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In Small Packages: Particularities of Performance in Dramatic Episodic Series

Sarah Cardwell

The accumulated amount of character knowledge that a long-term serial viewer accumulates gives a richness of interpretation to any single instalment.

(Smith 2014: 290)

The familiarity with characters that is furnished by prior episodes is sustained and built upon through the incorporation of gestures, moments, and events that are imbued with emotional weight based on information parcelled out previously.

(Nannicelli 2016: 70)

As the editors of this volume observe in the Introduction, attention to performance on television has, until recently, been relatively limited; this collection constitutes a welcome and significant expansion. Within existing scholarship, some of the most incisive and nuanced accounts of television performance are proffered in the context of focused analyses of specific programmes and characters, under the aegis of television aesthetics (which is also where this chapter situates itself). One of the most important, obvious and immediately engaging functions of performance is, after all, to express and communicate the development of character. Thus valuable insights into televisual performance have arisen via critical and scholarly attention, such as that paid by Greg M. Smith and Ted Nannicelli as highlighted in the above quotes, to notable examples of extended character development in TV serials such as Mad Men and Breaking Bad.

Notably, these are both long-running dramatic serials, proffering complex narratives stretched out over many series/seasons. Recent expressive and
evaluative criticism of television frequently valorises TV’s seriality and the
dramatic potential of long-running serial form, especially its manifestation
in ‘quality US drama’. The episodic series, also a firmly established, persistent
televisual form, composed of fully self-contained episodes (‘small pack-
ages’) in terms of plot, and dependent upon core characters supported and
supplemented each week by changing cameos, lies comparatively neglected
by aestheticians and cognitivists, and undervalued by critics.

The widespread preoccupation with serials is understandable, reflecting
a desire to pinpoint some of the specificities of TV, its dominant forms and
noteworthy achievements. In their collection on television aesthetics and
style, Jason Jacobs and Steven Peacock identify extensive seriality as a primary
difference between television and film, citing ‘the expansive structure of
television fictions’ (2013: 6–7). Ted Nannicelli, in his philosophical account
of the art of television, explores ‘temporal prolongation’ in his endeavour to
establish the specificity of TV: ‘the television medium possesses certain qual-
ities, including the capacities for temporal prolongation and liveness, that
differentiate it from the film medium’ (2016: 80, 81). Others, such as Robin
Nelson (2007) and Jason Mittell (2015), have commended contemporary
‘quality’ TV serials’ complex narrative and character development.

Furthermore, it is easy to see why television aestheticians, who seek
particularly to pinpoint the singular achievements of notable works,
might tend less often to be inspired by programmes that exhibit formula,
repetition, conformity, lack of individuality. While episodic formats garner
considerable attention from mainstream TV studies, within television
aesthetics – which promises detailed attention to elements such as style
and performance – serialised dramas are far more often the focus of recent
close analyses than are episodic ones. The fact that episodic series are
frequently generic – as in the case of Death in Paradise (BBC, 2011–), the
police procedural which is my chosen focus – rather than ‘serious’ drama,
compounds the problem.3 Scholars concerned with details of character
and performance are understandably drawn to explore and appreciate the
achievements of notable serials which allow for the extensive, intricate
development of character.

From a distinct but potentially complementary perspective, nascent
work undertaken by cognitivists interested in television adds weight to the
focus on seriality. Cognitive scholars begin from a reasonable presumption
that our engagement with characters is central to our relationship with
and appreciation of the work in front of us, and that, moreover, moving-image narrative forms such as film and television exploit instinctive, deep-rooted ways in which we form real-life connections. It is clear, therefore, why the rise in profile of long-running serials has lured some cognitivists from their home ground of film studies to television studies. Television serials facilitate far more obviously than do films the ‘friendship metaphor’ as a model for our complex engagement with on-screen characters: cognitivists Robert Blanchet and Margrethe Bruun Vaage argue that ‘by generating an impression of a shared history, television series activate mental mechanisms similar to those activated by friendship in real life’ (2012: 18).

As noted in the quotations that open this chapter, our memories of characters’ histories, accreted across the extended narrative arc of a serial, intensify our engagement with those characters. Cognitivists exhibit enthusiasm for the same long-form serials as do TV aestheticians, favouring them over episodic programmes, since the former appear to correspond more closely with their scholarly preoccupations.

Both aesthetic and cognitive approaches contend, with differing degrees of explicitness, that sophisticated characterisation and performance enable us to build intimacy with a character over a sustained period, and that this process is central to our engagement and appreciation. Thus across two key areas of television studies which concern themselves particularly with characters and performance, long-form serials have dominated recent discussion.

When performance is evaluated within this context (of long-run serials), an inevitable focus emerges on the profound exploration or long-term progression of characters, and the actors who develop with and through them. However, this is not the only possible route into television performance, nor does it cover the range of pleasures to be found in particular performances, especially where they exist in non-serial episodic forms and genres. This chapter addresses performance within conventional episodic form. Episodic form can be arguably more challenging for its creators and performers, given its restrictions and limitations. Herein, I recognise and explore some of the implications of episodic form for performance, and celebrate the respective achievements of one specific, oft-derided series, *Death in Paradise*. Within necessarily limited space, I hope to show that it is possible to proffer sensitive and appreciative explorations of particularities of performance within traditional episodic series. Underlying this chapter is a firm belief that sometimes good things come in small packages.
Counterpointing the Serial with the Episodic

The current dominance of serial form within television scholarship and criticism raises two potential barriers to the appreciation of performance(s) within episodic series.

First, important though the serial form is to contemporary quality TV, there is a risk that complex seriality begins to stand for the fully realised ‘televisual’, or at least for that worthy of close aesthetic attention; our understanding and appreciation of serial form consequently belies a lack of responsiveness to television’s other dramatic traditions and to the particularities of performance therein.

There is a tendency not only to acclaim recent long-running serials but also to proffer, if only for classificatory or rhetorical purposes, episodic form as their logical counterpoint. Some scholarship, while celebrating the open, evolving serial, comes close to caricaturing the episodic series as a dead counterweight: closed, constrained, simplistic, out of date. Bruun Vaage contrasts ‘regular TV’ as LOB (Least Objectionable Programming) for an ‘undifferentiated mass audience’ against newer, long-form US quality serials (2016: xii). Mittell’s work on ‘complex’ contemporary US television offers probably the most sustained deployment of this use of the episodic series as counterpoint. In one essay, extolling the virtues of recent US television serial dramas, he depicts episodic form as historical, and claims that narrative complexity develops in television only from the late 1990s; aligning the latter with serial form, Mittell argues that this ‘new TV is more “difficult”’ than earlier or other television (2010: 78, 79).

It must be acknowledged that most of the scholars cited above offer caveats regarding their preference for serials over episodic series. While Mittell allies complexity to serial form, he also clarifies in a later work that complexity is not necessarily to be equated with value, and that simplicity is sometimes artistically preferable (2015: 217). Jacobs and Peacock (2013) are careful to emphasise that neither quality nor value resides inherently within any particular form of TV, and Nannicelli asserts that there is no ‘direct, causal link between temporal prolongation and artistic achievement’ (2016: 81). In relation to close analyses of specific instances of television, Jacobs and Peacock further advocate an approach which explores the relation of a singular ‘moment’ to the whole, while Nannicelli offers a precise and nuanced account of the relationship between individual episodes and the entire
serial/series (2016: 108–13). Thus in these scholarly accounts, the facet of seriality does not dominate, or undermine attentiveness to, the particular (however the latter is defined).

Nevertheless, the widespread prevalence of serials as examples, and the not infrequent use of juxtaposition (counterpoint and contrast) to highlight the value of extensive seriality compared with episodic form, tend to divert attention away from the particularities and achievements of episodic dramas, even though many of the ideas presented in relation to serials — and relevant to explorations of character and performance — apply with equal persuasiveness to episodic series.5 Enthusiasm for the recent long-form serial has unintentionally discouraged close attention to the specific qualities and achievements of episodic series; correspondingly, consideration of performance within dramatic episodic series lags behind.

Second, the overemphasis on serials impacts particularly upon the study of character and performance. Valuable analyses of performances within serials inadvertently begin to institute implicit notions of what successful, persuasive performances look like. The element of seriality leads us to value change, development, or at least deepening interrogation or uncovering of character. Performance contributes to narrative and/or character development: there is a sense of movement, progression, going somewhere. In these terms, the contrapuntal episodic series appears to go nowhere — and the same could be said of its characters who, especially in procedurals, must exhibit constancy, repetition, perhaps circularity. Tacit assumptions about successful performance thus risk leading us to a dead end when attempting to appreciate character and performance in the near-amnesiac episodic series, wherein character development is necessarily severely limited and each episode must be self-contained, plausibly absorbing any change, complication and resolutions.

Episodic Form and Character Development, Revelation and Performance

If we seek, above all, complex and elongated diegetic development as the epitome of successful characterisation and performance, we can only be disappointed by the episodic series.6 The conventional episodic series does not generally allow for notable change or progression. However, it extends us the pleasure of repeated confirmation of character, and it can proffer an
elucidation of character in increasing detail, enabling us to get to know a character more intimately each week, deepening our rapport, regardless of the presence, length, complexity or profundity of that character’s individual journey. While the form is amnesiac in terms of plot, it need not be so in terms of character: a nuanced performance that is straightforwardly accessible to new viewers can simultaneously allow fresh insights into a character’s disposition that will be detected and appreciated by the regular audience.

Scholars and teachers of acting have noted the potential continuity between screen performances and social relationships. Patrick Tucker, in his practical guide to screen acting, avers ‘We are all stage actors’ (1994: 3), in the sense that our words and bodies present a performance that others may interpret as expressive of our characters, thoughts and feelings. It is through how others act that we come to know and appreciate them. Importantly for our purposes here, what matters most to us is a person’s recurring traits: the details of how they habitually behave, speak, move.

Though cognitivists appear in thrall to serial form, it is striking that in terms of performance there are clearer correspondences between our engagement with characters in episodic form and with others in real life. How often, after all, do we scrutinise and invest in the individual, life trajectories of those around us, their personal ‘development’, in the same way as when we watch a long-form serial? We can befriend someone over a decade without having privileged access to his or her ‘narrative’, inner life, intimate relationships and memories. Instead, as we get to know someone better, we may take pleasure in their very consistency: in the reiteration of words and actions that typify the person. Over time, in some cases, we might deepen our understanding and appreciation of their character via our observations, and this can constitute a significant and pleasurable relationship even if the person undergoes no striking changes or development. In short, we get to know those around us well precisely because of repetition and reliability. In this way, an appreciation of the kind of performances found in episodic series might chime with our appreciation of other people in real life.

Thus in the episodic series, enjoyment and satisfaction can be sought in performances which particularly exploit our common experiences of friendship and acquaintanceship in the real world. If we shift our focus from the extensive development of character, and from the contribution of performance and character to narrative progression and complexity, we can attend instead to the ongoing pleasures of the revelation, shaping and affirmation
of character via accreted details of performance. (Indeed, we can also relish those details for their own sake, in the moment, even if they prove evanescent, adding nothing noteworthy to our perception of the character or any broader narrative arc.)

Those details of performance will have their own specificity. As James Naremore neatly defines it, acting is the ‘systematic ostentatious depiction of character’ (1988: 23); we must recognise that the context or ‘system’ differs between serial and episodic forms. Successful performances in episodic series must effectively deploy the essential trope of repetition (present also in serials, but more marked in episodic series), while avoiding tired repetitiousness, and delicately balance several things, including forward momentum with equilibrium, and character revelation with the need for immediate recognisability, all the time avoiding caricature.

There are other important facets to be considered when attending to a performance within episodic form. Most such series are patently ensemble pieces, and the ensemble is a primary source of delight. Therefore performances are likely to be interdependent, each actor/character allowing others to play their part. Relationships between characters must exhibit constancies and continuities to allow the programme’s format to persist, and any changes must be absorbed without undermining the entire equilibrium of the work. Death in Paradise, for example, has faced several times the departure of key actors, whose roles and functions must be thoughtfully and plausibly replicated.

Even more fundamentally, the episodic series requires that we trouble the simplistic connection between performance and character. Performance in the episodic series fulfils additional functions and offers alternative satisfactions. Death in Paradise exploits repetition as a source of pleasure, as repetitive motifs of performance are central to the programme’s broadly comedic tone.

**Death in Paradise: Detective Inspector Richard Poole**

Death in Paradise is ignored by scholars and sneered at by critics, but loved by audiences. This light-hearted police procedural is conspicuously conventionally structured – more so than some other recent examples (such as Castle (ABC, 2009–16) or The Doctor Blake Mysteries (ABC, 2013–17;
Seven Network, 2018)), which incorporate recurrent back stories and protracted relationships between characters. *Death in Paradise*, defiantly old-school, embraces episodic form wholeheartedly. Each episode is entirely self-contained – the complete package – following a predictable narrative format, and comprising a central, constant cast complemented by weekly cameos.

The programme is set on Saint Marie, a fictional Caribbean island; it is filmed on location in Guadeloupe. The island is a star in its own right: *Death in Paradise* is shrewdly scheduled in British winter, allowing viewers to savour the stunning scenery, sandy beaches, vibrant bars and Caribbean music. Indeed, the programme’s unashamed attractiveness is likely one of the reasons for critics’ scorn: this is the very definition of escapist television. In the opening episode of series one, DI Richard Poole, played by Ben Miller, arrives from cold, damp London, a fish out of water, to oversee the local police force, who have found themselves in the unusual situation of having to investigate the murder of their Detective Inspector, Charlie Hulme (Hugo Speer). This episode establishes the programme’s format, with pre-credit scenes showing the lead up to and discovery of that week’s murder case: here, Inspector Hulme is found shot dead in a safe room, in a classic ‘locked room mystery’. The investigation is undertaken by a small stalwart team, the show’s regular cast: laid-back Dwayne Myers (Danny John-Jules), keen novice Fidel Best (Gary Carr), and astute DS Camille Bordey (Sara Martins); ‘The Commissioner’ (Selywn Patterson, played by Don Warrington) also makes periodic appearances.

The series’ credit sequence – a cheery, golden-hued montage of the central characters, idyllic beaches and palm trees of Saint Marie – includes shots of DI Poole already established among his colleagues. However, our properly diegetic introduction to the new inspector is one of gradual exposure via a series of fragments. Our first glimpse of the man who is to step into the shoes of the recently deceased DI is, appropriately enough, of his feet – or at least, his lower legs, from his shiny, lace-up brogues, which gleam in the light, up to mid-calf height, his legs clad in a well-cut, conservative dark blue suit. Poole’s long, swift strides through the arrivals area of Saint Marie airport are purposeful and confident, and his attention to detail and tendency to formality resonate in his brusque yet polite, enunciated middle-class Southern English tones, as he proclaims, with barely
concealed impatience, that the airline has lost his luggage. His idiomatic English phrasing of a request (or order) as an incomplete question, ‘If you could just point me in the direction of the lost luggage desk’, combines politeness and authoritative firmness in equal measure. Poole’s request coincides with a sharp about-turn to face his interlocutors: he wheels around on his standing leg, drawing his free foot to close neatly in an almost military, almost balletic movement that expresses neatness, precision, decisiveness. Poole is given the foreground: the toes of the other characters can just be seen in the distance, but the outline of Poole’s feet and legs is sharply drawn (Figure 1.1).

At the helpdesk, as Poole fills out a form regarding his missing suitcase, the focus of the shot moves to his mid-section, arms and hands. He asks what time the lost luggage desk opens and, on being informed that it is at 6 am, replies, ‘Then I’ll call you at oh-six oh-one, thank you very much’, with rising and levelling upward inflection, already certain of his interlocutor’s compliance. Notably, Poole extends his arm and shakes back his sleeve to check his watch in the moment before he enunciates ‘06:01’. This gesture is in practical terms redundant, but is expressive and indicative, establishing that Poole is prone to emphatic, self-assuring gestures to underscore his assertions, and does not shy from performing for those around him. This

![Figure 1.1](Death in Paradise, BBC, 2011–)
personal quality lends plausibility to the later establishment of another key, generic element of the programme's format: the denouement in which the inspector verbally unravels the devious machinations behind that week's case and reveals the identity of the murderer, exposing one of the gathered suspects as the guilty party.

As Poole walks out of the airport, he is filmed from behind in a head shot, his dark suit and hair punctuated by the crisp white collar of his shirt. And then, at last, we see his face, as he pauses at the airport doors and squints up into dazzling sun, muttering 'Christ'. His pale face is already pink and slightly sweaty, and he appears breathless from the searing heat. In this moment, DI Poole's dark, formal, polished attire – while still elegant – is clearly inappropriate. He is both literally and sartorially overdressed. The tension established here between Poole's instinctively confident and commanding demeanour and his discomfort within unnervingly unfamiliar surroundings is exploited throughout the series, mostly to comic effect.

Indeed, Miller's performance tends throughout towards the comedic (later inspectors move the dial further towards the dramatic). And the deliberately fractured presentation of the actor and character in this introduction function less to build up tension about who the actor is and more to direct our attention to details of his distinctive form, physiognomy and voice; these elements of physicality constitute from the beginning major aspects of his performance.

Poole's confidence, precision, sharpness, reserve and awkwardness (traits regarded by other characters in the programme as typically 'English') are conveyed not only by what he says but also by the actor's mode of delivery. Miller's distinctively dry tone renders Poole's sarcastic observations of the many 'problems' of Saint Marie (excessively hot weather; strange food; laid-back locals; odd customs; no cutting-edge technology) amusing, tongue-in-cheek, rather than tiresome. Poole concludes his sourer comments with a perceptible pinching together of his lips, indicating tight disapproval, personal repression and a rather prissy self-consciousness which encourages us to laugh with and at him simultaneously.

Above all, Poole's character is manifestly embodied, concentrated within details of physical and kinaesthetic performance: facial and bodily expression, posture, poise and movement. When he first arrives at the police station, set above a small, bustling market square, a mixture of close-ups, mid-shots
and long shots capture the details of Miller’s corporeality. Discombobulated, Poole gazes atypically open-mouthed, turning to absorb the scene. Taking control of himself, he heads towards the steps that lead up to the police station. With impressive flexibility, he surmounts the stairs with lengthy, bending strides, but this lower-body fluidity sharply contrasts with his stiff upper body, which exhibits no natural counter-body movement. Over Poole’s stiffly crooked left arm hangs a superfluous mackintosh, and in his right hand is a briefcase, held unnaturally low by a rigidly straight arm. Hunching his head down into slightly curved shoulders, he looks short in the neck, as if defensively shielding himself from any unexpected blows. The overall impression is comically unnatural and awkward. But it is not merely funny: it also encapsulates Poole’s keenness to get on, speediness and determination versus his stiff reserve, self-containment and lack of ease. As is often the case in these kinds of programmes, comedic performance is here balanced with and integrated within the dramatic concerns of the programme.

Strategic choices of shot size frame Miller’s performance, frequently pulling back to offer a full-length shot of Poole’s distinctive body movements, posture and poise, as in a sequence within this opening episode in which he makes a phone call to England from his secluded beach house. A long shot frames two sets of French doors, separated by a short dividing wall, which open onto the decked veranda with its aged wooden balustrade. Poole paces absentmindedly with awkward gait back and forth, crossing the space of one doorway, disappearing briefly and then reappearing to cross the other before reversing his trajectory, pausing intermittently to speak to his interlocutor (Figure 1.2). Knowing he is unobserved, his usual restraint is eased, and he is more expressive with his body. Concentrating on the fuzzy phone connection and absorbed in the call, he curves slightly forward and inward, a gentle ‘C’ shape, as if suffering from a mild but uncomfortable stomach ache, a semi-bowed posture which complements his courteous language in suggesting a measure of deference to the person on the other end of the line (his superior officer in London). Sometimes, Poole reverses the shape, rising on his toes and swaying his hips forward and his chest back, as if by stretching out his body he might find that it all falls comfortably into place. Again, Miller’s movements, while entertaining, also imply his flustered emotional state; his physical and mental conditions are inextricably bound within his performance.
At one point, in a sweeping gesture accompanying his claim that he has entirely settled in and is comfortable in his surroundings, he runs his hand blithely along the top of the wooden balustrade – and immediately encounters a splinter. Grimacing, but trying to conceal the problem from his interlocutor, Poole bends more deeply forward at the waist as if punched in the stomach, raising one leg and lowering his head in exaggerated movement of pain and frustration, before dropping his head and sagging his shoulders in defeat. Much of this scene is shot in long shot, and the bright sunlight streaming into the beach house silhouettes him to some degree, highlighting the shapes he forms with his body. Such details of performance and its framing/staging may be more wholly appreciated when watching slowly and attentively, but at the same time Miller’s performance here is drawn with broad enough brushstrokes that anyone viewing this scene for the first time can readily engage with and appreciate his character, as well as enjoy the humour.

Miller’s DI Poole is a man out of his comfort zone, and the comedic pleasure to be found in his performance arises frequently from his contrast with his surroundings. He is uncomfortable walking on sand, rarely sits with his colleagues in the local café, and makes it clear that he looks forward to returning home to England. He is also markedly distinct from his colleagues,
their scepticism and exasperation providing a choric counterpoint: they act as wry observers of and commentators upon his performance. As Poole takes his seat in front of a large desktop computer, insisting it is imperative he access the network ‘asap’, hitting the side of the monitor and complaining that it won’t turn on, laid-back local cop Dwayne, who has the air of a man who has seen it all before, observes sotto voce to his colleagues: ‘This is not going to go well.’

This is not to say that Poole is merely a butt of humour. He is bright and scientifically minded, coming up with ingenious ideas to make up for the lack of technology on the island, and diligent and persistent as he pursues the smallest case details. He is gifted in a way that sets him apart from his team. His verbal proficiency is impressive and, as noted above, his English reserve does not prevent him wholly enjoying the performance that constitutes the denouement of each episode – this he does with flourish and theatricality, to the extent that in later episodes he is not ashamed to choreograph and direct other members of the team. The generically conventional, revelatory finale of episodic detective series demands from an actor a performance suitably theatrical, and yet consistent with the character as already established. Here, as in several other examples of the genre, DI Poole’s self-regard for his intelligence and proficiency provides plausible motivation for him to overcome his instinctive introversion, and seize with relish an opportunity to display publicly his impressive abilities.

In the Miller episodes, then, the inspector is a protagonist whose dramatic and comedic significance depends upon contrast and juxtaposition. His idiosyncratic character traits, expressed via bold performative gestures and repetitions, are juxtaposed with the rest of the regular ensemble of characters, who retain subsidiary status. Poole’s voice contrasts with their slower diction and rolling tones; his striking physical qualities and modes of movement diverge from their more relaxed demeanours and gestures. Furthermore, each actor’s performance pleasaably highlights the particularities of others in the group: Dwayne’s cool, laid-back, flirtatious charm; Fidel’s earnest, youthful diligence and occasional naivety; Camille’s feisty confidence and scepticism.

The programme constructs a hierarchy between the central characters and cameos via subtle differences in their respective performances. To take up Naremore’s observation that actors must compromise between ‘obviousness’ and ‘doing nothing’ (1988: 34), the performances of cameos tend towards
the former: they are more often overstated, with characters drawn necessarily quickly and baldly. The further generic necessity that each suspect must dissemble or ‘perform’ so that we consider as many of them as possible to be potentially guilty means that the cameo performances are in a sense already ‘inauthentic’. A successful cameo performance thus constitutes a notable achievement, balancing as it must the requirement for relative theatricality with the need for plausibility: cameos cannot appear so inauthentic that they fracture entirely the episode’s coherence and credibility. In contrast, the key characters may be uncomplicated in constitution, but they are plausible, rounded and we have time to get to know them – and the actors’ performances are correspondingly subtler and more multifaceted, despite their apparent straightforwardness.

Thus a finely tuned balance is established by means of contrast, differentiation and juxtaposition, so that each member of the cast, whether protagonist, core or cameo, is able to take up his or her distinctive space and role within the drama. But these orchestrated balances between performers and characters, confirmed as they are by repeated traits of performance, can be upset – most noticeably when a crucial cog in the machine must be replaced with a new one. This happened when Ben Miller decided to quit the programme at the beginning of series three.

The New Inspector

The replacement of DI Richard Poole with DI Humphrey Goodman (Kris Marshall) in 2014 was the first of several big casting changes which took place after the programme’s form and style, and its characters and their interrelation, had been established. Such a disturbance ran the risk of upsetting the series’ internal equilibrium and alienating viewers. The creators had a tricky task to negotiate: the new inspector had to perform a comparable narrative function, allowing other characters to sustain their roles and interrelationships within the group, while also being plausibly distinct from his predecessor and opening up new possibilities. A delicate balance was needed between continuity and change. Continuity was assured via consistency of format and narrative structure, while a sense of movement, change and distinction from what came before were achieved through performance.¹³
The first episode of series three amusingly vocalises, via plausible meta-commentary, the potentially sceptical, resistant attitude of the regular viewer faced with a significant change to that which has become cosily familiar:

‘But look, you weren’t too keen on Inspector Poole when he came out here. We should just give him a chance – that’s all I’m saying.’

‘Well, he’s no Chief. Not in my book [...] No one is going to take the Inspector’s place.’

(Fidel and Dwayne discuss the new inspector, DI Humphrey Goodman)

‘I’m not here to take his place, you know [...] I’m not here to *be* him. I don’t expect anything – any consideration. I’m just here.’

(Humphrey, to Camille.)

In these moments, other characters voice their doubts about the interloper’s ability to take Richard Poole’s place, and Humphrey attempts to assuage their concerns, explaining that he is not trying to ‘replace’ Richard but that he is there to perform a function. The same is true, of course, of Marshall.

Where the first two series employed contrast between the inspector and his exotic surroundings, primarily to comic effect, by series three the island and team are familiar elements to regular viewers. Now the new inspector is the unfamiliar element to whom we need introduction. The character, Humphrey Goodman, and the actor, Kris Marshall, must undertake a similar task: each must sensitively and deftly manoeuvre himself into his new situation in a way that confidently establishes his individuality and difference from his predecessor, without upsetting the poise of the established and successful ensemble already in existence.

The transition episode from one inspector to his replacement took a surprising turn. Despite the celebrated return of DI Poole from London at the end of series two – diegetic confirmation of his commitment to remaining on the island – the writers chose to open series three with Richard’s murder: Poole is stabbed to death with an ice pick while attending a small gathering with some old university friends. His dramatic demise was a bold, potentially risky strategy for an ‘escapist’, easy-viewing series, with regular viewers unlikely to welcome such a stark (if temporary) change in tone.
DI Humphrey Goodman flies in from London to assume Poole’s role. The nature of his introduction bears striking resemblances to that of his predecessor in series one: elements of physical performance are foregrounded, quickly establishing broad character traits and functioning to highlight, for regular viewers, his dissimilarity from Poole. Long shots emphasise Humphrey’s very different physicality: he is not neat and petite but instead rather large and clumsy, with a looser sartorial silhouette of a soft linen jacket that bulges at the pockets, hangs open and flaps in the wind. Humphrey arrives at the police station by cab, struggling with luggage which includes a shoulder bag, plastic bags, a heavy, battered brown suitcase, and a dog-eared newspaper which falls periodically from under his arm, causing him to pause and juggle the other items to retrieve it (Figure 1.3). His appearance is messy and crumpled; his long fringe hangs over his eyes; he is tall, slim and gangly in his movement, tripping and stumbling as if not quite in control of all his limbs. In response to the team’s sceptical looks, the commissioner reassures them, sotto voce, that ‘London speaks very highly of him’. In contrast with DI Poole’s exaggerated performance of temporal precision (‘I shall call at 06:01’), Humphrey wishes his team good morning before questioning out loud whether it is indeed still morning.

Figure 1.3 Humphrey and his luggage (Death in Paradise, BBC, 2011–)
In closer shots, Marshall’s physiognomy and facial movements disclose his disposition. His initial nervousness is conveyed via an over-eager, toothy smile, the corners of which downturn rapidly, leaving him looking rather goofy and uncertain. Marshall’s inspector is expressively open, not reserved; loose-, not tight-lipped; and ready with a smile. When thinking he furrows his brow and grimaces effortfully.

In this introductory episode, Marshall’s performance exploits the kind of foregrounded comic physicality that typified Miller’s inspector and, in this way, emphasises his differences from the previous character. However, the episodic series’ amnesiac form means that Miller’s inspector is ruthlessly forgotten by episode two, making sustained comparison needless. Once Marshall’s inspector, Humphrey, is established, the use of contrast and juxtaposition which typified Miller’s performance almost disappears. Humphrey seeks to fit in, to embrace local customs and experiences, to be part of a milieu, and Marshall correspondingly starts to dial down the more exaggerated aspects of his performance.

Humphrey astutely remarks to his team that he feels he has got to know the late Richard Poole a little, ‘mostly by the effect he had on those around him’. Given the interdependence of performances in an ensemble setting, the replacement of a pivotal role necessarily alters the relationships between characters and actors. Notably, Humphrey demonstrates a far greater sensitivity to others than Poole exhibited: he deliberately chooses not to take his late predecessor’s desk at first, instead plonking himself on a seat at a spare desk at the back of the room – a seat which promptly sinks and leaves him unseen behind his piled-up belongings. He is polite and thoughtful, and tentatively reaches out to befriend his new colleagues. Humphrey’s greater engagement with those around him is manifested in a correspondingly more generous performance from Marshall, placing him on a more level footing with his peers. When other characters are speaking, Marshall’s Humphrey looks from person to person, acknowledging them, where Miller’s Richard tended to be the focus of the supporting actors’ gaze, rarely returning it. Humphrey seeks acknowledgement and agreement from others, especially Camille. He is not commanding or bullish in the way that Poole was; he feels his way in this new environment.

The replacement of Poole with Goodman, and Miller with Marshall, alters the relationships between inspector and team, and between protagonist and ensemble cast. A new, democratic balance is forged across the ensemble, which one might have characterised as functioning previously as protagonist
and chorus. Just as Humphrey embraces life on the island and embeds himself amenable within his team, Marshall's performance as the inspector reflects the programme's broader movement away from hierarchy, juxtaposition and tension towards a more assured, settled status quo. Marshall's relaxed, self-effacing demeanour plays a crucial role in structuring Humphrey's character.

Crucially, and contra prevailing trends, *Death in Paradise* completes the transition by confidently embracing conventional episodic form and rejecting serial elements. The protracted romantic tension between Humphrey and Camille, which continues that between Richard and Camille, disappears with Camille's departure from the programme in series four. Although Camille is replaced by another female character, DS Florence Cassell (Joséphine Jobert), the series avoids the easy trick of substituting Florence for Camille as Humphrey's 'love interest'. In place of romantic frisson, appropriately, Florence and Humphrey develop a friendship – one of several at the heart of this series. *Death in Paradise* in the Marshall era thus moves away from contrast as a route to comedy towards subtler, more everyday, ‘episodic’ pleasures of familiarity and friendship, via a wholehearted embrace of episodic form.

**Appreciating the Episodic Performance**

In the context of prevailing attentiveness to the achievements of various complex television serials, this chapter took up an alternative focus: the episodic series, often neglected by aestheticians and cognitivists, and undervalued by critics. Yet the analysis herein might nevertheless pertain helpfully to studies of long-form serials. Although episodic and serial forms have historically been juxtaposed, and can reasonably be distinguished at a conceptual level, the two are inevitably interdependent. The presence and development of serial elements within episodic programmes is frequently noted, but the importance of episodic qualities within serial form, in comparison, is more often overlooked. When considering serials, it must be remembered that episodic form remains fundamental to the art of television. Even the longest-running, most complex serial depends necessarily upon episodic structure, its individual episodes exhibiting discrete elements to a lesser or greater extent; occasional episodes exhibit conspicuous singularity, their episodic qualities heightened and celebrated (‘one-off’ specials and
bottle episodes, for example). Seriality and episodic form are inextricably connected; the very concept of a serial (or a series) depends upon the existence of an episode, and vice versa. Therefore to appreciate fully the long-form serial, it is necessary to appreciate the episodic.

The episodic series also warrants dedicated attention in its own right, especially in relation to performance. Within necessarily limited space, I have gestured towards some of the specific implications of episodic structure for performance, and have advocated a reappraisal and revaluing of this form. In celebrating the navigations, negotiations and achievements of one specific series, *Death in Paradise*, I hope to have shown that it is possible to proffer sensitive and appreciative explorations of the particularities of performance within traditional episodic series. Performances in an episodic context offer both the pleasures of nuanced repetition and familiarity, and those of immediacy: we value and may evaluate these performances for the ways in which they augment our existing perceptions of each character, and we also relish them for their own sake, for the delight they elicit in the transient moment, regardless of their contribution or otherwise to more expansive narrative arcs. Admiration for works in long-running serial form is not incompatible with appreciation for the artistry involved in creating simple, ‘escapist’, dramatic episodic television fiction. Sometimes good things come in small packages.

**Notes**

1. Specifically, this chapter adopts the mode of interrogation most often associated with television aesthetics: detailed stylistic analysis and evaluative criticism of a particular programme. I aim to offer a sustained, appreciative account of the programme’s singular achievements as they relate to this collection’s core focus: television performance. For a concise introductory overview of ‘television aesthetics’, its principles, concerns and methods, see Cardwell (2006).


3. Episodic programmes, especially middletrow dramatic or comedic series, often fall under the umbrella of ‘invisible television’: popular television that is nevertheless mostly ignored by TV scholars; this phenomenon is addressed in a special issue of *Critical Studies in Television* (2010), 5.1.
Blanchet and Bruun Vaage use the term ‘series’ indiscriminately, to refer to (episodic) series and/or serials. All their detailed examples are serials.

Reciprocally, undue emphasis on seriality and the concomitant neglect of episodic form also obscure the salience of episodic structure – and episodic singularity – within long-form serials. Seriality and episodic form are inextricably connected; the very concept of a serial (or a series) depends upon the existence of an episode, and vice versa.

‘Character development’ can refer also to the actor’s preparation – their work before and during performance, something which is clearly pertinent to both serials and episodic series. Herein, I refer rather to ‘diegetic’ character development: that which is discernible within a work, ‘written in’ or ‘drawn out’ via performance across time. It is this type of character development that is more strongly associated with serial form.

It is interesting to note, however, that some cognitive studies show we often like most those whom we do not come to know as deeply: ‘Although people believe that knowing leads to liking, knowing more means liking less’ (Norton et al. 2007: 105).

Perhaps the correspondence between engagement with episodic series and with people in real life is overlooked by cognitivists because, despite their focus on characters, they too rarely mention performance, which is after all the initial means by which we are engaged.

Occasionally, a case runs across two episodes.

The condemnation of Death in Paradise as ‘escapist’ television is closely connected with its conservative episodic form. Cognitivists have revisited ‘escapism’, arguing that it is not something to be embarrassed about, for it merely exploits a fundamental human tendency to avoid ‘cognitive taxation’ and allows us to ‘exercise our rights as cognitive misers’ (Raney 2004: 362, 364).

Death in Paradise exploits Miller’s background in comedy; in doing so, it continues a convention of casting comic actors in light-hearted episodic series (see, for instance, Martin Clunes in Doc Martin (ITV, 2004–) or Alan Davies in Jonathan Creek (BBC, 1997–2016)). Miller’s successors in Death in Paradise, replacing him as the principal inspector, continue the trend: Kris Marshall, from 2014, and Ardal O’Hanlan, from 2017, best known respectively for their roles in sitcoms My Family (BBC, 2000–11) and Father Ted (Channel 4, 1995–98).

Miller’s performance as Poole undoubtedly exploits stereotypical notions of Englishness, his demeanour contrasting broadly and expressively with the looser, more relaxed island milieu. However, the particular characters and performances of his Saint Marie colleagues are carefully individuated, as previously mentioned: the core team comprises insouciant Dwayne; eager and assiduous Fidel; sharp-witted, often impatient Camille; and the smooth-talking, careerist commissioner. Indeed, the programme mostly eschews simplistic stereotypes and caricatures of nationality and race, both in terms of its central characters and cameo roles.

Death in Paradise appears reluctant to abandon its original premise when recasting, sticking with its format of a British (or UK) inspector adapting to life on an exotic (though by this point, for regular viewers, simultaneously comfortingly familiar) island.
Sarah Cardwell

This may be the reason that the writers appear to have overlooked the dramatic possibilities of promoting the current second-in-command, and occasional action hero, DS Florence Cassell (Joséphine Jobert) to the central role. However, while the programme’s initial concept might justifiably continue to determine the (non-native) nationality of the inspector, it does not explain why all three actors to have held that role have been white men; this obduracy contrasts with Death in Paradise’s otherwise balanced and inclusive casting. Another study might fruitfully explore the show’s representations of race and gender; obviously that falls outside my remit here.

14 Kris Marshall’s entrance here, his performance and the aspects of his character thereby established clearly echo his previously best-known role in My Family. His inspector builds upon the expectations of viewers familiar with that earlier work.
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