

DAVID THORBURN

Is TV Acting A Distinctive Art Form?

The actor has always been the essential artistic resource of American commercial television, and the history of that medium is, at the very least, a history of exceptional artistic accomplishment by actors. All the good TV series have centered on fine acting, and all the great shows—the classic texts that, in my opinion, will one day be valued as highly as the best Hollywood movies—have depended on superior, memorably intense performances from two, three or even four recurring roles.

One explanation (there are many others) for the disesteem in which television is held is that little has been said about how TV acting differs from acting in other media and specifically about the complex modulated drama enacted by the faces and voices of the best TV actors. Far more decisively than the actor in the movies or in the theater, where backgrounds and vistas and props compete for the audience's attention, the TV actor creates and controls the meaning of what we see on the screen. And in order to understand our culture's addiction to television, in order to find authentic standards for judging TV drama, we must learn to recognize and to value the discipline and the improvisational intelligence regularly displayed by our TV performers.

Because it is free of the cinema's malicious (if often innocent) power to transform even minor facial irregularities into craterous deformities and because it is unsuitable for grand panoramas and extended action sequences, television has encouraged a uniquely intimate drama of the ordinary and has been friendly to performers who look and talk more like the rest of us than most movie actors. Television's matchless respect for the ordinary human face and its special hospitality to the confining spaces of our ordinary world explain the remarkable success of the soap operas, which have developed into a distinctive form of American art. And these same qualities also explain why actors like Richard Boone, Peter Falk and Telly Savalas have been cast mainly as villains or buffoons in the movies but have been able to create memorable heroes in the reduced visual field of television.

I believe that David Janssen's increasingly intelligent and subtle work on television is a good example of the TV-actor's art, as well as an example of how the medium in general has matured. Janssen has performed creditably, and sometimes brilliantly, in a number of TV movies, most recently as a self-destructive alcoholic in "A Sensitive, Passionate Man." He has a leading role in the premiere episode of this new season's "Police Story," to be broadcast by NBC Sept. 27. But he has given his best performances in that most disdained of all TV genres, the crime series.

Janssen's first series was a version of "Richard Diamond—Private Eye," a character who had appeared earlier in books and on radio. This late 1950's series was typical of television in that decade, which mechanically repeated stories and characters from other media. But in his next series, "The Fugitive," one of the strongest and most popular shows of the 1960's, Janssen began to develop a whole range of facial gestures and vocal inflections that had a distinctive authority on the small screen. "The Fugitive" was a bold fable of injustice and flight whose ambivalent attitudes toward legal authority and toward middle-class life complexly reflected American cultural anxieties. But its chief artistic distinction was located in Janssen's performance, which repeatedly turned the show away from the muscle-flexing violence of the plot and toward scenes of intimacy and emotional nuance that spoke eloquently of the burdens and costs of human relationships.

In his four seasons (1963-67) as the fugitive, Janssen grew remarkably as an actor. And it is hard to imagine that his special talents would have been tested and strengthened so fully in any other medium or in a format other than the weekly series. The very premise of the program, conceived

David Thorburn is a professor of literature at MIT and is currently writing a book about prime-time TV drama for the Oxford University Press.



David Janssen in "The Fugitive" (left) in the 1960's and in the forthcoming "Police Story"—"increasingly intelligent and subtle work as a TV actor"

by Quinn Martin, laid demands upon Janssen that were peculiarly congenial to an actor of his unflamboyant physical presence and restricted vocal range. The smoldering physical authority of most film stars would have been an impediment in this role, which required a hero of modest dimensions, an ordinary fellow able to lose himself in crowds and able to move and speak inconspicuously. Not physical energy or size, then, but psychological nuance was what the role demanded:

an actor able to create a sense of character through the rhythms of his speech, the way he cocked his head or shrugged his shoulders, an actor alert to all the minute physical and vocal maneuvers that define our ordinary individuality.

These qualities were only intermittently visible in Janssen's next series, "O'Hara—U.S. Treasury," which died a well-earned death in 1972 after 22 episodes. He was badly mis-

cast as a brave T-man. But the vulnerable, self-deprecating decency of the character he had established in "The Fugitive" was refined and complicated in "Harry-O," a private-eye series that ran for two seasons beginning in 1974. The difference between "Richard Diamond" and "Harry-O" is the difference, essentially, between an apprentice art and a mature art, between a dramatic text blind or indifferent to the special limitations and opportunities inherent in television and a text that fully understands and exploits the distinctive features of that intimate medium. Even in "The Fugitive," Janssen's gentleness, his pained reluctance to impose himself on others, the singular tentativeness he brought to the act of speaking—all this came through only fitfully and was often submerged by tides of melodramatic violence or sentimentality. But in "Harry-O," these and other qualities were kept at the very center of each episode by writers and directors who clearly understood how to use story lines and interior spaces and close-ups and voice-over narration so as to respect the principle of the actor's primacy on the small screen.

A sensitive, reluctant hero, Janssen's Harry Orwell was one of the great TV characters, more credibly and richly imagined than nearly all the TV detectives who preceded him, a true successor of the private-eyes in the novels of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler and in the movies that grew out of those books. Unlike "Richard Diamond," which merely repeated an earlier story, "Harry-O" drew creatively on this popular mythology, and the pleasure of watching the show partly consisted in one's repeated recognition of the variations and shadings the series introduced into this fertile American tradition. There were many explicit allusions to the older detectives in "Harry-O," and Janssen's gently hoarse voice-over, used with great economy in every episode, seemed an aptly restrained echo of Hammett's narrators and of the movie detectives who also often told their own stories. There was no trace, though, of machismo swagger or self-display in Janssen's weary voice; his attitude toward the world was correspondingly quiet and unassertive.

As I've already implied, Janssen's own previous work conferred an even more complex authority on the series. He was 27 and looked younger when he did "Richard Diamond"; he was 44 and looked older when he began "Harry-O." As with other memorable TV actors—James Arness, for instance, who did "Gunsmoke" for 20 years, or James Garner, whose version of the hero as silver-tongued coward has grown richer with each series he has done—Janssen's aging was significant drama in itself, his quick familiar face growing more expressive as it matured.

In his first season, Harry Orwell hobbled through a brilliantly photographed San Diego with a bullet in his spine, having retired on a disability pension from the police force. Late in the season the writers allowed Harry an operation which removed the bullet, perhaps to stimulate ratings by giving him more strenuous and violent tasks to perform on the screen. But he never became much of an acrobat and retained his shambling awkwardness throughout his second season. Fitting himself with rueful slowness into his broken-down toy of a sports car, middle-aged and sagging like its owner, or stiffly climbing the wooden steps of his house on the beach, he seemed a subversively modest hero, the fugitive grown older and wiser.

He moved to Los Angeles in his second season, and into a recurring half-comic entanglement with Lieutenant K.C. Trench, a meticulous intelligent cop (brilliantly played by Anthony Zerbe) who respected Harry's honesty but was continually outraged by his habitual disorderliness and casual style. Harry's manner with Trench, as with clients and suspects, always registered a special sensitivity, a wary tolerance for their pain or anger or foolishness, and he put questions to people with great hesitancy as if embarrassed to be violating their privacy. Like Garner's Jim Rockford, who also appeared in 1974, Janssen-Orwell was a great wheedler, more likely to coddle or flatter information out of his sources than to threaten them. "Why should I answer you?" asked an officious bureaucrat in one episode. Janssen's response was characteristic, a half-audible mumble, delayed for a long moment as he settled on the edge of the bureaucrat's desk: "Because my feet hurt?"

Of course Harry Orwell was a figure of fantasy like all heroes. But I think him a fine and healthy fantasy, an admirable dream of integrity and decency. His adventures were cancelled after 48 episodes, despite reasonably strong Nielsen ratings against formidable competition. I suspect the show was a casualty of irresponsible complaints against the alleged violence on television, complaints that resolutely refuse to make even the most elementary distinctions among TV programs and that foolishly insist that crude body counts and indices of ill-defined "aggressive behavior" can measure the quality of our TV fare.

Though I miss Harry, I am comforted by the expectation of seeing him again in the inevitable re-runs and also by the certainty that he and the gifted actor who brought him so vividly to life will be remembered fondly by tens of millions. ■