds that no one in the play has a good word to say about Jack Cade.

(Compte rendu établi par Michèle WILLEMS
d'après l'enregistrement de la Table Ronde obligeamment
fourni par le Centre Pompidou)