



photo: V. Tony Hauser

by Patricia Michael

Cinema Canada: *It's been said that acting in front of the camera is a miniaturization of action as compared to acting in front of an audience. How would you compare the two experiences?*

Martha Henry: I don't know. Everybody asks that. What you do in front of a television camera is not all that different from what you do onstage. You still have places you have to go to, but in the film thing I always have the sense that whatever you're doing, the film camera will go into you whereas the television camera just sits there and I have to play something into it. I guess that's the difference.

To me the process that you go through to get to what you're doing, as far as working on a person, that process is exactly the same. I've never discovered that there was any difference.

When I first started on television, I thought, 'This is wonderful. It can all be very small.' And discovered that that is not the case at all. That the television camera is quite demanding and quite clunky in a sense. It doesn't have the kind of sensitivity that a film camera does. So what it seems to do, is simply report what it sees. I was going to say much as the audience sees something onstage. That's not quite true. It reports it without any particular kind of comment or sensitivity of its own. It shoots it.

So I discovered that in television you have to be quite large, much to my surprise. I think it's always been quite hard for me to be big. And because I've worked in the theatre all my life, that's what I've trained myself to do. Because you need a certain kind of size to be onstage. You need a size of vocal projection, you need an emotional size, you need a psychological size. You need all that kind of thing so that it can be seen and perceived. So I was quite surprised that I couldn't simply just relax in front of the television camera and come down to what I thought was a normal size.

Martha Henry in Transition

When Martha Henry won the Genie for Best Actress for her portrayal of Edna in *Dancing in the Dark* – a role etched in passive and perfect subservience before quietly exploding in murder – it was the second time the Academy had honoured her. She had previously won for her work in Robin Phillip's *The Wars*. However, both awards paid tribute to only one facet of Henry's talent – she is also masterful on stage. A Canadian citizen today – "You can do more work here than you can anywhere else and in a smaller space" – she studied in Pittsburgh before moving to Ontario to work at Toronto's Crest Theatre, and eventually studied at the National Theatre School. Since then, her career blossomed in different directions: 16 distinguished seasons at Stratford and a host of other theatrical triumphs were interspersed with regular forays in television, mainly for the CBC, and film. Recently, she has also embarked upon a new career as a theatre director. Her most recent offering, *All Other Destinations are Cancelled*, played at Toronto's Tarragon Theatre. But she still finds time to act. This summer, after a 12-year absence, she returns to CBC-Toronto to shoot Eric Till's *Banting and Banting*.

Then when they started using film on television, I could see a huge difference in what the film camera did, and what the television camera did. By the time I did my first feature film, I felt that I could do what I had felt many years ago, which was, I suppose, supported with many years of work and being more comfortable with myself and more confident about what I was doing.

I didn't have to worry about all the other stuff as far as the technique of the thing was concerned. And it was like breathing a sigh of relief. And so therefore, the eye of the camera became, for me, the other eye – from my eye to its eye.

Cinema Canada: *You speak of the camera as something personal.*

Martha Henry: I don't know. It's a camera and it's something that's there. It can see everything you do that's within its scope. Not only can it see the look of you, but it can also see your thought and it can see what you feel. It can see the way you breathe and it can see everything that flashes through your head and everything that happens to you.

Cinema Canada: *In your Genies acceptance speech, you talked about Vic Sarin's ability to look into your soul. It's not just staying outside you then?*

Martha Henry: I do think it does depend on who is behind it (the camera), I think the film camera, technically – without knowing anything about how it is put together – is obviously a much more complex and sensitive instrument than a television camera. But it also seems to take on the personality of the person behind it and who is operating it. And so I used to feel with Vic sometimes – and I've felt this with other camera operators as well – that it sort of becomes a link I guess, between Vic and myself. It's sort of as if Vic is playing an instrument and the instrument is the camera, I guess.

Cinema Canada: *Where was Leon Marr (the director) in relation to this?*

Martha Henry: He knew exactly what he wanted for every shot, right down to the last detail and Vic set it up for him and let him look and see if that was what he wanted. And then if Leon said,

'Yes,' that was it. He invented it within the parameters of what it was that Leon was after.

Cinema Canada: Do you remember your first response to the character of Edna in *Dancing in the Dark* when you read the book?

Martha Henry: I think that the feeling I had, was that this had been done. That it was a kind of feminist statement that we had come beyond.

My feeling changed enormously from working on it, until I couldn't understand how I had felt that way. Why? I think in my initial and surface reading, it looked as though it was the old cliché of the woman who stays home and just cleans the house and never gets out.

And it became not that. I discovered that it was about any kind of relationship where somebody subjugates themselves to somebody else. It's not necessarily the fault of the other person either. You do this to yourself, you allow yourself to become the other. And you do everything within your power to make sure that that happens. So that in fact, you do not have an existence of your own. There is no relationship insofar as you make yourself an adjunct of that person.

This often happens in a marriage, but it's not restricted to a marriage relationship. It can happen between any two people – best friends, a grown-up and a child, or a boss and a worker. The very interesting thing about it for me, was



• Henry as the Munroe matriarch in *Empire Inc.*

what she had to do in order to come to herself, to see what 'herself' was.

What she had to do, unfortunately, was to kill the thing that she had set up as her existence. In this case, that would be her husband. The only way she could see if there was anybody there, was by killing the person she thought that she was being made the fool of. So what she comes to in the hospital is someone who has done the ultimate deed, and wiped the slate clean. And then (she) can start to see who and what she is. So then we see the first step of what she is, which is simply something who – chooses to dance.

Cinema Canada: How much of Edna is within you?

Martha Henry: Well, more than I would have expected.

Cinema Canada: Was that difficult for you?

Martha Henry: Oh, no. That was a help. It surprised me. It wasn't a revelation exactly, but it's often one of the things that you find most interesting when you're working on something – to see how much of you there is there. How much of the thing you're doing responds to something in you, you didn't know you had.

That's why actors are so vulnerable in a way. They find all kinds of parts of themselves that they don't necessarily like very much. They're there to be used and are often explored and bared. Sometimes, it's necessary, even if you like to think you're not like that.

Cinema Canada: You said that the process of preparing for stage or for the camera is much the same.

Martha Henry: I think the process is the same. It's different, of course, for every part that you play, whether you're playing it onstage, on television, on radio or whatever. It's always a slightly different process. And you really don't know when you start out, how you're going to do it.

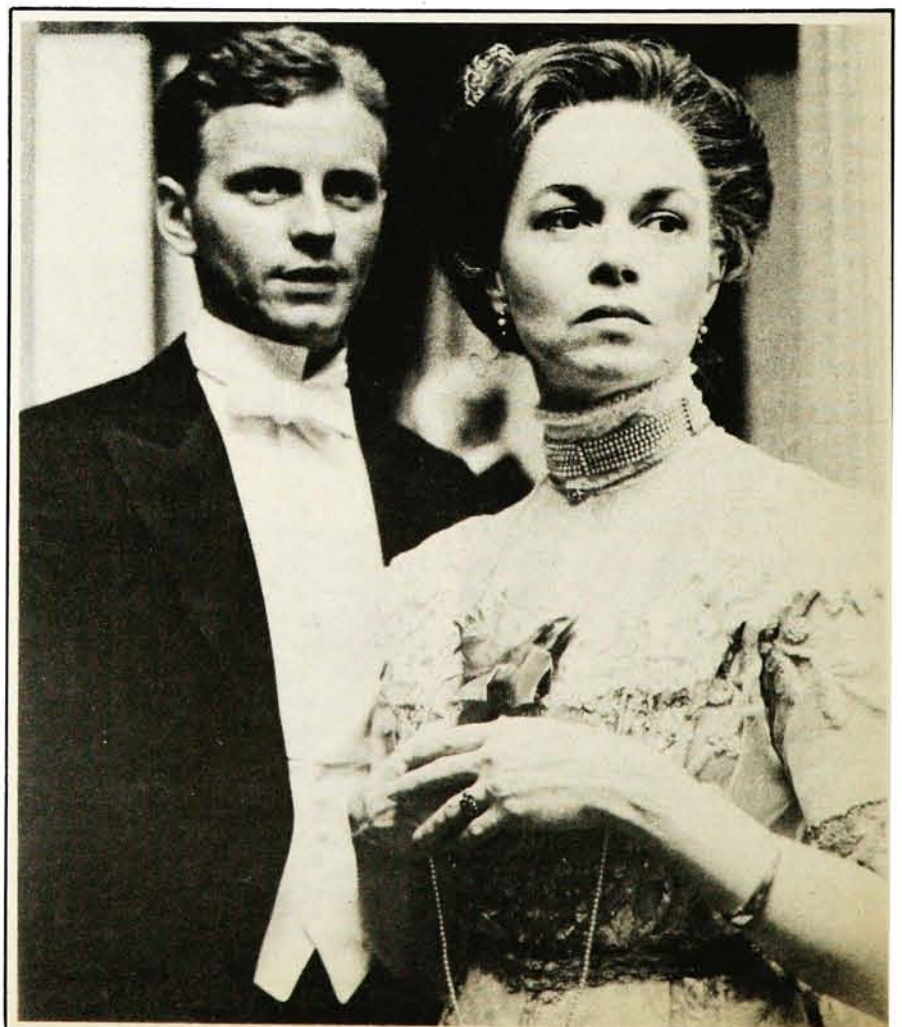
There are certain habits you get used to. Practically every actor reads the script first. But not even every actor does that. Judy Bench gave an interview, recently, where she said she doesn't read scripts. Somebody said then, "Well, how do you choose your parts?" And she said, "Well, I let my husband do that."

Cinema Canada: But you read the script first?

Martha Henry: Yes. But I can see her point. She feels she obviously has enough technique and experience and knowledge to do this. She just starts in rehearsal and allows the whole thing to evolve. And that is a wonderful luxury, a wonderful thing to be able to do.



• Going crackers getting cracking in *Dancing in the Dark*



• Henry and Brent Carver model the upper class Edwardian elegance of *The Wars*

Cinema Canada: *In thinking back over your career, is there any part you've played that has had a larger impact on you?*

Martha Henry: Well, probably John Murell's play 'Farther West'. Murell is an amazing playwright. He changes your life when you work on one of his plays, certainly on that play. I've done a number of his plays now and that one was... an evolutionary play. It wasn't unlike *Dancing in the Dark* in that it was about a woman who was looking for a place where she could be what she was, instead of what the world expected her to be. I did it about five years ago. In '82.

Cinema Canada: *Did it affect the way you looked at *Dancing in the Dark*?*

Martha Henry: Probably, but not consciously. Everything you do changes you a bit. For an actor, that is quite apparent. And it's something you have to deal with. And you're very aware that it's happening. Probably in all of the arts, that is true. So yes, indeed, it changed me and I'm sure I looked at *Dancing in the Dark* differently than had I been asked to do it before. I sort of knew what that task was, I guess.

I know that somebody once said that aside from sitting out on the field and listening to the grass grow, there is nothing more boring than (actors) talking about acting. It's definitely the most interesting interview for me, but it's so difficult. It's easier to say, 'I was born in whatever and I live here.'

Usually, when you first look at a script, you think, 'Oh yes, I really want to do this' or 'I really don't want to do this' and if you don't want to do it, then you turn it down. But it's later when you've started to work on it, that you realize how difficult it is. It's sort of like giving birth, I think. The initial impulse - nature has taken care of that - is very appealing but the process is often hard.

Cinema Canada: *Has taking on theatre direction over the last few years meant making some hard career choices?*

Martha Henry: I'm still in that kind of transition period, I think. I saw Chris Newton (Shaw Festival's artistic director) this morning and he said, 'I don't think anybody should only direct. I think you should always keep your hand in and act from time to time, just to remind yourself about how hard it is.' I think there is probably some truth in that.

But for me, as I've acted all my life and I'm only starting to direct, it seems important to me to say, 'No, this is actually what I want to do. I want to direct.' As far as the theatre is concerned, I want to direct because otherwise, I think it's going to be very difficult for me to get myself out of the performing area and into sitting on the other side of the room.

Cinema Canada: *Having worked as a director, how does it feel going back to acting?*

Onstage, your life is on the line every single night. And you could die out there. Whereas on film, if you die, they'll just wipe it.

Martha Henry: It's made me much more humble. I guess, before I'd ever directed, I thought that the director was God, and therefore they were to be challenged, that the director was impenetrable and inviolate. I think to a very great extent, that actors have to feel this way. I think they have to feel that a director is someone they can fight, that they can come up with all kinds of things, because the director cannot be harmed.

And if you feel that way, you feel very secure as an actor. You can finally find the place where you shall be. But in being the director, you find that this isn't so.

I am amazed at the actors I've worked with, at how adroit they are and how willing they are to do things, and how skillful they are and easy to work with.

And I'm sure I was never easy to work with. So it's been a very humbling process. If I go back on the stage again, I will be much quieter and much less flappy of tongue.

Cinema Canada: *Have you ever wanted to direct film?*

Martha Henry: No. I'm always delighted to be able to be in a film. It's almost like a holiday for me. It's not that one doesn't work hard, but it's a completely different kind of being. It's much more relaxed and I don't feel the same tension, I don't feel the same anxiety.

Cinema Canada: *Why is that?*

Martha Henry: I don't know. I guess, it's because theatre is so hard. With film you always do it more than once, but you achieve the thing once. Now this may take several hours during the day - or if it's an extremely large-budget film, it may take more than one day to do one thing - but once you've done that one thing, then you go on to the next. So there are little pockets with an overall view and I've always enjoyed having that time to figure out how the thing that I'm doing that particular day fits into the whole. It's always a great pleasure for me. It's a part of the detective work of the film part. And I like all of that, trying to figure out if I have on the right earrings or if my hair had a curl



photo: V. Tony Hauser

death. And you might not work for three years and come back and they will still be there. And they will follow what you do. They will follow the progress of your work and they are just as loyal as the day is long.

So there is an enormous compensation for that lack of quick fame and that lack of huge, almost unselective, enthusiasm over something. Canadians will take much longer to choose whom they care for and when they do, they seem to feel then, that they have taken you in.

Cinema Canada: *But is there any sense of what it is in *Dancing in the Dark* that makes it Canadian?*

Martha Henry: Maybe it has to do with that longer line of energy. It's slightly lower-key, not quite so frantic.

I remember that for a long period of time, when I first began to be aware of the depth of feeling in the Canadian national conscience, particularly in the arts world, of feeling very nationalistic and really feeling that the only way we were going to be able to do it ourselves, was to, in a sense, block the border. Ideally, exactly the way the Black movement happened. They had to say, 'No, no. It's us now and nobody else.' and 'Black is beautiful.' People are going to have to say, 'No, no. We have to stand up for ourselves. We are who we are. We are not English. We are not American.' And that is the only way we are going to find our identity.

It seems to me, more and more and to my sorrow, that during the last year or so a great portion of the Canadian population (as far as the arts are concerned) don't really care or think about this in any way. And I guess it's the job of the artistic community to try and point our culture toward ourselves if we possibly can. The political and economic load is so great and getting greater every year with our links to the States, that I'm not sure that my past feeling isn't kind of old-fashioned now - that we're moving toward a time when we're going to look at being Canadian and being nationalistically Canadian in a different way than we did.

Cinema Canada: *Robertson Davies thought that Canadian literature is a regional type true to itself, much in the way that writing in the States is identifiable as coming out of the South, New England, the Midwest and from the West Coast.*

So we become regionally defined as part of a larger continental culture and we already have a voice.

Martha Henry: Perhaps this is the trick - to realize that we already have it, instead of insisting that we don't and that it's something we must find.

Cinema Canada: *How hospitable is the Canadian film climate today?*

Martha Henry: When it really began, (around 12 years ago), people were very wary of stage actors. They didn't want to use them. They wanted to find

under the day we shot the sequence that went before. I adore all of that.

And the acting itself then, becomes for me like a sigh of relief. Whereas onstage, your life is on the line every single night. And you could die out there. Whereas on film, if you die, they'll just wipe it. It goes into the mysterious black box.

Cinema Canada: *As an American, is there a sense in the films you've worked on, of this thing called the 'Canadian Sensitivity' and how would you characterize it?*

Martha Henry: I don't know. That's a very interesting question. I have had people say to me that there is no question that *Dancing in the Dark* is a Canadian film, that you can feel it, you can smell it. The sensitivity is quite different from American films. And I guess that that is true. I'm not quite sure why, and I wouldn't know what to call it.

When I come back to Canada, I think, 'Oh, thank heavens I'm home.' And I've really come to see the Americanness of Americans and the Canadianness of Canadians in relation to each other.

In the States, it's very quick and it's very strong and very fast and very quickly over. And 'Take me on to the next thing, the next bright colour and the next bit of brilliance or enthusiasm.' And then it's gone. And it's on to the next thing. No sense of regret or contrition or even much link to what's happened before.

And as a result, Americans, if they (in this business) take you to their bosom, they do so wholeheartedly and with enormous enthusiasm and have no compunction whatever about telling everybody about how wonderful they think you are and how wonderful they think the film is. And they push it and promote it and as soon as it's gone, it's gone. It's over. And they're quickly onto the next thing.

Canadians don't make stars, or at least they haven't. They're beginning to do that more and more. But it takes a much longer time. Once they find you, and once they feel they know you and they like your work, they're there to the

their own actors and for the most part, they chose people that were certainly not involved with classical theatre. For the most part, they were looking for actors, who if they did work onstage, worked in very small theatres because it was felt that small is better for film. I don't in fact think it has anything to do with small or big, really. I think it has to do with talent, whatever that word means.

But anyway, understandably or not, that seemed to be the feeling. In the course of my career, I've gone in to see about participating in perhaps 10 films. But the two films I've done were not because somebody called me in to see about them, they were because somebody wanted me to do them. That's as opposed to going in to audition for them or to do an interview. I'm not very good in interviews, I don't interview

very well. I don't audition very well. I'm too shy. It's a hard process for me. Auditioning is a completely different kind of process than actually working on the script. So if you go in to audition for something and you're using the same process you use when you first start to work on a script, it's too small for them. It's too undeveloped. They want to see what it's going to be like and that's very hard for me to do.

Cinema Canada: *Have you noticed an improvement in the quality of scripts that you see?*

Martha Henry: I think so. Certainly in the films that I see on the screen. There has always been the odd Canadian script that's come out through sheer dint of hard work and intelligence and a creative dream – but with each year now, there are more and more.

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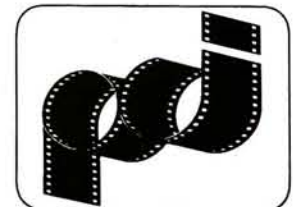
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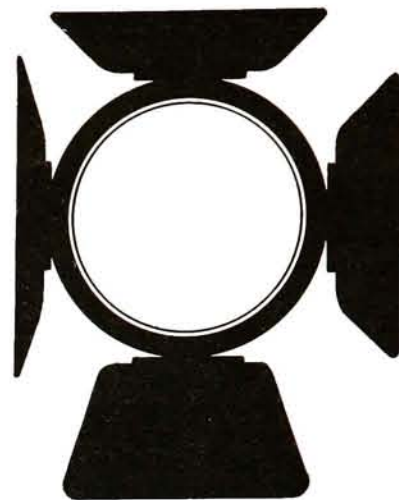
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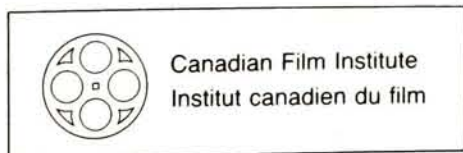
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