



Glenda Jackson in the Title Role of "Elizabeth R"—"The Masterpiece Theatre production relies heavily on a surefire bag of theatrical tricks."

INTRIGUE AND THE WRINGING OF HANDS

by Stephen Koch

Addicts will recall the success a few years ago of "The Forsyte Saga," a by-no-means-transcendent serial from the BBC that initiated the PBS program "Masterpiece Theatre." Its success left the American television industry in amazement, and one is told that it even inspired a movement for more "quality" programming, though we wait in vain for the results of that movement. The doyens of the industry were baffled by

the Britishers' braininess; after all, television has become unspeakably rich and powerful on the conviction that it is impossible to underestimate the stupidity of the American public. Then came "The First Churchills" (which I loved, though it apparently didn't break any records), followed by the composite Tudor saga "The Six Wives of Henry VIII" and "Elizabeth R," which, taken together, must be accounted, I supposed, the high-class soap opera of all time.

But perhaps we should not alto-

gether despise soap opera. It is the one really original narrative form thus far contributed to art by broadcasting, and one fine day it may even produce its masterpieces. Now, the secrets of soap opera are these: It must be about family life (threatened family life, motivated especially by sex, money, power, and challenged loyalty), and it must be endless. Ordinarily, narrative structure anticipates its own end; for the artist, knowing where to end (on the kiss, the climax, the killing, the revenge) is everything. The opposite is true of soap opera. It must be interminable and terminate in more or less the same way life is and does. Theoretically, a soap can end only with the end of its protagonists' lives. In soap opera people do not come to conclusions. They react; visually, soap opera is the great art form of the reaction shot. And merely reacting, rather than concluding, the characters live their lives chewed up by time. A soap opera is not a narrative form defined by the beginning, middle, and end of an action or an event. On the contrary, its basic unit of imagined time is the span of the generations.

OBVIOUSLY IT IS a form ideally suited to broadcasting, with daily or weekly episodes continuing across a season or across the years (and years and years). It is also ideal for the kind of historical work seen in the Henry and Elizabeth series. Yet, despite the tremors of shock felt through the American television industry over the lofty intellectualism of "Masterpiece Theatre," let us concede that, on examination, the programs are not all that impenetrable and superb in their embodiment of Mind. True, they are about a historical (therefore "boring") subject; they are meticulously researched and literate; they represent quite accurate accounts of the great Tudors' lives; they are performed and produced on a very high level of competence and professionalism. The fact is that despite their glossy, mid-cult patina, the Elizabeth and Henry series are soap operas that work, theatrically, on a very low-down, gut level, and the competence of the production relies heavily on an entirely unexperimental, or at least unadventurous, surefire bag of theatrical tricks. What works? Blood and guts work. Tirades, magnificent costumes, life and death work. We see the Royal Henry aging and fattening before our eyes, and that works; so does sex, intrigue, wringing of hands, Lady Rochford's terrible screams after the chamberlain addresses the Queen: "Madame, I am commanded by His Majesty the King to arrest you and convey you to the Tower." Headsmen's axes work, as do spies lurking in door-

ways, Henry's regal eyebrow arching when the luscious Katherine Howard is ushered before him for the first time, and Elizabeth's superb rage: "Eeeeeenough! God's death!"

GLEND A JACKSON and Keith Mitchell are consummate performers; the supporting cast could not have been better. But we are not discussing here anything remotely like major art. Once in a while some episode picks up an echo or irony or richness capable of making it sing a more interesting tune. Ian Thorne's script for the Jane Seymour episode, for example, is hardly great work. But at least the struggle between Jane's immovable delicacy and Henry's real love for her, his hysterical "conscience," and his brutal power is endowed with some of the Real Thing's requisite mystery—as in the touching, spooky use of Jane's strange (apparently authentic) joke about the criminal who convinced Louis of France to postpone his execution by promising to teach the king's horse to talk: "For in a year's time, Louis may die. Or I may die. Or the horse may die. Or the horse may talk."

Yet by and large, the whole trick consists of keeping the hands wringing and the intrigues closing in. This is theater raw. Its drama is a little low but enthralling. It's fun; I like to watch it. And there will be more of it to watch. Along with work like "Tom Brown's School Days" and even the oddly interesting and revealing "Golden Bowl," it has already instituted some minor stylistic changes in American production. ABC, for example, has started a project to make an analogously "high quality" soap opera from Joseph Lash's *Eleanor and Franklin*. No sooner is the idea spoken—with its conjunction of sex, power, and family life in the span of two lifetimes—than it seems inevitable.

ALL THIS HAS been accompanied by some stylistic oddities and inventions. Television production has lately been acquiring a much more theatrical look and, at the same time, by an odd paradox, a look of much greater realism. The crucial element in this change is videotape. Current fashion has videotape replacing film as a dramatic medium—as it has in "All in the Family" and "Maude," both of which are performed straight through and videotaped before a live audience. Film and videotape are not only used differently, capable of doing different things, but they look different. Most episodic series ("Ironside"; "The Courtship of Eddie's Father"; Marcus Welby, M.D.; etc.) are shot on film. They have film's sharp definition of line and detail; they are not put together on the spot but as-

sembled in an editing room. Thus their editing style includes easy, frequent use of such things as extreme close-ups (Ironside's hands unfolding a note) and, above all, greater visual speed and variety, effortlessly flashing from location to location, continent to continent, if necessary. Editing videotape in this manner is far more difficult and expensive: Instead of the interminable, highly detailed multiple takes of film shooting, the action is set up very much like that of a stage production (except that blocking is for the cameras rather than the proscenium or audience) and is run through. If there is an audience, it must peer through the lights, the boom apparatus, and the soft-footed crowd of technicians, with their headsets and catlike cameras silently running in on the brilliantly made-up action beyond.

In place of film's "photographic" look of precision, videotape has a less highly resolved luminosity, a kind of glow from within the tube. It is instantly recognizable—once you know what you are looking for. Compare the photographic look with the videotaped look of Carson, Cavett, Parr, most public affairs—like Watergate—most sports, and, finally, most soap operas. Or compare the look of any movie with "All in the Family."

THE PARADOX of this technical difference is that videotape, even though used in a way that is more theatrical than filmic, tends to look "live" and therefore more "real." Since most videotaped material has a "live" look, the look of videotape has become, in effect, a new technological convention for the real—as the old-fashioned proscenium stage used to be. It is quite a turnabout: This filmic century has challenged and all but demolished every known convention of stage realism, one by one. The theater has had to survive the challenge of film by ever greater abstraction and stylization. Now, suddenly, a very old-fashioned "theatrical" look (if I may so violate the language) has—sometimes—a more "real" look than film. "All in the Family" is praised for its realism. Yet its central characters are always greeted with loud applause when they make their first entrances at the door and pause, with fixed expressions, to let it pass.

I have no conclusions to draw about this. Conclusions are for the artists in the medium to draw as they make their work. Well, let me tell you an anecdote, an anecdote (not a theory) about perceptions. It seems safe to say that for an entire generation of English and Americans, Henry VIII and his great daughter are Keith Mitchell and Glenda Jackson—have their faces, voices, eyes. Whatever else, the series—shot exclusively in videotape, except for out-

door sequences—was completely absorbing in that addictive television way; the technique managed to effect (assisted, let us not fail to add, by the other merits of the production) a complete suspension of disbelief. It was all credible; it worked: Whitehall was real; the Virgin Queen did indeed stand there before us. I recently had occasion to see a couple episodes of the series, transposed into film, run off on the large screen. It was all there, all exactly the same—except it looked perfectly unreal. Whitehall was a jerry-built collection of painted sets: I almost expected a flat to come falling down if the enraged Henry slammed a door too hard. And that cumbersome videotape editing made it look like a movie from 1912. There the characters stood, talking to each other. And talking. And talking. When somebody would sweep in or out of a room, one hardly cared. Everything that had seemed so real was revealed by film to be cardboard and staples.

A few nights later, one of the episodes was back on the tube. I snapped it on. And there was Privy Councilor Cecil, worry and strategy crawling all over his face, hurrying down the corridors. There was the guard with his battle-axe. Doors opened into the Presence Chamber. And there, a few feet from the throne, a cunning smile on her lips, stood Elizabeth of England. □

New Issue

MULTIRACIAL HOUSING AS AN INVESTMENT

PH PARTNERS IN HOUSING

Limited Partnership Interests
\$1,500 each, payable over 8 months.

GOAL: To participate in a tax sheltered real estate partnership providing quality housing for all people.

HELP END THE INJUSTICE OF CLOSED HOUSING.

Send for free prospectus

James Farmer & Morris Milgram
Partners in Housing, DEPT. WM4
8702 Crispin St., Phila., Pa. 19136

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

This ad is not an offer to sell, nor a solicitation of offers to buy these securities. The offering is made only by the prospectus—available only in states where these securities may be offered. Neither the Attorney General of the State of N.Y. nor the Attorney General of the State of N.J. nor the Bureau of Securities of the State of N.J. has passed on or endorsed the merits of this offering. Any representation to the contrary is unlawful.

Light Refractions

It's Still Mizzling

For months now, ever since the *Light Refractions* that dealt with *misling*, which grew out of a friend's misreading of *mised*, I've received a steady flow of letters telling me about people's favorite instances of mispronunciation.

A few who must have missed the first *misle* column have written to tell me that *misle* should rhyme with *isle* and *lisle*. D. Yuzon, of San Francisco, wrote a poem to illustrate his point:

A crooked cabdriver, Carlisle,
Took tourists around on his isle.
Whenever it drizzled,
He usually sizzled.
He couldn't the innocents misle.

Those of you in the East may well grizzle
It is wrong to pronounce it as mizzle
It is obvious that misle
Rhymes with aisle and lisle
Your discourse on the matter's pure fizzle.

I often write in my head while I'm riding my bicycle, and I find bike-riding particularly conducive to the writing of

limericks and song lyrics. I think that's probably a very personal quirk. Anyway, by a not very odd coincidence, I had written something similar in a sort of obverse way to Mr. Yuzon's two limericks while riding my bike:

As the couple came back up the aisle,
The groom wore a radiant smisle,
And a churchful of guys
Heaved a chorus of suys
Of relief that was heard for a misle.

Mrs. Alfred P. Otto asks, "Do you suppose that Gloria Steinem is out to MSle you men?" Arthur M. Cory, a professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin, wrote to say that *mizzle* means "to rain in fine drops" and that an earlier form was *misle*. Furthermore, Professor Cory tells of a colleague of his "who got on the elevator one rainy day, saw that I was wearing a slicker, and said, 'You're smarter than I; you brought a raincoat today.' I replied that I had a raincoat at home but that I also keep one in my office. His comment: 'No

fair; you're playing both ends against the mizzle.'"

I looked up *mizzle* in my Oxford English Dictionary. Not only do *mizzle* and the old *misle* mean "to rain in fine drops" but they used to mean "to confuse, muddle; to make tipsy; also, to mystify (a person); to give (one) wrong information." So *misling* has a certain legitimacy.

Henry Porter, in *The Two Angry Women of Abington* (1599), wrote, "What though he be mump, misled, blind? 'Tis no consequent to me." I looked up *mump*; it means—or used to mean—drunk, and I assume *misled* and *blind* did, too, as Porter used them. Now we know that in the sixteenth century, *misled* was pronounced *mizzled* and meant *sozzled*.

Straphanger took a funny bounce for A. Peter Hollis, who now lives in Wilson, North Carolina. He says:

Straphanger mizzled me on the New York City subways, where the word was used to promote courtesy amongst passengers. My own definition is:

straph-anger: n. A common, occasionally fatal disease of modern origin caused by *straphylococcus proximiti* and characterized by violent twitching of the body and umbrella, often followed by hysteria, coupled with furious and extreme attacks on nearby persons. Because of the incoherent babbling of its victims, straphanger is vulgarly called "Geddinowpleez Disease."

I can speak with some authority on the straphangers since I am, myself, a victim of the disease and have had to undergo several years of painful deurbanization.

Carole Grayson, who says she's a Princeton man, not a coed, though she's definitely a Ms., tells me she's had trouble with *facetious*. "To me it was pronounced like the word I assumed it had its roots in: *fa-cet-e-us*, having, of course, to do with facets. The word meaning "humorous" I always spelled *phoecetious*. And somewhere, way in the back of my mind, it was derived from *Phoenician* (though the consonants got a little kastroodled)."

Mrs. Hyman Lieber, who spoke German as a child, says she naturally pronounced *albeit* as *all-bite*. She says she'd still rather pronounce it that way. For my own taste, given a choice of *al-be-it* and *all-bite*, I'll say *though*.

The word most often mentioned in the Mispronunciation Derby (after *misled*, of course) is *bedraggled*. In one mail delivery alone, I got four letters telling me about *bed-raggled*. Interesting word. It sounds like a description of the girls coming down to breakfast in Polly Adler's house. THOMAS H. MIDDLETON

Answer to Wit Twister No. 3, page 6. spate, peats, tapes, paste, pates.

BACH'S BACK

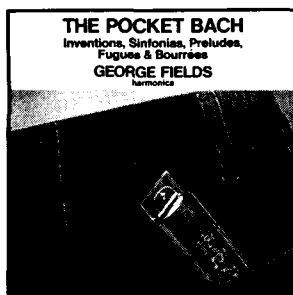
ON HARMONICA?



Yes, on harmonica.
And with the wizardry of
George Fields, America's greatest
jazz and classical harmonicist.
(You know him from classic film
scores—*Paint Your Wagon*, *Ruby
Gentry* and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.)

He has transcribed 14 of his
favorite Bach pieces, which he
plays on four-octave chromatic
and bass harmonicas. The result
is a tour-de-force of musicianship
and multi-track recording.

If you like Bach, listen. If you like
the harmonica, listen. If you can't
imagine the combination, listen. You will
hear both with new insight, new delight.



S-36067
(LP, Cassette
& Cartridge)

