

AN AGE OF KINGS

(BBC TV, 1960)

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Tom Fleming, Robert Hardy

Things have moved on in fifty years. In 1960 (I was sixteen), we didn't have a television, and I had to prevail upon my school-friends to let me cycle round to their houses every alternate Thursday to watch this series.¹ Now, I can sit in my armchair and watch it straight through on my computer on DVD, with sound coming through the headphones.

I count *An Age of Kings* as the single most important cultural event in my entire life, more important even than being in Trevor Nunn's first-ever Shakespeare production (*Hamlet*) the previous year. It taught me what Shakespeare was about, and I've never forgotten it. Over ten years ago, seeing that it was on at the NFT, I went down to see some odd bits. Approaching Michael Hayes, the director, I said, "What you did here provided me with the single most important cultural event of my life". He looked at me suspiciously: "You seem a bit *young* to say that", he said, and turned away. I went up to Peter Dews, the producer: "What you did here provided me with the single most important cultural event of my life" – "Good!" he grunted, and turned away.

So much for the creative team. Were they really as boring as that in 1960? (In fact Dews died shortly after our brief chat.) Paul Daneman said in an accompanying NFT talk that the cast spent every morning chatting, and didn't start rehearsals till after lunch. If that's the case, it bears out my suspicion: that *An Age of Kings* came out of a long, long tradition of acting and directing Shakespeare which had been crystallised in

1: Something tells me there were repeats on alternate Tuesdays as well.

companies like the Birmingham Rep and the Old Vic, where so much that was excellent in the approach was programmed-in to the actors' nervous systems that it all came by instinct. The verse-speaking in *AAOK* makes you long for the good old days of those endangered species, BBC English and Received Pronunciation.

This tradition has been lost in our post-modern, politically-correct chaos (despite the existence, still, of Hall/Barton/Nunn, who sprang from a Cambridge version of it, now extinct too), so that each new production emerges as if from a void, and you can see that each director has had to re-invent the wheel. An American academic was hired by the RSC last year whose thesis was that the best approach to blank verse was to treat it as prose: probably he was a CIA plant. Last year I walked out of Sam Mendes' *The Winter's Tale* at the Old Vic because it was making me physically sick with its non-stop miscalculations. Only one actor (the Young Shepherd) knew how to deliver a Shakespeare speech.

At the school where I taught people used to ask me, why I only did Shakespeare productions? They took on board that Shakespeare has bigger casts and more good parts, but gagged on the idea that he was easier to act and direct than anyone else, and that if you said his lines clearly he did a lot of the acting for you: but that's the case. Putting lots of stupid ideas in between his lines and the audience – like having Hermione drunk in *The Winter's Tale*, I ii, as Mendes did – interferes with the drama. His subtexts are in his texts, and if you articulate the latter the audience can sense the former. These days they start with their own subtexts, and rack the script to fit.

This is not to say that you can't be inventive, but your inventions must be suggested by the lines. The reason why his plays worked so well in fortnightly rep (*remember fortnightly rep?*) was that you didn't need that much rehearsal if you had faith in him.



Murder of Richard II (David William, Robert Lang behind)

The cast of *An Age of Kings* didn't need telling any of this, and from David William's Richard II to Jerome Willis's Henry VII they speak the verse first and act second – very well indeed in each case. I don't know, but I sense that William had played Richard II before, and am positive that the superb quality of Frank Pettingell's

Falstaff (the best I've ever seen, Orson Welles not excepted), comes from having played the part on stage – frequently.² You can sometimes see Pettingell switching his performance on, especially at the beginning of the scene, in a way that shows it's deep in his muscular memory. He manages to be at once aristocrat and buffoon, a mixture hard to embody in 1960, and virtually impossible in 2010.



Frank Pettingell

But the most memorable performance is the Hotspur of tall, slim, ultra-hirsute, thirty-year-old Sean Connery, two years prior to *Doctor No*. You don't associate post-Bond Connery with charm, romance and innocence, but as the admirers of 1959's *Darby O'Gill and the Little People* will (both of them) avouch, in those days he was loaded with all three qualities. If the real Hotspur was as sexy as this, Lady Percy was a woman to be envied.



Sean Connery

2: Frank Pettingell's best movie role is the detective in Thorold Dickinson's version of *Gaslight*.

From having a first-class Falstaff and a super-first-class Hotspur comes the first problem, for Hotspur is dead by the end of Episode Four, and Falstaff destroyed by the end of Episode Six, and both are terminated by Hal / Henry V, whose charisma has then to carry Episodes Seven and Eight. Robert Hardy manages this impossible feat by making it clear that, despite having himself rejected Falstaff, he's inherited Falstaff's satirical edge and Falstaff's common touch, plus Hotspur's charisma and Hotspur's military prowess. Even though (or because) Suez was only four years earlier, the production doesn't attempt a deconstruction of *Henry V*, but plays its patriotism for all it's worth – without caricaturing the French – so that when Hardy comes to the line "... Davy Gam Esquire" – looks over his shoulder at the Herald for more papers – realises there are none – and then reads on, "... and of all other men but five and twenty", you get a lump in your throat, which I've never had before, not even in the Olivier movie.

Hardy is so deep in his part (he'd played Hal at the Old Vic) that you can often see him corpsing through his lines, but in so professional a way that it seems part of the show. He definitely goes up on the last line of Act IV ("Where ne'er in France arrived more happy men"), but it might look to the innocent as if Henry were chortling through his tears, not Hardy weeping with relief (and on live television) that the fucking scene is at last over.



Robert Hardy

As Katherine of France he has Judi Dench, a couple of months before she achieved world renown as Zeffirelli's Juliet at the Old Vic.



Judi Dench, Robert Hardy, Yvonne Coulette

It was Hardy's performance which impressed me most in 1960, because *Henry IV II* was one of my A-Level set texts, and I used his way of doing Hal's relationship with Falstaff as my yardstick. Hal loves Falstaff, even as he finds him disgusting: "Know the grave doth gape / For thee thrice wider than for other men" is a real joke, made on instinct and at once regretted. Just having his fat tutor in riot in front of him, even on the Abbey steps, makes Hal witty, and he goes on being witty even after he's thrown Falstaff into the Fleet.

The casting in the series is cunning. Some artistes appear over and over again: Edgar Wreford is Gaunt, the Archbishop of York, Burgundy, Suffolk, and Buckingham; Frank Windsor is Carlisle, Blunt, Williams, and Warwick; Robert Lang is Exton, the Sheriff, Mountjoy, and Winchester; Geoffrey Bayldon is the Duke of York, Worcester, and the Lord Chief Justice; George A. Cooper is Northumberland and Pistol. William Squire is a superb Glendower, a very poor Shallow, and then again a superb Chorus. Even Pettingell turns later as the Bishop of Ely in *Richard III*. The likes of Lang and Jerome Willis sport so many wigs, beards, eye-patches and character-voices that you start to laugh. Then, just when you're getting fed up with the same old faces, and wondering at the quick changes the casting necessitates, they spring a new face on you, like Cyril Luckham as Canterbury, or Kenneth Farrington as Fluellen, or Jack May as the Duke of York in *Henry VI*. Other single-part players, principally David William, and the sonorous Tom Fleming as Bolingbroke / Henry IV, seem to have been thought too important to justify their doubling-up.

Esmond Knight, Robert Hardy, and William Squire all appear as extras in the final episode, in the scene where Richard III walks between the monks. This got a big

laugh at the NFT. Evidently they were there for the celebration, and decided to be in it.

Of interest are Gordon Gostelow, the only actor to play the same part (Bardolph), in the 1980s BBC TV Shakespeare, and an innocent-looking Simon Ward, seen over Jack Cade's shoulder in one shot. Later he played Churchill for Dickie Attenborough.

This brings us to the next and biggest problem – how to bridge the gap between the later tetralogy, *Richard II-Henry IV-Henry V* (four of the greatest plays ever written) to the earlier one, *Henry VI-Richard III* (good stuff, but not four of the greatest plays ever written)? They do it, firstly by setting the first scene of *I Henry VI* around Henry V's coffin, with Jamy, Fluellen, Gower and MacMorris on guard around it, so as to provide a rough continuity: and then by cutting all the Talbot scenes, and condensing the first part of *Henry VI* into an hour. This makes for a puzzling narrative, but the vigorous acting, plus the startling presence of the twenty-six-year-old Eileen Atkins as Joan of Arc, carries us forward, and almost enable us to forget the relative thinness of the material in relation to what's gone before.

As *Henry VI II*, with a fuller script, gets under way, we see what a lot of good stuff there is in it, and how lots of ideas are developed by the later Shakespeare. The Duchess of Gloucester prefigures Lady Macbeth, and Jack Cade (played here by the blind actor Esmond Knight) is a witless, destructive, working-class Falstaff, whose anarchic actions and ideas, including everyone's favourite Shakespeare line, "First thing, let's kill all the lawyers!" are completely intolerable, despite the rousing cheers that that one always receives. But the Duchess's sorcery and Cade's destructiveness are only accompaniments to the aristocratically-created chaos which envelops the kingdom as Part II moves into Part III. Hal and Falstaff are buddies in carnival, and their relationship is the core of their plays: Jack Cade is no-one's buddy, and his version of carnival, unlike Falstaff's, is only there as a poison to be expelled.

Terry Scully is an excellent Henry VI, deepening his voice and increasing the lines of agony in his make-up as he gets older and as things get more and more out of his control. But the one with the best scenes (until Gloucester turns up) is Queen Margaret, and Mary Morris³ is so steely-dreadful as to expunge our memories of Dame Peg (who actually played the part later, but never mind, that's how memory works). Margaret takes over from Joan La Pucelle as the script's Unbridled Woman, and her tormenting of York on the anthill is here stomach-churning. There are many other riveting scenes, including the way Terry Scully draws a pattern on the frozen glass during his "This battle fares ..." soliloquy, including Edward's wooing of the Widow (played by Jane Wenham, Albert Finney's then wife), and, including, at last, Paul Daneman's delivery of the longest speech in Shakespeare at the end of Episode Twelve.

The see-sawing power struggle gets a mite exhausting towards the end of *VI III*; but as soon as it's clear that Henry has lost and Edward (for the time) won, you calm down. For the murder of Henry they make Scully up to resemble a ghostly statue (he has a striking bone structure already), and light his cell spookily (dimly-lit interiors were hard to do on TV in 1960, because the cameras couldn't film in the half-light).

3: Mary Morris is in the Michael Powell *Thief of Baghdad*, as the magic manikin who skewers Miles Malleston. In a later BBC series, also made by the AAOK team, she was Cleopatra to Keith Michell's Antony.

As Gloucester / Richard III, Paul Daneman reverses Olivier. Olivier had a triangular nose and long black hair; Daneman a Mr Punch nose and a black crew-cut. Mr Punch is an apt image, for who fills the carnivalesque role played previously by Jack Cade, and in the future by Falstaff, but Crookback Dick? He makes the best jokes in the script, and thereby seduces and corrupts us into getting as much fun from the destruction of the people around him as he gets himself. His descendant, Macbeth, has no sense of humour, which is at once a weakness and a strength.

The comical Gloucester / Richard is surrounded and set off by tragical women – here, not just by Mary Morris as the aged Margaret and Jane Wenham as Edward’s Queen, but by the pure-toned Jill Dixon as Lady Anne,⁴ and – *mirabile dictu!* – by Violet Carson as the Duchess of York, just before she became a national icon (rivalled only by Noele Gordon in *Crossroads*), as Ena Sharples in *Coronation Street!* She speaks Shakespeare reverently, but is denied her best speech, in which she curses her son. Edgar Wreford told me, sixteen years after, that Carson got out of her costume and makeup, left the building, and was making for the bus-stop, when looking into the window of a TV storeroom she saw the show on, and realised that she still had one scene left to do. But I don’t know if that scene would have been the “cursing” one.

They also remove the scene in which the King woos Queen Elizabeth for her daughter’s hand, which is common even in the theatre.

Richard III becomes more and more frightening as the corpses pile up and as Richard becomes more and more isolated. Done in a small TV studio, as here, the claustrophobic medium increases the terror, and Paul Daneman gets less and less amusing as the shadows deepen around him and nemesis closes in. Had I been producer, I’d have insisted on a brand-new actor as the saviour Richmond. He would have been the first in several months, and it would have been a salutary shock and a good metaphor for the idea that a new man and a new dynasty are taking over. As it is, we get Jerome Willis, in what must be about his fifteenth change of wig. But he’s very good, and his climactic fight with Daneman, in a mud bath, is the most energetic fight in the series. Fight-arrangement on live television must have been risky.

The series was designed for twelve-inch black-and-white telly. The recordings were made just by pointing a cine-camera at a TV monitor, and rolling it. At the NFT, projected on to a cinema screen, the production values seemed a bit threadbare, but, obviously, on a computer screen of less than twelve inches, it looks much more at home. The design, by Stanley Morris and Olive Harris, gives very good traditional costumes, and sets which never appear bare, but which contain decoration sufficient to enable you to forget how studio-bound it all was. There seem occasional filmed sequences (the feet drumming on the spot to suggest Agincourt being the least successful) and some back-projection in the battle at the end of *Henry VI II*. There’s one surreal bit in *VI I* where the camera gets as close as possible to Eileen Atkins’ eyeballs, and you see a dancer doing demonic movements in each one. La Pucelle is then arrested in a complete blackout by pikes (with no hands holding them) coming at her from all angles.

4: Dixon is crushed by a falling funnel of the *Titanic* in *A Night to Remember*.



Eileen Atkins

More of such telly-adventurous stuff might have been tried. They do have another go in Richard's dream before Bosworth, with (as I take it) a live shot of his head, upside-down in the frame, and what seem swooping filmed shots of the ghosts who come to torment him. This is a very scary sequence.

There are lots of short bursts of music, percussion and wind, to emphasise the doomy bits. Christopher Whelen wrote it.

What happened to them all? Connery and Dench soared on to superstardom; Atkins is now Dame Eileen; Fleming became an awed voice-over on televised state occasions; Hardy conquered TV drama over and over again; William went to Canada and disappeared; Scully disappeared after the mid-eighties; Daneman died shortly after the NFT event; Pettingell died a couple of years after the series went out; Geoffrey Bayldon was Catweazle; Frank Windsor went into *Z Cars*; George A. Cooper played history's only thin Falstaff (for Joan Littlewood) and then gained immortality as the school caretaker in *Grange Hill*; Robert Lang (Olivier's Roderigo) died the other day; I acted with Edgar Wreford in *Dracula* at Worcester in 1976, and he too died recently (he looked a bit frail at the NFT); William Squire died years ago. I last saw Jerome Willis hanging upside-down from the ceiling in a Rowan Atkinson Barclaycard commercial. The plummy voice of Jack May graced dozens of TV plays, and was heard now and then as Walter Gabriel's son in *The Archers*, making us wonder how Walter ("Eay up there, me old pal, me old beauty!") had managed to send his son to public school. Julian Glover (Edward IV is the most important of his many parts) never stops working: I saw him be extremely dull as Henry IV in Adrian Noble's inert doing of those two plays at Stratford (with Robert Stephens as the most rejectable Falstaff ever); then he was much better as John of Gaunt in Trevor Nunn's hi-tech *Richard II*, at the Old Vic some years afterwards.

"Oh call back yesterday, bid time return!" Says Salisbury to Richard II on the Welsh coast. This DVD set helps you to do just that.