

## Chapter Three: *The Girlfriend Experience*

### Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>208</b>
<i>The Girlfriend Experience</i>	<b>219</b>
<b>2. Acting Processes in <i>The Girlfriend Experience</i>:</b>	
<b>The practical challenges of the Recorded Delivery process</b>	<b>239</b>
<b>Rehearsal Processes: Outside-In and Stanislavski's</b>	
<b>Method of Physical Action</b>	<b>247</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>266</b>

## Chapter Three: *The Girlfriend Experience*

### Introduction

Alecky Blythe's play, *The Girlfriend Experience*, directed by Joe Hill-Gibbins, was produced by Blythe's company, Recorded Delivery, and premiered at the Royal Court Theatre on 18 September 2008. The play focuses on four women working as prostitutes in a brothel in Bournemouth over a fourteen-month period. Set exclusively in the communal/sitting room of the brothel (referred to as a 'parlour' in the play), Blythe recorded the women's conversations in between their 'appointments'. The play also features a string of heard but only half-seen men visiting the brothel. The particular performance methods employed by Blythe are quite unlike anything encountered in the previous case-studies. In both rehearsal and performance, the actors wore headphones through which Blythe's edited version of the original interview material was played. The actors did not rehearse with a written script; indeed, there was no written script until the play was published to coincide with the run. Instead of traditional line-learning, the actors simultaneously listened to the recording in performance and repeated the testimony as precisely as possible, which preserved the characters' vocal tics, repetition, pauses and illogicalities.

An actor's usual task is interpreting a role and bringing it to life on stage. As the use of headphones requires the actors to repeat the audio they hear, it provokes performance questions of a different nature than either of the previous case-studies. Christopher Innes, in one of the very few studies to refer to Blythe, states

that the process allows actors only ‘a modicum of interpretation’.<sup>1</sup> Innes assumes that the use of headphones severely limits the actors’ capacity for interpretive interventions. However, the picture is more complicated and evidence from the actors in *The Girlfriend Experience* does not support his contention. This case-study concentrates on how actors worked creatively within such unusual and prescriptive performance conditions.

### **The development of the Recorded Delivery approach: Alecky Blythe, Anna Deavere Smith and Mark Wing-Davey**

The origins of the headphone approach have been rather obscured by the confused statements of researchers. For example, in Innes’s article, he states that ‘Alecky Blythe has labelled this style of documentary drama, at its most extreme, ‘verbatim’ theatre; Blythe pioneered the form...’.<sup>2</sup> This demonstrates a complete ignorance of the lineage of verbatim theatre, and a misunderstanding that only Blythe’s approach is called verbatim.

Despite now finding herself best known as a verbatim writer, like Soans and Norton-Taylor, Blythe’s background was not in playwriting.<sup>3</sup> Rather, she was an actor who came across verbatim theatre by chance:

The way I came to it was as an actor looking for work. I was doing some workshops at the Actors’ Centre, and one of the workshops I did was run by a director called Mark Wing-

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<sup>1</sup> Innes, *Modern Drama*, p.436.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Although her process does not include writing, in my interviews Blythe stated that ‘I call myself a writer’. As with Robin Soans, I will thus similarly use the term. Again, I recognise that its use is problematic, particularly in considering her working processes.

Davey... I did his workshop not through any worthier reason than I was trying to get an agent – I didn't know what verbatim was, it wasn't called a verbatim workshop it was called 'Drama Without Paper'.

In fact, the use of headphones in verbatim theatre was developed by American actress, writer and academic Anna Deavere Smith, who is internationally recognised as an eminent documentary theatre maker and political activist. Smith's documentary work has become synonymous with her virtuoso one-woman shows, in which she portrays multiple individuals of different class, race, age and gender. Concerned with issues of identity and community, since the late 1970s she has worked on a series of plays under the ambitious title, *On the Road: A Search for American Character*. Smith has performed over twenty plays as part of her series. Notable productions have included *Building Bridges, Not Walls* (1985), and most famously, two plays dealing with race-related riots: *Fires in the Mirror* (1992, directed by fellow documentary theatre-maker Emily Mann) which was based on interviews conducted following the Crown Heights Riot in Brooklyn in 1991, and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1993), which focused on the 1992 Los Angeles Riots.<sup>4</sup> Central to her work has been her focus on idiomatic language:

My goal has been to find American character in the ways that people speak... at that time I was not as interested in

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<sup>4</sup> Scholarship into Anna Deavere Smith's work is plentiful. For primary material see Carol Martin, 'Anna Deavere Smith: The Word Becomes You. An Interview', *TDR*, Vol. 37:4 (1993), pp.45-62; Barbara Lewis, 'The Circle of Confusion: A Conversation with Anna Deavere Smith', *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 15:4 (1993), pp.54-64; and Mary Luckhurst and Chloe Veltman, eds., *On Acting: Interviews with Actors* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), pp.131-38. For scholarship into her work, see in particular Debby Thompson, "'Is Race a Trope?': Anna Deavere Smith and the Question of Racial Performativity", *African American Review*, Vol. 37:1 (2003), pp. 127-138; Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, 'Teaching the Politics of Identity in a Post-Identity Age: Anna Deavere Smith's "Twilight"', *MELUS*, Vol. 30:2 (2005), pp. 191-208; and Alison Forsyth, 'Performing Trauma: Race Riots and Beyond in the Work of Anna Deavere Smith' in Forsyth and Megson, *Get Real*, pp.140-50.

performance or in social commentary as I was in experimenting with language and its relation to character.<sup>5</sup>

Mark Wing-Davey, the first Artistic Director of the Actors' Centre, directed and developed Smith's 1997 solo play, *House Arrest: The Search for American Character in and Around the White House*. Deavere Smith interviewed individuals and edited their testimony on audio files, and rehearsed using headphones through which the interview was played. In performance she worked without the audio, relying on her memory to recreate speech patterns, accent and emphasis.<sup>6</sup> In a modification of Smith's technique, Mark Wing-Davey experimented with keeping the headphones on in performance in his workshop at the Actors' Centre.

Although Blythe is the only British documentary theatre maker to employ headphones in performance, they have also been used in fictional plays. We can thus contextualise Blythe's use of the device within a small group of British practitioners. Rotozaza is a theatre company which specialises in working with 'the unrehearsed performer'. In their play *Doublethink* (2004):

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<sup>5</sup> Anna Deavere Smith, *Fires in the Mirror* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993), p. xxiii.

<sup>6</sup> Several researchers have noted the Brechtian elements of Smith's work. Stephen Bottoms has stated that 'she seeks... to highlight and underline the specific, *gestic* qualities of her subjects' behaviour, almost as if pursuing Brechtian "estrangement techniques". Stephen Bottoms, 'Solo Performance Drama' in David Krasner, ed., *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p.529. Similarly, looking at documentary solo performers (including Smith) Jonathan Kalb has also noted that 'These artists seem to me to fuse a psychological and political appeal, linking compassion and identification with objective scrutiny in a way that, though Brecht might not have approved of it, amounts to a new, peculiarly American form of individualistic *Verfremdung*.' Kalb, p.14. However, in interview, Smith has not described her work in this way. In the introduction to an interview with Smith for the *Brecht Yearbook*, Karl Weber states 'From my own experience of working with Brecht in Berlin and as a director of Brecht's plays in Europe and America, I would claim that Smith's work comes closer to the concept of performance Brecht had in mind when he wrote "*The Street Scene*" than that of any other actor I have seen'. Karl Weber, 'Brecht's "Street Scene" – On Broadway, of all Places? A Conversation with Anna Deavere Smith' in 'Brecht then and now': *The Brecht Yearbook 20* (International Brecht Society, 1995), p.53. However, despite repeated attempts by Weber to identify her work as Brechtian, Smith appears unconvinced by his leading line of questioning, and does not describe it in these terms.

Two completely unrehearsed “guest” performers [different every night] follow instructions from a recorded voice, with a divider between them. They can't see each other; the audience see both sides, and their differences.<sup>7</sup>

Rotozaza's production of *ROMCOM* also experimented with performers reacting to a voice on headphones. In this play, like Blythe's work with Recorded Delivery, the actors repeated the words they heard. Rotozaza's website explains:

The performers, different for every performance, agree in advance to do the show, but have absolutely no idea what is expected of them; they simply turn up and put on a set of headphones through which their instructions are given to them about what to say and do. It's important they haven't been told anything about the show's contents beforehand.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike Blythe's recording of the subjects' words, the audio material the actors heard contained verbal instruction by the creators prescribing actions as well as speech. Writer-performer Tim Crouch has made similar experiments. His play, *An Oak Tree* (2006), is a fictional hypnosis act between a father of a girl killed in a car crash and the hypnotist, who was driving the car. Both actors hear the play through headphones, and repeat the words as in Recorded Delivery's productions. In all performances, Crouch played the hypnotist and so knew the words and the story. The father was played by a different guest star at each performance, who knew nothing about the play, the plot or the character; they simply reacted to the words they heard and the unfolding story.<sup>9</sup> The difference

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<sup>7</sup> See <<http://www.rotozaza.co.uk/doublethink2.html>> accessed 8 Jul 2010.

<sup>8</sup> <<http://www.rotozaza.co.uk/romcom.html>> accessed 18 Jan 09.

<sup>9</sup> See Tim Crouch's account of the production at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2007/jan/17/theatre2>> accessed 8 Jul 2010. For a dramaturgical analysis of *An Oak Tree*, see David Lane, 'A Dramaturg's perspective: Looking to

in both Crouch's and Rotozaza's work from Blythe's approach is that they are predicated on the performer knowing very little, if anything, about the event. By contrast, in Recorded Delivery's productions, the actors rehearse with the audio and thus become familiar with it. The significance of this difference will be explored below.

### **The actor and the role: Recorded Delivery's productions**

*The Girlfriend Experience* was Alecky Blythe's eighth play with her company.

As Blythe recalls, she developed her first production, *Come Out Eli* (2003), at the Actors' Centre, following her involvement in Mark Wing-Davey's workshop.

Whilst she was looking for a story, news broke of a siege in Hackney:

Near where I was living there was a siege going on, a lot of people were on the street...I started collecting material, at that point I didn't realise it was going to turn into a three-week siege and I would have a story on my hands... it far exceeded what I'd imagined.<sup>10</sup>

The final play featured testimony from forty-one individuals, including the hostage himself, who were all played by a cast of five, including Blythe. The play also focused on the act of acquiring this testimony, as Blythe was herself portrayed by fellow actor Miranda Hart. Blythe has noted her interesting approach to casting the production:

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the future of script development' in *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, Vol. 30:1 (Mar 2010), p.127-42.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Alecky Blythe, London, 11 January 2008. All quotations from Blythe, unless stated otherwise, are from this interview.

I made a point of casting against type. I played a seventy year old West Indian grandma, and Don Gervais who is a black actor played a sixty year old white man, and the reason for that was that it actually made their words more powerful – you wouldn't expect those words to come out of me, and so it just made sense to play away from type. It made the technique even more extraordinary.

Blythe modified Brechtian methods of alienation in her creation of an unexpected distance between the original speaker and the actor portraying them.<sup>11</sup> Although this may have foregrounded the headphone process, it is unclear why Blythe thought that it made their words 'more powerful'. The use of headphones was also foregrounded in *Come Out Eli* by a simple, adaptable playing space, without specificities of time or place, and by the actors wearing their own rehearsal clothes throughout. The play was initially presented as a Rough Cut<sup>12</sup> at the Tristram Bates Theatre, London, before being fully mounted at the Arcola Theatre in September 2003.<sup>13</sup>

*Strawberry Fields* (April 2005) was Blythe's first commissioned play. The Shropshire-based theatre company, Pentabus, recruited her to research a play about the employment of migrant workers on a large strawberry farm in Herefordshire, and the resulting tensions within the community. Described as a 'political verbatim drama', the production, directed by Teresa Heskins, featured

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<sup>11</sup> We might compare Bottoms's comments about Anna Deavere Smith's performances, 'Her own gender and colour simultaneously foreground the fact that she, as an individual, is inherently different from many of the characters presented, and can never fully "inhabit" their subjecthood.' Bottoms, *Solo Performance Drama*, p.529.

<sup>12</sup> A 'Rough Cut' was a partially staged work-in-progress performance. As Blythe's process meant that she could not submit scripts for her plays, which precluded a rehearsed reading, this was the way in which Blythe could invite potential commissioners to see her work.

<sup>13</sup> *Come Out Eli* was directed by Sara Powell, under the auspices of Blythe's new company, Recorded Delivery. See <<http://www.arcolatheatre.com/?action=pasttemplate&pid=94>>, accessed 10 Aug 2009. The production won Time Out's award for Best Fringe Production, and thus was re-staged at Battersea Arts Centre in 2004 as part of the Time Out Critics' Choice Season. Following the success of *Come Out Eli*, Recorded Delivery was made a resident company at the Actors' Centre.

interviews with many different people in the affected communities, and a cast of five actors played multiple characters as the production toured community venues around the area in which the testimony was gathered.<sup>14</sup> In June 2005, Blythe created, directed and appeared in *All the Right People Come Here*, which was based on her own adventures as a spectator at the Wimbledon Tennis championships. She focused particularly on the social hierarchies: ‘from campers to competitors, Kournikova to Cliff, Wimbledon attracts a heady mix of stars and stalkers’.<sup>15</sup> The play culminated in a brief interview with Roger Federer, the world number one. Blythe inscribed herself in the play as the interviewer, and so (as in *Come Out Eli*) the audience followed her journey from interview to interview, although in this play, Blythe played herself. Again a small cast of five played dozens of characters, frequently against type. The set was a simple artificial grass stage with white benches. It originated as a Rough Cut for the Actors’ Centre and was subsequently performed in a full version at the New Wimbledon Theatre, funded by the Arts Council. Later in 2005, Cafédirect invited Blythe to Tanzania to interview workers in the coffee trade. The resulting twenty-minute play, *The Day of All Days*, which Blythe again directed and appeared in, was presented in a pod on the London Eye as part of a one-day festival, Flight 5065 (21 June 2005), in which each of the thirty-two pods housed a different performance designed to raise awareness of fair trade in the lead up to the 2005 G8 summit in Scotland.<sup>16</sup> In December 2005, Blythe created and directed *I Only Came Here for Six Months* in Brussels. Invited by the British

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<sup>14</sup> For more on *Strawberry Fields*, see <<http://www.pentabus.co.uk/index.php/past-productions/strawberry-fields>> accessed 6 July 2009.

<sup>15</sup> For more on *All the Right People Come Here*, see <[http://www.recordeddelivery.net/all\\_the\\_right\\_people.html](http://www.recordeddelivery.net/all_the_right_people.html)> accessed 6 July 2009.

<sup>16</sup> For more information on the Flight 5065 festival, see <<http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/music/review-19455249-the-eye-has-it.do>> accessed 10 July 2009.

Council as part of the UK's six-month presidency of the EU, Blythe interviewed British and local people living in Brussels about issues regarding identity and integration.<sup>17</sup> In 2007, Blythe worked with director Matthew Dunster at the National Theatre Studio, producing *A Man in a Box*. The play followed Colin, an autograph hunter, and used the backdrop of illusionist David Blaine's stunt in which he lived in a perspex box suspended over the river Thames for 44 days in 2003.<sup>18</sup>

In her next two plays, *Cruising* and *The Girlfriend Experience*, Blythe shifted her focus from creating narratives generated from the breadth of testimony to look in more detail at fewer individuals: 'there are two types of play I've done: community plays and plays that are more like the typical drama about an individual.' For example, during her research for *Strawberry Fields*, she met a woman who became the central character of *Cruising* (2006):

Sometimes I get a kind of inkling, either a character or a story, so with the siege, that started with a story that was happening around me, with *Cruising* that was character based. [Whilst researching *Strawberry Fields*] I met a seventy-two year old widow who had been on over forty blind dates, still trying to find the right man... I thought that as she was a good character... I'll just go and pay her another visit and she started opening up, saying 'Oh, I'm going on a cruise'.

*Cruising* explored the love lives of the over-50s and took 'Maureen', the above character, as the protagonist. Blythe presented a Rough Cut at the Actors' Centre,

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<sup>17</sup> The production was staged in association with the Royal Flemish Theatre and Halles de Schaerbeek.

<sup>18</sup> *A Man in a Box* became Blythe's first film to be shown on Channel 4, aired on 10 December 2007 as part of a series entitled 'Coming Up', directed for the screen by Yann Demange.

and was commissioned by the Bush Theatre for a fully staged production, which opened in July 2006, again directed by Matthew Dunster. Blythe notes:

*Cruising* was a step towards casting to type, even though we were all thirty or forty years younger, physically there were some similarities, for example Miranda Hart is quite a tall, big girl and so was the real life woman, Claire Lichie was little and slight, and so was the real life Margaret, so that was something that I was going for.<sup>19</sup>

Although there may have been some physical similarities, describing employing actors forty years younger than their subjects as ‘casting to type’ is both perplexing and misleading. Indeed, in performance, the discrepancy in age was a clear source of comedy and was used to satirise the individuals portrayed, as Charles Spencer observed:

[I] question the device of having actors in their thirties playing characters more than twice their age. Their clever impersonation of the speech and movements of the elderly adds to the impression that people are being exploited merely as dramatic raw material.<sup>20</sup>

In *The Girlfriend Experience*, Blythe cast the play much more closely to type than in previous productions:

I realised to do that [cast against type] with characters you followed all the way through the piece may be not so successful, and so I cast to type. It became less about the technique and more about the story. So with *The Girlfriend*

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<sup>19</sup> Follow up interview with Blythe, 22 January 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Spencer, *The Telegraph*, 14 June 2006.

<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/drama/3653117/Sexual-odyssey-of-a-very-merry-widow.html>> accessed 5 July 2010. Similarly, Mary Luckhurst has stated that casting ‘actors who were 30-40 years younger than their characters...treated the characters as comic, strongly implying that the subject itself might be difficult to take seriously, arguably reinforcing taboos about the elderly, and prejudging the material for spectators’. See Luckhurst, ‘Verbatim Theatre, Media Relations and Ethics’, p.216.

*Experience* I tried to cast women who were the same age and size.

In this way, Blythe has stated that '*The Girlfriend Experience* is the furthest removed of all my plays from the formula established by *Come Out Eli*.'<sup>21</sup> Both *Cruising* and *The Girlfriend Experience* replaced the multi-character narrative 'formula' to which she alludes, that foregrounded the process by emphasising the discrepancy between the actors and their roles, with through-characters played by actors who are cast for their similarity (in terms of age, physical appearance and ethnicity) to the character, rather than their distance from them.

However, Blythe has not suggested that her work has followed a linear progression of form or style:

The way I am working at the moment is very different from the way I started, but that doesn't mean I won't go back to it. Because everyone goes on a bit of a journey... the subject matter will always dictate what the production values will be.

In her most recent production, *Do We Look Like Refugees?!* (which Blythe wrote and directed for Beyond Borders Productions, and which was performed at Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh Fringe, 2010), Blythe returned to her multi-character narrative approach. The production was based on interviews with individuals in the Tserovani refugee camp in Georgia. A cast of five Georgian actors played dozens of characters. Again, the Recorded Delivery approach was used, but in a departure from her previous productions, the actors frequently spoke in their native tongue, with the text translated on subtitles.

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<sup>21</sup> Hammond and Steward, *Verbatim: Verbatim*, p.85.

We can thus acknowledge that throughout her career, Blythe has experimented with different forms of presentation which focus on the size of the distance between the actor and the role. Blythe's experimentation may be partly attributable to the fact she has worked in different collaborations. Kent and Norton-Taylor, and Stafford-Clark and Soans have worked in established partnerships across many verbatim projects, whereas Blythe has worked with five different directors.

A persistent feature of Blythe's work has been her predilection for comedy, and creating comic characters. This is an unusual feature of Blythe's drama, as most verbatim productions focus on tragedy and loss. Blythe's focus is particularly noticeable when compared to both Kent and Stafford-Clark's productions. Although, as we have seen, Stafford-Clark was intent on finding interesting characters to appear, the genesis of *Talking to Terrorists* was predicated on the cumulative scope of Scilla Elworthy's contacts. In interview, Blythe has repeatedly argued that 'unlike the other verbatim practitioners who tend to be quite political, the particular ear-phone technique that I use lends itself to comedy.' This is an inexplicably unreflective comment by Blythe, as her work is clearly political. The false dichotomy between the political and the comic is at best naïve, since comedy has repeatedly been used by theatre-makers as an incisive political weapon.

### *The Girlfriend Experience*

*The Girlfriend Experience* was first produced as a 'Rough Cut' which opened on 3 July 2008 and ran for three performances at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs. The fully-staged production opened in the same space on 18 September 2008, where it played for three weeks before a two-week run at the Drum Theatre, Plymouth. The production was remounted for another three weeks in July 2009 at the Young Vic Theatre.

### **Recording processes**

An attraction of the brothel was that Blythe could 'escape the confines of retrospective story-telling and include action that takes place in the present.'<sup>22</sup> This is a useful differentiation. Both of the previous case-studies were predicated on the interviewees' memory of past events. By contrast, in *The Girlfriend Experience*, the women frequently react to events as they happen. However, the testimony and events are, of course, not unaffected by Blythe's presence – quite the reverse, there are moments of open suspicion in the play; indeed, cast member Beatie Edney stated 'I think that they were rather suspicious of what she [Blythe] was doing'.<sup>23</sup> Given the nature of the women's occupation, Blythe's presence had a significant impact on the material she recorded. Interestingly, though, in a move which is totally different from either of the previous case-studies, Blythe stated that 'When I'm unable to be at the parlour myself, the girls have agreed to record themselves in my absence.'<sup>24</sup> Questions abound from Blythe's decision to allow this recording. How did she know they didn't set her

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<sup>22</sup> Hammond and Steward, *Verbatim: Verbatim*, p.92.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Beatie Edney, 9 January 2009. All quotations from Edney, unless stated otherwise, are from this interview.

<sup>24</sup> Hammond and Steward, *Verbatim: Verbatim*, p.93.

up? When were they told to record themselves? To what extent did the subjects craft and manipulate material? What are the ethics of using this testimony? This means that the status and credibility of the testimony is much more problematic to ascertain. Blythe's own lack of openness about these issues and her apparent lack of concern for them is also very troubling.

There are some sensitive ethical questions raised by Blythe's working methods on *The Girlfriend Experience*. As we have seen, all the women working as prostitutes agreed to be interviewed. In addition, one of the women, 'Suzie' (all the names were changed in the production), was invited into rehearsals and on one occasion the cast were invited into the brothel during the rehearsal period, where they met 'Tessa', 'Suzie' and 'Poppy', three women working there. All the women thus knew the purpose of the recording. By contrast, the male clientele did not know that they were being recorded, and thus did not give their permission, and yet their testimony appeared in the production. Blythe recorded their conversations with the women covertly, capturing their words in the hallway of the brothel from inside the sitting room. Alex Lowe stated:

When I think about the risks Alecky took – one arm outside the living room trying to record it. You can imagine it could have turned nasty if anyone had seen she was recording.<sup>25</sup>

Lowe's suggestion of the risk of the men's physical violence is not explained and reinforces a negative judgement of them. It is legitimate to suppose that anyone discovering that they are being recorded in secret would be angry.

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with Alex Lowe, 10 October 2008. All quotations from Lowe, unless stated otherwise, are from this interview.

Using the recordings of the men without their permission to do so is concerning. All of the people who appeared in previous case-studies knew the purpose of the interview. Blythe makes no reference to the use of their words in her introduction to the printed text of the play (which also functioned as the programme). It is not clear how Blythe and the Royal Court negotiated the legalities of including material that had been recorded without the subjects' knowledge or consent.

In addition to the lack of consent regarding their testimony, the men are a source of ridicule and derision in the play. They are known by the women's nick-names such as 'Dick-brain', 'Groper', 'Viagra Man' and 'God's Gift'.<sup>26</sup> Their nicknames indicate Blythe's agenda in the play, which was clearly to evoke sympathy for women and to deprivilege the men, depicting them as pathetic caricatures. The women's testimony was thus given a totally different status from that of the men, who were prejudged from the beginning. This ethical dilemma is further complicated by Hill-Gibbins, the director, who suggested that the lack of consent is an attraction for the audience: 'There is a voyeuristic thrill of listening to those men who don't know they're being recorded'.<sup>27</sup> The legitimacy of this voyeurism must be questioned, as must the fact that anyone who does not know that they are being recorded behaves differently to those who do. The women are

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Billington commented that he 'wish[ed] Blythe could have told us more about the clients who remain shadowy figures'. Michael Billington, *The Guardian*, 25 Sept 2008. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2008/sep/25/theatre>> accessed 15 Aug 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Joe Hill-Gibbins, 16 April 2010. All quotations from Hill-Gibbins, unless stated otherwise, are from this interview.

therefore cast as privileged performers and the men are used as fodder in the play.<sup>28</sup>

### **Editing Processes**

Blythe recorded all her visits to the brothel and she edited and constructed the play from those recordings. Over the course of fourteen months, Blythe amassed many hours of testimony. Rather than transcribe the material, she edited the audio file using computer software, so the play did not exist in written form at any point in the process.

The cast received an audio copy of the edited recording about a week before rehearsals commenced, though Blythe continued to re-edit throughout rehearsals, during which *The Girlfriend Experience* was transformed from a two act play with an interval to one act with no break. The scope of the editing process was increased by the fact the cast did not have to learn lines, as cast member Alex Lowe stated: ‘Thank God it was on audio, if they were cutting a text each night, it would be impossible’. However, this process was evidently still difficult, as actor Beatie Edney recalled:

It really changed. Loads of cuts. We were in tears, it was rather dramatic. But we didn’t have an excuse because we didn’t need to learn any lines, so they could just cut scenes. It was difficult...I remember telling them ‘you are shuffling it in my head’. This was the day before we opened.

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<sup>28</sup> Blythe’s depiction of the men in *The Girlfriend Experience* is in contrast to Esther Wilson’s *Unprotected* (London: Joseph Weinberger, 2006), which featured interviews with men visiting prostitutes, and interrogated their stories alongside those of the women.

Central to Alecky Blythe's approach is the belief that an individual's speech reveals their character. Blythe saw this in Anna Deavere Smith's work: 'Crucially, her work demonstrated that language is the root of character'.<sup>29</sup> As we have seen, the working processes on *Talking to Terrorists* placed the final testimony spoken by the actors at several removes from the original speakers' words. Similarly, in comparison to *The Girlfriend Experience*, the testimony in *Called to Account* was notably free of verbal tics, overlaps and idiosyncrasies. Presumably, this was because those interviewed in Kent's play were experienced public speakers and because Norton-Taylor decided to edit them out. Although the content was repeatedly re-edited and re-ordered by Blythe, she chose to include these features. The material is so full of circumlocutions, hesitations, and half completed phrases, that some sections of the script are rendered almost unreadable. Consider, for example, the following extract from a speech by 'Tessa':

This is a business – where – i-it *is* a business where *iss* (*Beat.*) – ah-I *want* a give the best I *can* (*Beat.*) – and make people *happy*. (*Beat.*) I was so fed up – wiiiith (*Beat.*) – being told what to do and how to do it (*Beat.*) – w-workin' for someone *else*...<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, such was the atypical relationship between the play and the published script, that actress Debbie Chazen remembers 'we saw the published version once we had opened, and we all had a look at it and thought "Oh, is that what she said?!"' Chazen's comment reinforces the fact that the written transcription cannot render exact sounds and emphasis caught on the audio versions.

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<sup>29</sup> Hammond and Steward, *Verbatim: Verbatim*, p.80.

<sup>30</sup> Blythe, *The Girlfriend Experience*, p.12.

Although the vocal features may have been preserved, a series of ethical questions are raised by the relationship between the editing process and the action in the play. This is particularly apparent in the comic moments in the play. Debbie Chazen noted ‘You have to do their comic timing. Fortunately [Tessa] is funny without always knowing it. There is a lot you can do physically – a raised eyebrow at the end of a sentence.’<sup>31</sup> Chazen’s statement is highly problematic for several reasons. Firstly, the comic moments she heard on the audio were edited by Blythe, and may not have been the intention of the original speaker. For example, near the beginning of the play, Blythe manufactured a comic moment by removing it from its original context:

TESSA: I *love* the nineteen-thirties, I *love* Art Deco, I’m *very* old-fashioned, I’m I’m sorry I am / I’m not modern.<sup>32</sup>

On this line, ‘Tessa’ is folding a pair of large black leather knickers. I asked Debbie Chazen about this moment:

That was invented... There were a lot of bits like that. But we tried to make sure it was as true life as we could. In some cases it was funnier just to be real. You didn’t have to invent much. I mean that line is funny anyway. We just enhanced it.

This throws into question the claim for validity of the audio testimony given its meaning could be altered or even completely changed by the actions of the characters. Chazen’s comment that a raised eyebrow could provide comedy also suggests that the actors could comment on their characters to the audience, undermining the testimony by casting judgement on their subjects.

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with Debbie Chazen, 16 January 2009. All quotations from Chazen, unless stated otherwise, are from this interview.

<sup>32</sup> Blythe, *The Girlfriend Experience*, p.8.

Chazen's statement is also problematic from another point of view. At the beginning of the play, 'Tessa' and 'Suzie' discuss a light fitting that 'Tessa' bought in Wilkinson's. The moment was received with a great deal of laughter.

Alex Lowe voiced his concerns:

Alecky recorded these women and they don't have particularly nice lives, and we're all here in Sloane Square, with media London types thinking 'isn't this hilarious'. I know all this is voyeuristic in a way, but occasionally I think 'why do you find that so funny?' it is tragic and I think 'oh god what are we doing?' It is like the line 'where did you get that lamp?' and she says 'Wilkinson's' and Wilkinson's is a cheap DIY store, and that gets a huge laugh and I think, 'what, is that funny just because she can't afford to go to a posher place?'

Although Lowe directs his unease at the audience, this moment was clearly included by Blythe for comic effect. Reviewer Michael Billington experienced a similar anxiety about the audience's response:

I was struck by the sadness of the milieu depicted, unlike the rest of the audience who seemed to find the notion of an old man with prostate trouble needing sexual assistance hilarious.<sup>33</sup>

Lowe clearly had profound ethical concerns about the way in which the play satirised aspects of the women's lives, and the voyeurism inherent within it. The comedy in the play was thus not always generated by the subjects themselves, but by the editing processes. Blythe and Hill-Gibbins removed words from their original context to amuse an audience.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Michael Billington, *The Guardian*, 25 Sept 2008.  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2008/sep/25/theatre>

<sup>34</sup> Concerns about the production were also noted by some reviewers. In *Metro*, Maxi Szalwiska wrote 'The play sometimes comes across as mock-doc. It's often edited to generate easy laughs,

## Staging Blythe's 'Point of View'

The staging prompted the audience to adopt Blythe's point of view in the play.

Unlike *Come Out Eli* and *All the Right People Come Here*, Blythe did not appear as the interviewer in the play, although Beatie Edney notes that this was Blythe's original intention:

When we got the first draft of the full production, it had Alecky in the play rather than us talking to the audience as Alecky, and both Debbie and I felt that the intimacy had gone.

The final production cast the audience as Blythe, in much the same way that

*Called to Account* cast the audience as the jury. The actors often spoke directly to the audience on lines such as:

TESSA (*to audience*). If anybody asks, you're the lady who does the phones, okay?

SUZIE. Jus' say – jus' say you're the maid.<sup>35</sup>

Debbie Chazen stated that:

The first scene is like the introduction. It was 'Suzie' introducing the audience, Alecky, to 'Tessa'. So at the beginning I was a bit more shy and a bit more reticent. But then the audience and

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occasionally at the expense of its subjects' (28 Sept 2008) <[http://www.metro.co.uk/metrolife/article.html?The\\_Girlfriend\\_Experience\\_casts\\_a\\_red\\_light\\_of\\_insight&in\\_article\\_id=328998&in\\_page\\_id=260](http://www.metro.co.uk/metrolife/article.html?The_Girlfriend_Experience_casts_a_red_light_of_insight&in_article_id=328998&in_page_id=260)> accessed 25 Aug 2009. Alice Jones in *The Independent* stated 'it still boils down to the truism that it's a grim way to earn a living, however chirpily these ladies go about it. Did I need to go and sit in a theatre in Sloane Square and laugh at them to learn that? I'm not sure that I did.' (25 Sept 2008) <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre/reviews/the-girlfriend-experience-theatre-upstairs-royal-court-london-941305.html>> accessed 10 July 2009.

<sup>35</sup> Blythe, *The Girlfriend Experience*, p.7.

Alecky become a friend, just someone who is there in the parlour.

We must problematise Chazen's comment. Although in performance Chazen may have viewed the audience in this way, her comment that Blythe became 'a friend, just someone who is there in the parlour' is a romanticised view – she was a theatre-maker with a recording device.

The way in which the unwitting men appeared in the play also foregrounds Blythe's point of view. Like her, the audience was denied full view of male clientele. They appeared stage right along a semi-boarded corridor, as Alex Lowe recalled:

I never go into the main body of the stage. I always appear in this corridor. It is deliberately obscured from some of the audience, just to get the feeling of what Alecky could see. She couldn't quite see these guys, she certainly couldn't go and have a good gawp, so she would only catch glimpses of these guys passing...

Thus, although Blythe neither appeared as the interviewer in the play, nor acted in it, the way that she constructed her material so that the women frequently referred to her served as a self-reflexive reminder of the process.<sup>36</sup> Like *The Laramie Project*, her presence was constantly foregrounded in contrast to the way in which Norton-Taylor and Soans strive for absence.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> David Hare uses a similar device in *The Permanent Way*, in which the characters frequently refer to the audience as 'David'. Derek Paget has called the different modalities 'reporting' and 'recording': 'In the first modality, the inflection of a particular voice was an inherent part of the composition. It was expected in reception and gave rise to the figure of the Reporter – a person keen to angle their vision according to their medium partly by displaying their technique... In the recording mode, by contrast, the maker seeks to stand self-effacingly to one side, as it were.' Paget, *Get Real*, p.227.

<sup>37</sup> Stuart Young has stated that, in *Talking to Terrorists*, 'the role of the writer-editor remains disguised'. Stuart Young, 'Playing with Documentary Theatre: *Aalst* and *Taking Care of Baby*',

## Casting and Rehearsals

The Rough Cut, in July 2008, featured three actors, as only one scene was presented. Debbie Chazen played ‘Tessa’, the owner of the parlour, Beatie Edney played ‘Suzie’ who worked there, and Jason Barnett played the men that visited the brothel. They rehearsed for one week in preparation for the work-in-progress performances. In the final production at the Royal Court, Edney and Chazen reprised their roles, and were joined by Esther Coles playing ‘Amber’ and Lu Corfield, who played ‘Poppy’.<sup>38</sup> The men were all played by Alex Lowe. All cast members were experienced comic performers.<sup>39</sup> They rehearsed for four weeks at the Royal Court’s rehearsal rooms in Sloane Square.

The decision to cast actresses who were physically similar to their roles was driven by the nature of the women’s profession; the play is punctuated by phone calls in which they are physically described:

SUZIE: He-llo? (*Pause.*) [...]we have Tessa – she’s thirty-nine – five foot six, she has long dark hair brown eyes – very busty, thirty-eight double-F curvy dress size- fourteen-very lovely lady [...] – we also have Suzie – she’s thirty-seven, five foot two auburn hair blue eyes – very busty forty double-D – and curvy dress size eighteen to twenty [...]<sup>40</sup>

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*NTQ*, Vol.25:1 (Feb 2009), p.73.

<sup>38</sup> The actors’ training was as follows: Esther Coles and Lu Corfield trained at RADA; Debbie Chazen at LAMDA; Beatie Edney studied English and Drama at Leeds University, and Alex Lowe at The Studio School and Leicester School of Performing Arts.

<sup>39</sup> In my interview, Beatie Edney identified herself and Debbie Chazen as ‘comedians’. Whilst not explicitly self-identifying as comedians, Esther Coles has appeared in several episodes of the comedy sketch show *Tittybangbang* with Debbie Chazen, and Lu Corfield recently appeared in *Comedy Showcase*. Alex Lowe’s career has been dominated by comic roles, in shows such as Peter Kay’s *Phoenix Nights*, Steve Coogan’s *Saxondale*, and is most famous for his own comic persona, ‘Barry from Watford’.

<sup>40</sup> Blythe, *The Girlfriend Experience*, p.13.

Evidently, this brought the issue of casting to the fore, as any departure from these descriptions would be repeatedly emphasised throughout the play. The physicality of the women was also foregrounded by the costumes the actors wore. For most of the play, the cast wore lingerie and revealing clothing. Of her casting decisions, Blythe explained:

I just felt we couldn't do this with skinny little size eights. It just wouldn't have worked. When I met these women I thought how brilliant to get women like this on the stage. The material just seemed to suggest how to bring it to life.<sup>41</sup>

Blythe and Hill-Gibbins thus cast actors who were similar in size and age to the women described in the phone call above. These casting choices clearly reduced the distance between the actor and the role that characterised Blythe's early plays.

### **A Brechtian aesthetic: *The Girlfriend Experience* in performance**

The director, Joe Hill-Gibbins, stated that a Brechtian aesthetic informed his design choices for the production:

If you are in *Come Out Eli*, and you are playing a Jamaican grandma, and you are a young white male, it is clear by casting against type that these are real people's words...so it has an alienating effect...[In *The Girlfriend Experience*] how do you create the alienation? We used to have these in-ear headphones, and one rehearsal the lighting designer came in and he couldn't see whether they were wearing them. I thought that that could ruin the whole thing. You have to have the alienation...If you

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<sup>41</sup> Follow-up interview with Blythe, 22 January 2009.

make it clear that they are actors and this is a recreation, it becomes more real in sense because you become aware of the process and that there were real people out there saying these words. So we put the sound desk on stage, they declared the technique by putting the headphones on onstage. With the set...we had it completely crudely done, with the bare wood. Absolutely saying to the audience this is not the real thing, but it is a recreation of a real thing.

Hill-Gibbins's comments are interesting as he provides a reflective account of his decisions and recognises the tensions in this process. However, there are a number of assumptions in his statement which are not logical. The main point of confusion is over alienation and its relation to truth. Alienation techniques highlight distance and the materiality of production. As Hill-Gibbins rightly notes, they draw attention to the process; however, they do not inherently make the process more real. His assertion that 'it is clear by casting against type that these are real people's words' is spurious: it may be intended to alert the audience to the fact that the speaker on stage is not the original speaker, but it does not logically follow that they were spoken by real people rather than fictional characters. Furthermore, his comment that 'this is a recreation' needs closer inspection. It is not a 'recreation' of unmediated conversations, but rather of Alecky Blythe's very heavily edited and re-ordered recording. It is clear, however, that Hill-Gibbins felt that reminding the audience about the artifice of the theatrical event was absolutely integral to the success of the production. This is a belief that will be interrogated here.

Hill-Gibbins's production employed Brechtian techniques which served to foreground the artifice of the play so as to emphasise the headphone process. The

*mise-en-scène* brought the mechanics of the theatrical event in full view of the audience, as Blythe notes:

We had the sound desk downstage, the designers went for the starkest of sets to represent the shell of the parlour... It was that that they wanted to get across. To remind the audience that this is a performance. They are not the prostitutes. You are in a theatre. So we avoided a naturalistic set.<sup>42</sup>

The walls of the set were half-finished, with the wooden trusses and supports visible to the audience, evocative of a rehearsal room mock-up. In addition, the audience entered the auditorium through the set, past the props table and costume rails. Downstage left was the lighting desk and downstage right was the sound desk, from which the headsets were operated.

However, to what extent was this design, as Hill-Gibbins claims, a modern manifestation of a Brechtian form of ‘alienation’? Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*, or *V-effekt*, was a cornerstone of his praxis.<sup>43</sup> It is an umbrella term referring to a collection of ideas and techniques across every aspect of theatre-making, which Brecht reformulated throughout his career.<sup>44</sup> In his earliest writings on the subject, in 1936, he stated:

It is difficult for the actor to generate certain emotions and moods in himself every evening... The “alienation effect” enters

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<sup>42</sup> Follow-up interview with Blythe, 22 January 2009.

<sup>43</sup> The term has various been translated as ‘alienation’ (or ‘A-affect’), ‘estrangement’ and ‘distanciation’. In my studies here I will refer to it in the German, and in the shortened version, ‘V-effekt’, (except when quoting others). I agree with Peter Brooker that “‘alienation’” is an inadequate and even misleading translation’ and rather that there is ‘no reason for avoiding Brecht’s own term’. Peter Brooker, ‘Key Words in Brecht’s Theory and Practice of Theatre’, in Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.217.

<sup>44</sup> See John J. White, *Bertolt Brecht’s Dramatic Theory* (London: Camden House, 2004) for more on the development of the *V-effekt* through Brecht’s career.

in at this point, not in the form of emotionlessness, but in the form of emotions which do not have to be identical with those of the presented character.<sup>45</sup>

Brecht used a polemical language to describe this quality. In naturalistic theatre, Brecht observed that ‘the actor has managed to infect himself with the emotions portrayed’<sup>46</sup>, but that in his theatre ‘nobody gets raped by the individual he portrays’.<sup>47</sup> Later reformulations focused less on the actor and more on the result of the *V-effekt*, as Brecht described: ‘A representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognise its subject but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar’.<sup>48</sup> Brecht stated: ‘The actors must estrange characters and events from the spectator so as to attract his attention’.<sup>49</sup> It was crucial to achieving *Verfremdung* that the actor ‘should not “live” characters but “demonstrate” them to spectators’.<sup>50</sup> As Brecht notes in *The Street Scene*: ‘His demonstration would be spoiled if the bystanders’ attention were drawn to his powers of transformation...He must not “cast a spell” over anyone.’<sup>51</sup> The *V-effekt* thus

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<sup>45</sup> Bertolt Brecht, ‘On Chinese Acting’ trans. Eric Bentley, in Carol Martin and Henry Bial, eds., *Brecht Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.18. Similarly, Brecht’s actor Ekkehard Schall stated ‘I don’t act emotions, I present them as ways of behaviour’. ‘An interview with Ekkehard Schall’, *Theater Magazine* (New Haven, Spring 1986), cited in Margaret Eddershaw, ‘Actors on Brecht’ in *Cambridge Companion to Bertolt Brecht*, p.288.

<sup>46</sup> Brecht, ‘Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting’ (1936), in Willett, *BT*, p.94. This is Brecht’s first use of the term *Verfremdung*. For more on the impact of Chinese acting on his formulations of *Verfremdung*, see Huang Zuolin, ‘A Supplement to Brecht’s ‘Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting’, in Tatlow and Wong, eds., *Brecht and East Asian Theatre* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1982), pp.96-110.

<sup>47</sup> Brecht, *Brecht Sourcebook*, p.17.

<sup>48</sup> Brecht, ‘Short Organum’, in Willett, *BT*, p.192.

<sup>49</sup> Brecht, ‘Theory of Pedagogies’ (c.1930), in Tom Kuhn and Steve Giles, eds., *Brecht on Art and Politics* (London: Methuen, 2003), p.88.

<sup>50</sup> Carol Martin and Henry Bial, Introduction to *Brecht Sourcebook*, p.5. As Brecht states, the actor should ‘detach himself from the character portrayed’, ‘The Street Scene’, in Willett, *BT*, p.121.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p.122.

interrupted the audience's identification with the unfolding action, in order to maintain the spectator's critical involvement with the performance.<sup>52</sup>

Brecht also explored how the staging could contribute to the *V-effekt*, which is particularly relevant to Hill-Gibbins's design for *The Girlfriend Experience*. In 1936 he wrote, 'In German epic theatre the "alienation effect" was employed not only through the actors but also through the music and the décor.'<sup>53</sup> In Brecht's 1940 essay, *Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect*, he stated:

The first condition of the A-effect's application...is that stage and auditorium must be purged of everything 'magical' and that no 'hypnotic tensions' should be set up.<sup>54</sup>

Elsewhere in his writings, Brecht described a very similar aesthetic to that seen in *The Girlfriend Experience*:

It's more important nowadays for a set to tell the spectator he's in a theatre than to tell him he's in, say, Aulis...The best thing is to show the machinery, the roles and the flies...The materials of the set must be visible. A play can be performed in pasteboard only, or in pasteboard and wood...but there mustn't be any faking.<sup>55</sup>

Brecht thus viewed the production's aesthetic as a critical component in creating the *V-effekt*. Josette Féral has noted that performances involving 'new

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<sup>52</sup> In relation to Brechtian modes of documentary theatre, Derek Paget has noted that 'access to the means of production is granted to an audience expected not to consume passively, but to engage actively with the material being presented.' Paget, *True Stories?*, p.42.

<sup>53</sup> Brecht, *Brecht Sourcebook*, p.20. For more on Brecht's stage design, see Christopher Baugh, 'Brecht and stage design: the *Bühnenbildner* and the *Bühnenbauer*' in *The Cambridge Companion to Bertolt Brecht*, pp.259-77.

<sup>54</sup> Brecht, 'Short Description of a New Technique of Acting', in Willett, *BT*, p.136.

<sup>55</sup> Brecht, unpublished and undated note (Brecht-Archive 331/173), quoted in a note to 'Stage Design for the Epic Theatre' (1951), in Willett, *BT*, p.233.

technologies' (which legitimately includes *The Girlfriend Experience*) have further moved the *V-effekt* devices away from the actors' processes and onto the *mise-en-scène*:

In the new technologies, and in the multimedia performances, a different theatrical movement has come to life, a movement that has amplified and displaced the process of alienation, moving it away from the actor and from his relationship with the character portrayed, while reserving it for all that surrounds and absorbs him.<sup>56</sup>

Whilst the set and the presence of the sound and lighting desk in view of the audience was, as Hill-Gibbins stated, influenced by Brecht's writings on stage design, whether they were contributors to 'alienation' is questionable, particularly when considered in relation to the use of headphones in performance.

Blythe has argued that advances in technology 'helped to disguise the practicalities of the recorded delivery technique' in previous plays.<sup>57</sup> However, in *The Girlfriend Experience*, Blythe and Hill-Gibbins decided on conspicuous headphones. Blythe stated:

Compared to previous shows when I haven't been as obvious about pointing out the technology and spelling out the ear phones – you see now you can have tiny inner ear pieces – Joe and I felt that if we had the opportunity to tell the audience, how we could tell them that these are actors taking on these parts and the words are being fed to them.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Josette Féral, 'Alienation Theory in Multimedia Performance', *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 39:4 (1987), p.463. We must note, however, that this is not a new feature – Piscator's experiments in staging created the *V-effekt* on German stages in the 1930s.

<sup>57</sup> Hammond and Steward, *Verbatim: Verbatim*, p.99.

<sup>58</sup> Follow-up interview with Blythe, 22 January 2009.

This was made absolutely clear for the audience at the beginning of the play. Chazen and Edney entered, out of role, with the headphones in their hands. They put on the headsets and indicated to the sound desk that they were ready. The play opened with an audio prologue in which the audience heard Blythe telling the women about the process:

I kindof make (*Beat.*) – um (*Beat.*) – they’re sortof documentary plays. (*Pause.*) But – I don’t *film* anything (*Beat.*) - I just record – hours and hours of-of – audio...<sup>59</sup>

As the women on the audio replied to Blythe’s introduction, the actors repeated their words, so that the audience heard both the actual women and the actors’ voices. As the play began, the auditorium speakers faded down. The last line heard from the actual subjects was ‘It is all getting very real now!’, until only the actors’ voices could be heard. The actors stepping into the role was a very clear device creating the *V-effekt*. It was designed explicitly to demonstrate to the audience that the actors were repeating the words they were hearing via headphones.

Hill-Gibbins’s and Blythe’s contention that wearing headphones is a constant reminder of the real subjects is problematic. This is not proven: alienation cannot be a constant – of necessity alienation amounts to a set of devices which interrupt audience identification. The constant wearing of headphones simply becomes a convention, and in fact, after a time, the spectator accepts headphones as the norm. There is no evidence that they functioned in the Brechtian manner that Hill-Gibbins describes, as they manifestly did not interrupt the audience’s

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<sup>59</sup> Blythe, *The Girlfriend Experience*, p.5.

identification with the action or actors' portrayals. In fact, almost all reviewers felt that the headphones were unnecessary. Alice Jones's review in *The Independent* is typical:

I'm not convinced by this device – audiences have seen enough verbatim theatre to understand the concept, and the actors could just learn the lines, which they appear to have done. In any case, the excellent cast deliver the warmest and most engaging of performances.<sup>60</sup>

Most reviewers expressed both their suspicion about the efficacy of the headphones and their admiration of the actors' technical acting skills. Karen Fricker observed:

It's not clear... what is gained by having the actors listen to headsets and repeat back the recorded voices of their subjects as they perform... Given the strength of material and performers, having the actors wear headsets feels like a gimmick, particularly since their delivery is so polished it's hard to believe they haven't memorized the lines.<sup>61</sup>

For this critic, the headphones evidently had the reverse effect of that intended by Blythe and Hill-Gibbins. Similarly, Nicholas de Jongh wrote of the 'pedantic over-emphasis on what is pretentiously termed "The Recorded Delivery Writing and Performance technique"... None of the four fine actresses needs such

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<sup>60</sup> Alice Jones, *The Independent*, 25 Sept 2008. Similarly, in her review for *Do We Look Like Refugees?!* Jones again stated 'Once again, Blythe uses her recorded delivery technique; the actors wear headphones and repeat the recordings out loud, mimicking the exact intonations of the original subject. I'm still not sure of the point of this...' See <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/do-we-look-like-refugees-assembly-george-street-edinburgh-2056102.html>> accessed 20 August 2010.

<sup>61</sup> Karen Fricker, *Variety*, <<http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117938513.html?categoryid=33&cs=1&nid=2562>> accessed 11 April 2010.

stimulus',<sup>62</sup> and Caroline McGinn noted 'Its integrity doesn't stem from the headphones'.<sup>63</sup> It is evident that whilst reviewers were impressed by the actors, they had profound misgivings about the device, and did not equate the headphones as a piece of machinery with any greater 'authenticity' in the production.

The question prompted by the critics is whether the headphones bring anything new to the audience experience. From the point of view of the audience, there is nothing to suggest the headphones bring a radically new meaning to the performance of documentary. This is due, in part, to the fact that as the audience could not hear the audio, they could not judge the precision, or in fact vouch that the actors were hearing any voice at all. If anything, the spectator questions what the relationship might be between the actor and the headphones. The spectator does not assume that this relationship is unproblematic or straightforward.

However, the actors found that the headphone approach set new challenges to their process. Two members of the cast expressed frustration that the critics praised their 'truthfulness' and 'engaging' performances at the same time as rejecting the headphone approach. For them the two were not mutually exclusive, but rather were utterly reliant on each other – the strong performances were attributable to the headphone approach. Alex Lowe stated:

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<sup>62</sup> Nicholas de Jongh, *Evening Standard*, 24 Sept 2008. <<http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/theatre/show-23576459-details/The+Girlfriend+Experience/showReview.do?reviewId=23559528>> accessed 11 April 2010.

<sup>63</sup> Caroline McGinn, *Time Out*, 29 Sept 2008. <[http://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/events/810650/the\\_girlfriend\\_experience.html](http://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/events/810650/the_girlfriend_experience.html)> accessed 12 April 2010.

In performance it forces you to really play the character as he appears in your ears. Everyone has their little tricks, and this helps you throw them off...but people often forget we are listening to it. People still forget or don't understand. We try and show it in every way. The set is deliberately sparse, it looks like a rehearsal space, to point up the fact we are all actors, and we are just trying to show a fly on the wall view. We have people addressing the audience as Alecky, to remind you that it is all recorded, and then Kara, the SM is on one side operating the desk, in full view of the audience, and Jo on the other operating lights, you can see props as you come in, and still people don't realise, and think it is a gimmick.

Similarly, Coles observed:

I think it is essential we have the headphones. It means no matter what happens, it stays the same. Without the headphones it would change and end up not being at all the same. You wouldn't speak over each other, you'd wait, you'd fall into your own intonations, you'd start doing it your own way. There have been criticisms about the headphones from the press, but I think that is because of the lack of understanding about the technique.

As we shall see, Coles's comments are not straightforward, as the delivery of the testimony did not necessarily 'stay the same'. It is clear, however, that the actors found that the headphone approach was critical in creating their much-praised portrayals.

## **Acting Processes**

### **The practical challenges of the Recorded Delivery process**

I interviewed the cast of *The Girlfriend Experience* between 10 October 2008 and 16 January 2009.<sup>64</sup> Despite the fact that three of the actors met the women they played, by far the most formative element of the production for all the actors was the use of the headphones. I will first explore the practical challenges of the process before analysing how the actors worked with the headphones on their roles in rehearsal.

All the actors wore headphones in both ears. In the early plays, each actor wore a mini-disk player and pressed 'play' simultaneously at the beginning of the performance. Due to technological innovations in *The Girlfriend Experience*, the audio was wirelessly received by each actor's headset. Each actor heard all the audio recording, not just his/her own parts. The cast were instructed to turn the volume on their headphones to maximum, to avoid them being able to hear the other actor, the audience, or, indeed themselves. This is quite unlike any of the performance practices in the previous case-studies and, unsurprisingly, led to particular difficulties. Debbie Chazen noted that:

When we were all on stage, I couldn't hear the others, as I didn't want to. I wanted to be able to concentrate on my audio. That is what you are supposed to do. That is the way the technique works – you turn it up so high that you can't hear the others. So I had to concentrate on lips to ensure that I didn't answer a question before it was asked...The whole of the first week was spent listening to the audio, and trying to sort out whose voice was whose, and what it was they were saying...It took literally a whole week of really intensive listening to sort those strands out.

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<sup>64</sup> The dates of interviews were as follows: Alex Lowe, 10 Oct 2008; Esther Coles, 14 Oct 2008; Beatie Edney, 9 Jan 2009 and Debbie Chazen, 16 Jan 2009. All the interviews were conducted over the telephone with the exception of Alex Lowe, whom I met at the Royal Court Theatre before seeing his performance the following day. Lu Corfield, who played 'Poppy', declined to be interviewed.

Practically establishing what was said and by whom was thus a time-consuming element of the rehearsal process. For Alex Lowe, this was compounded by the complications of covertly recording the male clients from a distance: ‘The first three weeks for me were spent trying to decipher what these guys were saying...they are not that near the microphone so are hard to hear.’

Once the issue of actually establishing the words of the subject had been overcome, the actors were faced with further problems in rehearsal. Unable to hear their own voices, the actors often struggled to find an appropriate volume.

Beatie Edney stated:

One technical thing with the headsets which was difficult is that I have a very loud voice, I don’t need to project really, it just rings out. Joe kept telling me to be quieter. My main difficulty was trusting that I could be heard. That was really hard with the headphones.

Esther Coles found the opposite: ‘Joe kept telling me to be louder, as I always had the headphones on full through the rehearsal, I couldn’t actually hear how loud I was.’ Timing was similarly problematic. The actors repeated the words very shortly after hearing them. Naturally, this delay varied from actor to actor.

Lowe pointed out that:

The thing I find most difficult is when you get way behind the other actor, because everyone works at different speeds. Lu [Corfield] is a lot slower than everyone else. I was on with her the other night, and we ended up about ten seconds behind. I thought come on! Hurry up!<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> At the ‘Acting with Facts’ Conference at the University of Reading, Stuart Young and Hilary Halba presented an extract of their play *Hush: A Documentary Play on Family Violence*, which they produced in New Zealand. Like Blythe’s actors, the three performers wore headphones. However, when I spoke to them about the process, a significant difference became apparent. The

A further complication in relation to timing was the comedic nature of much of the material. Beatie Edney stated:

...[the audience] can't interrupt the action by laughing, we just plough on! For Debbie and I who are both comedians that is bloody hard...I used to lose my laughs left right and centre.

The audio, to some extent, denied the cast the opportunity to vary their delivery so as to prompt or ride the laughter. However, Alex Lowe noted that once the actors became familiar with the material, a degree of adaptation took place:

If I'm entirely honest there is a little bit of that that goes on...I play the old guy who can't hear them very well, and he has this great line 'I like the feel of your paddles on my bare arse'. Now right over the line there's a dog bark, but I wait until after so the audience can hear the line. So you can time it a bit. I've noticed the others do it, although they probably say they don't. But really you can't pause for the laughter. You can't ride it.

Lowe's admission is fascinating in that his clandestine tone suggests that the actors frequently bent the rules, but that he wanted to preserve a party-line about the use of headphones. It is evident that the actors' timing did alter in performance, but as they could not pause the recordings, the extent to which they could do this was limited.

The concentration needed to master using the headphones became clear when

Lowe stated:

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actors in *Hush* spoke in time with the voice they heard, not following it, or what the cast of *Hush* called 'trailing'. Thus, they learnt the piece completely, and used the tape to gain the pitch of the voice. Cindy Diver, one of the actors, spoke of 'breathing alongside' her subject. She noted that 'through breath I can share in her experience'. Questions abound from this process, which, as the actors speak simultaneously, is not based on listening to the same degree as Blythe's work.

It is quite a hard technique because you have one ear on what you're hearing...one ear on the other person, so you can make sure you don't answer a question before it is asked – that's a fear, and another ear on whether you are being too loud, and one on your own diction and enunciation. So there are four things going on, and only two ears.

Debbie Chazen made an even longer list of the concerns on stage:

Your brain literally can't do it all at once. You've got to listen to it, repeat it, you've got to interact with the other characters by looking at their eyes and lips, you've got your props, your actions, so all these things mean you have no time or space to do anything else.

We can thus more fully start to understand how the approach functioned, and the way in which, when trying to master the process, the actors' minds were entirely focused on the task in hand. A critical result of this demand was that as listening to the headphones was so engrossing, the actors were faced with a quite different set of concerns from those in productions without the headphones. Beatie Edney stated:

You are just listening, which is basically what you want as an actor. If it is working, what you want to be is in the moment and listening. And that is what this makes you do...you are not policing yourself all the time about what you are doing. You haven't got someone on your shoulder saying you don't sound like her, you missed that etc. You don't come outside of yourself.

The exigencies prompted by the headphones thus altered Edney's stage awareness. As she was so preoccupied with listening, she had less ability to 'police' herself. This can be seen as an extreme form of alienation, in which the

actors are alienated from themselves, which goes well beyond Brecht's writings on the subject. It is evident from Edney's comment that this was a very positive aspect of the process. She noted that 'not policing yourself' had two particular outcomes in performance: the lack of both nerves and self-consciousness. Nerves have been a notable feature in both previous case-studies (we might compare Catherine Russell's comment that she was 'terrified' and Diane Fletcher's memory that she has 'never been that nervous'). Here, however, none of the actors recalled feeling nervous. Edney stated:

The great thing about the technique is that you don't get nerves...I think it is to do with not having to remember lines. You are just listening...It forces it upon you, and so you are not nervous, it is extraordinary.

With reference to the lingerie that the women wore, Edney continued:

It takes all your self consciousness away. We were four middle-aged women, and my god what we were wearing – I got away lightly. There was no self consciousness. Because the brain is only engaged in the voice you are hearing.

It appears that the headphones created an alienation from self and functioned as a mental 'fourth wall' for Edney. Although she frequently spoke to the audience (and so broke the fourth wall in the traditional sense), the headphones and the associated concentration appeared to remove her from a direct relationship with the audience. Her attention on the audio and freedom from remembering lines evidently reassured her.

In contrast to the critics' suspicions, and despite a familiarity with the script, Edney maintained that she did not learn the audio:

I once went on stage without my headphones, and it was late on in the run and I couldn't do it. It shows that you need the audio. We are not just pretending to listen. It proved it to me.<sup>66</sup>

As the critics noted, in the run of the play it is hard to believe that the actors didn't learn their lines (albeit through constant repetition rather than conscious endeavour), but this is a very interesting aspect of Blythe's process. Debbie Chazen was clear that:

You don't learn it, because you just can't as the performance is such that your brain doesn't work in that way, but at the beginning because I didn't know what was coming next, it really was fresh and spontaneous.

This may account for Chazen's identification that: 'It is quite an amazing thing to feel on stage, so free and saying whatever came out of your mouth and not thinking several lines ahead.' However, it is clear from her comments that although Chazen didn't learn the audio, familiarity with it changed her portrayal throughout the run. These comments appear to contradict the earlier statements about the complexity of the process. This is further problematised by Blythe's observation:

I find towards the end of a four week run, the actors weren't as good to my mind as they were at the beginning. They knew it too well, so they could play little moments. They were also talking in

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<sup>66</sup> Similarly, Blythe has said: 'The actors don't learn them...if the audio went down, they would probably be able to keep going for a couple of lines, but that is it.' *Interview: Alecky Blythe*, Aleks Seirz ed. September 2008, London.  
<[http://www.theatrevoice.com/listen\\_now/player/?audioID=609](http://www.theatrevoice.com/listen_now/player/?audioID=609)> accessed 28 Jan 2010.

time with the text or ahead of the text, they stopped listening. The more they know the more they can talk with it, but if you keep behind it there are always little details. They stop working a bit and become a bit actory.

Blythe's comments are in contrast to her statement that: 'Because the listening takes so much concentration, part of your brain is already busy, so there is less room for actor's thoughts – going "oh they liked that line I think I'll push that one a bit more".' It is evident that through repetition, the challenge associated with the audio testimony eased throughout the run. The actors' comments about complexity are perhaps attributable to the early stages of performance, at which point the process was an extremely difficult technical skill to master. It was only at this point that the actors experienced what I have called 'alienation from self'. As Blythe suggests, as the actors became proficient in these new skills, they were able to develop and inflect their performances.<sup>67</sup>

We are thus presented with statements from the actors and Blythe which contradict themselves and each other, and thus raise more questions than they answer. Like the previous case-studies, it appears that the rhetoric surrounding the working processes on the production is designed to support and further Blythe's claims of authenticity. Her headphone approach is predicated on the actors' complete concentration on the minutiae of the utterances they hear. As she has stated:

[In verbatim productions without the headphones,] once actors have memorised their lines, they stop listening to how they were actually spoken in the first place, and this is when they start

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<sup>67</sup> It is on this feature that the Blythe's work differs from Tim Crouch's *An Oak Tree* and the work of Rotozaza, who only use each actor once.

deviating from the original intonation and embellishing it. I have continued to work with earphones precisely to prevent this from happening. I do not deny that actors are highly skilled at interpreting their lines, but the way the real person said them will always be more interesting.<sup>68</sup>

However, my interviews have demonstrated that this is not the way all the actors functioned in performance. The contrasting statements from both the actors and Blythe herself suggest that through repetition, the actors relied less on the headphones and developed their roles. As in *Talking to Terrorists*, the assumption appears to be (as evidenced in Lowe's reticence to expose the way in which he worked) that this development ran counter to claims of authenticity, and the actors feared that this undermined the validity of Blythe's approach. However, questioning the veracity of the headphones should not overshadow the fact that their use was entirely new to the actors and prompted particular challenges in their processes.

### **Rehearsal Processes: 'Outside-In' and Stanislavski's Method of Physical Action**

The order of my investigations here reflects the structure of rehearsal. Hill-Gibbins stated:

[The actors'] first job was to sound like the audio...the discipline is to replicate that perfectly...So what you are doing at the beginning is very technical...Then we work out the psychological and emotion lives which sit beneath that. But all that comes later.

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<sup>68</sup> Alecky Blythe interview in Hammond and Steward, *Verbatim: Verbatim*, p.81.

Whilst Hill-Gibbins may have perceived that perfect replication was ‘the discipline’ required of the actors, the cast’s experiences make it evident that they worked in quite different ways. Once the actors had mastered the initial technical demands outlined in the previous section, they were able to develop their portrayals. Hill-Gibbins stated that he used Stanislavski’s later teaching:

Normally I would start in a Stanislavskian way, so one of the first things you are thinking about is intentions and dramatic action. What does Character A want from Character B, and what tactics are they using to get what they want. You think about their psychology, and you use that as one of the central guides to thinking about the way they speak and move. It is different in *The Girlfriend Experience* because it is all there... You start with the voice. You work outside-in rather than inside-out. A lot of Stanislavski teaching is based on early- to mid-Stanislavski which is inside-out, and this is very different, it is outside-in, which he looked at later.

Again, Hill-Gibbins’s cogent articulation of the influences on his work with actors in the play is helpful. The specificity with which he identifies a particular period of Stanislavski’s teaching provides an interesting frame of reference. In this section, I will examine Stanislavski’s later work and explore how the actors experienced and utilised these techniques.

### **The Method of Physical Action**

Hill-Gibbins’s comments about Stanislavski’s ‘later work’, which was ‘outside in’ refer specifically to the Method of Physical Action. Frustrated with misunderstandings and misapplications of his system, in the last three years of his life (1935-38), Stanislavski worked with eleven hand-picked directors and

actors at his new theatre, the Opera-Dramatic Studio in Moscow.<sup>69</sup> Stanislavski's frustrations were, in part, a result of Soviet censorship of his work, as Carnicke has outlined:

By 1934, when Socialist Realism became the only lawful artistic style, governmental control turned into a stranglehold...By focusing on his early career and wilfully ignoring his experimental interests, the press of the 1930s turned Stanislavsky into a model for theatrical Socialist Realism.<sup>70</sup>

However, Stanislavski turned this 'stranglehold' into a strength in his late work. He was subject to Stalin's policy of 'isolation and preservation', which put Stanislavski into 'internal exile'.<sup>71</sup> According to Carnicke, 'He left his home only for brief visits to doctors...Ironically, Stanislavski conducted his most non-naturalistic work during these last years'.<sup>72</sup> Thus, his state of house-arrest meant, paradoxically, that he was free to develop his theories, which his small group of practitioners recorded through copious notes.<sup>73</sup> Stanislavski called this work 'the new secret, the new aspect of my technique'.<sup>74</sup> Jean Benedetti has gone as far as

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<sup>69</sup> Mel Gordon notes that 'By 1934 he had practically divorced himself from the daily activities of the MAT', *The Stanislavsky Technique: Russia* (New York: Applause Theatre Books, 1987), p.207.

<sup>70</sup> Sharon Marie Carnicke 'Stanislavsky's System' in Alison Hodge, *Actor Training*, p.5. For more on the misunderstandings about his work, see Benedetti, *Stanislavski and the Actor*, p.vii-xv. Also see Coger, who states 'Because of the work of the American Lab and Group Theatres, Americans are most familiar with Stanislavski's early and middle periods. An understanding of his late work – his 'method of physical actions' – would complete our grasp of his contribution.' Coger, *TDR*, p.63.

<sup>71</sup> 'Internal exile' is Carnicke's term. See *Actor Training*, p.6.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> The notes of the assistants tasked with recording his 'new aspect' have not been drawn together. Instead, we have some writings from this period by Stanislavski himself, included in *An Actor's Work on a Role*, and books by two of his assistants: actor Vasily Toporkov's *Stanislavski in Rehearsal: the Final Years* (translated in 1979), and director Nikolai Gorchakov's *Stanislavski Directs* (translated in 1954). Jean Benedetti based his book, *Stanislavski and the Actor*, on the notebooks of Irina Novitskaya, another of the assistants who worked with Stanislavski during this period. Also see Sharon M. Carnicke's chapter on Maria Knebel, also an assistant during this time, in Alison Hodge, *Actor Training*, pp.99-116.

<sup>74</sup> Stanislavski, *AAWR*, p.68.

to suggest that ‘The work of the Opera-Dramatic Studio is Stanislavski’s true testament.’<sup>75</sup>

The critical development of Stanislavski’s theory was with regard to the centrality of physical action within the given circumstances of the play.<sup>76</sup> As Hill-Gibbins noted above, in his early and mid-career writings, Stanislavski saw physical action as emerging from work on emotion and psychology: ‘In the classical model of MXAT [Moscow Art Theatre] rehearsal, physical action came last. It was the bait with which to ‘lure’ the required feelings.’<sup>77</sup> In the Method of Physical Action, by contrast, rehearsals started with establishing the character’s actions:<sup>78</sup>

...if you are logically consistent in your reasoning and actions, if you bear in mind all the situations in the role... You will feel much that is close to the role... and some of the character’s experiences will come alive in you.<sup>79</sup>

Stanislavski thus came to see that rather than being the product of psychological states, simple physical tasks could actually prompt inner feeling in the actor,

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<sup>75</sup> Benedetti, *Stanislavski and the Actor*, p.xii.

<sup>76</sup> To see this as a reversal of the system would be a mistake. Quoting G.W. Kristi, who edited the eight-volume Russian edition of Stanislavski’s works, Cogler has noted: ‘The use of physical actions seems like a reversal of the system where the role is created through analysis and exercise and then applied to the play’s circumstances. But Stanislavski never intended to emphasise one part of his work at the expense of the other. As Kristi points out, “the psychological action and the physical action are two parts of one procedure”. What happened was that Stanislavski used physical actions to create the need for that inner life which permits the actor to realise the external action’. Cogler, *TDR*, p. 67. Only those for whom Stanislavski’s teaching began and ended with *An Actor Prepares* would see this as a complete reversal. What was new in Stanislavski’s teaching was the direct effect of physical action on psychological states. This was something Stanislavski saw in Meyerhold’s work.

<sup>77</sup> Benedetti, *Stanislavski: An Introduction*, p.68.

<sup>78</sup> For examples of this shift, see the case-studies on *Woe from Wit*, *Othello*, and *The Inspector General* in Stanislavski, *AAWR*.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p.60.

which Hill-Gibbins called the ‘outside-in’ approach.<sup>80</sup> Stanislavski too used this term: ‘You probably know from your own experience the link between physical action and the inner causes, impulses, efforts it causes. This is from the outside in.’<sup>81</sup> In his translation of the notes of one of Stanislavski’s assistants from this period, Benedetti writes that ‘Physical action is the foundation on which the entire emotional, mental and philosophical superstructure of the ultimate performance is built’.<sup>82</sup> He goes on:

By finding out what happens and deciding what I would do physically in any situation, and believing in the truth of my actions, I release my creative energies and my natural emotional responses organically.<sup>83</sup>

It is thus clear why Hill-Gibbins used Stanislavski’s late teaching in his direction of *The Girlfriend Experience*. The exigencies of the Recorded Delivery technique necessitated the director and actors working backwards from the voice and physical actions, as Hill-Gibbins noted:

*The Girlfriend Experience* taught me a lot about acting. Because you have a structure already in place, it is much more like directing music or dance. With a normal play you have lines of text and some stage directions, so there is the question of how you say the lines and there’s also the question of staging. But in *The Girlfriend Experience* the structure is all there... Where I earn my money a bit more is then working out the psychological and emotional elements which sit underneath that.

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<sup>80</sup> Coger has contextualised Stanislavski’s reformulation with advances in psychology at the time such as the experiments of Pavlov which made a direct connection between physical and mental states: ‘The physical actions are nothing but a chain of stimuli evoking the feelings to be acted out... Thus Stanislavski moved towards the Pavlovian theories.’ Coger, *TDR*, p.67.

<sup>81</sup> Stanislavski, *AAWR*, p.79.

<sup>82</sup> Benedetti, *Stanislavski and the Actor*, p.xv.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

As with many of the experiences in this thesis, Hill-Gibbins stated that he had not worked in this way before: ‘it was new to start with the body and the voice and go outside-in.’ Although Hill-Gibbins asserts that the ‘structure is all there’, in identifying the ‘actions’ in the play, we shall see that this is not, in fact, true of the way in which he worked on the production.

### **Sources of ‘actions’ in *The Girlfriend Experience***

It is informative to establish what constituted ‘actions’ in *The Girlfriend Experience*. From Hill-Gibbins’s and the actors’ experiences, it is clear that they existed in three forms. Firstly, they were present on the audio. Hill-Gibbins noted the amount of physical action that could be heard on the recording:

Not only on the tape do you have the verbal, musical structure of what they say, and exactly how they say it, you also have the physical structure as well... There is so much of the physical life of it that is contained there. You can hear when they move, and you can hear what they are doing. You can hear when they are eating something, or using a hair dryer or brushing their teeth or sitting down.

It is surprising that these moments still existed on the audio despite the extent of Blythe’s editing and re-ordering. This was also supplemented by Blythe who had witnessed most of the events caught on the audio, as Hill-Gibbins added: ‘not only do you have that, you have Alecky Blythe, who tells us she sat there and did this or that, because she has quite a vivid memory of it.’ However, we must also remember the actors’ accounts in the previous section, who noted that actions not present on the audio were added. This implies that where the cast and director deemed the actions appropriate they were included, and if not, others were

invented. It is thus evident that Hill-Gibbins's statements about the fixed structure of the play do not correspond to the way in which he actually worked.

Secondly, the action was the voice itself, captured on the audio recordings and played through the headsets. With regard to voice within the Method of Physical Action, Sonia Moore, one of Stanislavski's actors stated:

The physical action is the "bait" for an emotion. It is, however, important to understand that Stanislavski also considered the spoken word a physical action.<sup>84</sup>

Similarly, Toporkov writes of the text as 'verbal action'.<sup>85</sup> As the voice is part of the body, 'physical action' refers to the voice, which is particularly relevant to our investigations here. Finally, physical actions were developed by the actors through Hill-Gibbins's improvisations, which will be explored below. As we shall see, the actors used a combination of these three sources of 'action' in their preparation for the play.

### **Alex Lowe: Voice and Physicality**

Alex Lowe was in a rather different situation from the other actors. As he played the men who visited the brothel, who did not know that they were being recorded, nor (with one exception) did Blythe observe them, aside from the recording and a small amount of information from the women, there was no other

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<sup>84</sup> Sonia Moore, 'The Method of Physical Actions' *Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 9:4 (Summer, 1965), p.92. Known under her original name, Sophie Evzarovna Shatzov, Moore was a Russian actress who trained in Moscow Art Theatre's third Studio under Eugene Vakhtangov (1920-23).

<sup>85</sup> Toporkov, *Stanislavski in Rehearsal*, p.91.

material to assist him.<sup>86</sup> His main resources from which to develop physicalities for his roles were thus the voice and his imagination:

There is this guy ‘Dick Brain’ towards the end, and he has a voice with a very open back to the throat, so I felt that would make him stand with his head jutting forward to lengthen the neck. So you get the open back of the throat on the line ‘I’m all keyed up to go’.

In my interview, Lowe vocally recreated the line he quotes above. He was very clear that to recreate the tone of voice on the audio he needed his larynx low in his throat and the pharynx open and stretched. In order to do this, Lowe adapted his stance. An integral aspect of his process was thus experimenting with his own posture and body shape to reproduce the sounds of the voice he heard. However, he then developed this further exploring what this physicality might reveal about the individual’s psychology:

These physicalities come from the content of the audio. They suggest a sort of insistence, leading with the head. He is not entirely comfortable about being there.

This was a product of Lowe’s imagination, developed from how he felt when he held his body in a particular way, and his own projection of unease onto the subject. Lowe was aware that this was based on little more than his imaginative response to the voice he heard: ‘I don’t know whether he really was like that, but his voice suggested that to me’. The way in which a particular physicality suggested a mental state to Lowe echoes the approach that Stanislavski endorsed in the Method of Physical Action:

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<sup>86</sup> Blythe followed one of the men out of the brothel and on a train. As Alex Lowe noted, ‘She managed to get on a train with him and he sat opposite her and she described him as having a tweedy kind of farmer’s shirt, so we tried to copy that.’

As the actor discovers and follows...his line of physical actions, involuntarily and, possibly, unnoticed by himself, he finds the features of his outer characteristics.<sup>87</sup>

Although Lowe developed the ‘outer characteristics’ from the voice, unlike Stanislavski’s comments, his physical manifestation was not subliminal, but rather an active and conscious endeavour. In addition, Stanislavski looked for detailed inner psychology. As Lowe had so little on which to base his work, this kind of detail was impossible for him to achieve. Indeed, Lowe was aware that he was extrapolating a physicality based on only extremely limited testimony:

You have of course only got what you’re hearing to go on, so I dare say if there is more audio she had, that might throw everything, as you’ve gone purely on what is in the play.

Lowe’s challenge was different from many of the actors whose processes I have analysed across my case-study productions. The first chapter explored the ways in which Catherine Russell, Chris Ryman and Alexander Hanson learnt more about their subjects’ lives through their meetings, and thus were able to contextualise the testimony in the play. Similarly, the *Called to Account* cast were able to research the individuals they played to provide supplementary information. Here, by contrast, Lowe had little other resource aside from the recorded words, and thus rather than claiming to understand or empathise with his subject, he was very clear that his portrayal of ‘Dick Brain’ was predicated on a combination of the physicality suggested in the voice, a few comments by the women, and his own imagination.

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<sup>87</sup> Toporkov, *Stanislavski in Rehearsal*, p.203.

### **Alex Lowe: developing a psychology through off-audio work**

Once Lowe's work on physicality had begun, Hill-Gibbins, like Stanislavski's teaching within his Method of Physical Action, worked on the actors' psychological rendering of their subjects. Hill-Gibbins outlined this journey:

Psychologically, you want to make it [the portrayal] as intense or as deep as possible. On a deep level it is as felt as it can be. So we would do work to achieve that... Doing that off-audio work is all about developing the sense of empathy between the actors and characters, and give them a lived and felt experience. We did quite a bit of that. It always paid dividends.

It is intriguing that in order to develop the psychology of the character, Hill-Gibbins worked 'off-audio' with Lowe. This strongly suggests that it was not possible to work on the character using their testimony alone, but rather that cultivating the actors' invention was a crucial element in Hill-Gibbins's process. This further problematises his comments about the fixed structure on the audio, and indeed his outside-in approach. Lowe's comments about a particular improvisation illustrate this contradiction:

We did a fantastic exercise... where I went out and chose one of these punters, 'Dick-brain', and I walked round Sloane Square – we tried to do it in real time to try and evoke a sense of how the punter feels turning up and how the working girl feels about him turning up. We did it from fifteen minutes before, with them knowing this guy is going to turn up from the streets.

This exercise evidently prompted Lowe to probe within himself the psychology of the individual he played:

Doing that, and me living as the character round Sloane Square and thinking lines like Dick-brain's 'I'm all keyed up to go', was very helpful. One of the women in the parlour told me Dick-brain was married. I mean if you think about that, he is going to somewhere that is clandestine, you're nervous, you have to get away from your wife to do it, and come up with some vague excuse (which presumably he has been doing for years), how do you square that with yourself? Years and years and years of excuses. Presumably your wife knows and you know she knows? Literally to act this out as an exercise, rather than having it down on paper 'he's married' was extremely helpful. So doing it as an exercise away from the audio and seeing the place that it happened really gives you a sense of what that's about.

Lowe's work on physicality was thus supplemented with off-audio exercises. His description of how helpful this was reinforces the fact that the audio itself was not sufficient. This raises the question as to whether this process was, as Hill-Gibbins noted 'outside-in'. It was certainly not a linear journey for Lowe, but rather his development of a physicality based on the voice was assisted by exercises which did not use his subjects' words at all. However, the main departure from the Method of Physical Action was on the lack of given circumstances available to Lowe. Stanislavski states:

You cannot act without feeling, but it isn't worthwhile to worry and fret about it. It will come of itself as a result of your concentration on live action in the given circumstances.<sup>88</sup>

The question as to what constituted the given circumstances for any of the men is a real problem. Lowe had access to only one fact: he was married. However, this

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<sup>88</sup> Toporkov, *Stanislavski in Rehearsal*, p.202. The close association between Stanislavski's emphasis on the given circumstances in The Method of Physical Action and Stella Adler's teaching is no coincidence. As noted on p.66 in the *Talking to Terrorists* case-study, Adler visited and took advice from Stanislavski in 1934, during his period of formulating the Method of Physical Action.

circumstance was not in the play, but rather was a piece of unsubstantiated information from the women.

### **Alex Lowe: Hotseating**

Lowe's lack of information and the fleeting appearances of his subjects meant that the imagined work was vital to him. His struggle to create characters from the audio became pronounced when he talked about his hotseating sessions. His session functioned in a completely different way from Stafford-Clark's deployment of the exercise in *Talking to Terrorists* (analysed on pp.71-83), as Lowe recalled:

Because my characters turn up intermittently, Joe did a lot of work with the women and it got quite a way through rehearsals and I said to him, 'I really want some time with you to do lots of hotseating as these characters, let's just really thrash this out, you know really let's get some three-dimensionality, rather than me just tapping up with a couple of indistinguishable lines.' And that was really useful...it was great with him asking those questions. It forces you to ask yourself, yes, what does he do? That really was helpful. That kind of detail is so important.

The suggestion by Lowe is that as he had very little material to go on, he requested the hotseating sessions specifically to enrich his portrayals. This again emphasises that the recorded material provided limited creative potential. The hotseating sessions in *Talking to Terrorists* were partly designed to provide material for the writer; indeed, they only took place if the actor had met their subject. They were exercises in memory as much as performance. By contrast, in *The Girlfriend Experience*, the hotseating sessions were based purely on improvisation, with the actors inventing facts about their subjects' lives. For

Lowe, this appears to be an attempt to aid his process which he felt was suffering due to the paucity of information on his characters.

### **Esther Coles: Voice to Psychology**

Esther Coles played ‘Amber’ who worked in the parlour. ‘Amber’ appeared to be much more guarded than the other women about her involvement with the production, as Coles observed:

My character is a bit different from everybody else’s as she didn’t really want to be part of it, she didn’t really give anything away. Whilst the other women were happy to chat to Alecky and tell her everything, my character didn’t do any of that at all.

Coles’s supposition that the other women told Blythe ‘everything’, seems very unlikely; rather, it appears ‘Amber’ exercised the most caution. Coles stated that her approach was predicated on two particular elements:

I built up the character from the facts I knew about her. I found out that she was a district nurse before, so from that I suppose I learnt that she was a caring person, but also, it made me wonder how she went from a having a good job to being a prostitute. Those things also helped. I built the character from the voice and the facts.

It is important again to contest this identification of ‘facts’. Despite her comment, it appears that at the centre of Coles’s portrayal were not facts, but quite the opposite – the apparent mystery of ‘Amber’s’ professional background. Like Lowe, the lack of information prompted Coles to focus on her subject’s voice:

I think what is really interesting about what you hear is that the more you listen to the voice, in a way, you can actually start to understand the character. Just hearing the voice over and over again, you hear the range of intonations, the moments at which they stumble, and it all gives you an idea of their psychology.

This was a feature that Hill-Gibbins also foregrounded in the rehearsal process he devised:

It is absolutely shocking the amount we give away about ourselves from the way we speak, not what we say but how we say it...I'm not a speech specialist, but when you repeatedly listen to something, it is mindboggling the amount you reveal about your psychology. Where you hesitate, where you mis-speak. That is what is interesting, and then drawing the actors' attentions to what might be going on. So once you have the physical and vocal structure there, psychologically you are creating the drama.

Although they were not conversation analysts, the personal nature of the testimony in the play evidently led both Coles and Hill-Gibbins to believe that they could ascertain a great deal about the character from the way they spoke. Whilst accepting that caution must be exercised as the testimony was not only affected by Blythe's presence but also highly edited and re-structured, this focus is entirely explicable, as it was all she had. Coles's lack of information prompted her to develop different analytical skills. She learnt a new understanding of character study through intense listening.

Coles found that her reliance on the recorded material alone was an insufficient stimulus, and that in rehearsal, the headphone technique was inhibiting her process. She stated that:

Towards the end of the rehearsal period I just wanted to put the headphones down, learn it and do it without them. Be able to go somewhere with the character. I'm not sure if that is because I only had a small part or whether it was slightly restricting.

Coles's comments suggest that using the headphones meant that there was little chance of developing a psychological journey. But interestingly, she did not experience this in performance:

Through the process of performing, I haven't really felt like that - it has felt very alive every time. I think that is something to do with the process. You have to listen, and in the course of doing that, something has happened and I have become a character. But I can't really say that I tried to find a way with that, but rather that it has developed from just really trying to listen.

Coles's comments are surprising. They echo those of Siân Phillips quoted in the previous chapter. When working with Samuel Beckett on *Eh Joe*, Phillips found that 'The mechanical work suddenly became real, became personal, it was very strange.'<sup>89</sup> Both Phillips and Coles found that the frustratingly prescriptive and technical rehearsal demands finally released them creatively. For both actors, it was not their work on their characters' psychology which released them, but rather a much less definable result of rote-learning.<sup>90</sup> It is also evident that these two actors found it very difficult to articulate exactly how or why this happened.

### **Debbie Chazen: flexible psychology and multiple truths**

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<sup>89</sup> Cantrell and Luckhurst, *Playing for Real*, p.140.

<sup>90</sup> Actor Indira Varma has described a similar experience when working with Harold Pinter on *Celebration* (2000): 'Pinter worked a lot through simple repetition of certain sections and was very particular about being faithful to the text...I felt as I went over the text again and again that I began to understand how to speak the words'. See Luckhurst and Veltman, *On Acting*, p.147.

Debbie Chazen most fully explored how she developed her role beyond replicating the audio she heard. Her comments are also highly pertinent with regard to the complex relationship between the Method of Physical Action and Stanislavski's reformulations of emotion memory.

Chazen found using the headphones difficult. Her early experiences of the play's run highlight the fundamental challenge of the Recorded Delivery device:

The technique is incredibly freeing in many ways, but it is also quite restricting in others. It is the same thing every night, and you can't ever put a spin on it. In a normal play with a script you can say the line in a different way every night if you want to. In this one you can't. After about a week of performance I was going to the theatre and I thought 'Shit, it is going to be exactly the same tonight as it was last night'. I had this fear that I was going to get so bored over the five week run.

However, Chazen experienced a crucial breakthrough in performance:

I did the show that night and something clicked. I realised that although I had to say the lines the same, the meaning behind it could be completely different. It changed everything. You sort of unravelled it backwards. When anyone says anything, there could be a hundred different readings behind it. If I say to someone 'You look nice today' it could mean you do look nice, or you look awful, and it can mean both of those things without changing the way you say it. So I could play many meanings, and all could be true. By doing that I was able to keep it fresh each night.

Chazen was the only actor across my case-studies to articulate this particular understanding of 'truth'. Although her delivery was fixed (at least within the slight deviations investigated in the previous section), Chazen found a creative role in the play by changing the thought which prompted the utterance.

Considering her worries during the early performances, this was evidently a

hugely releasing and satisfying intervention. Her understanding that the psychology is unstable and fluid, and can change in each performance totally contradicts Stanislavski, who sought psychological coherency and stability in his actors' portrayals. Nor is this Brechtian, as Brecht would have explored the distance between actor and role in order to expose a socio-political scenario. Chazen's understanding of character was, therefore, different every night, which is a radical intervention for an actor to make.

Despite her visit to the brothel, which Chazen stated '[made] a big difference. It was that final piece of the jigsaw...I mean I'm sure we could have done it without meeting them, but it was an extra bonus', Chazen attributed her discovery about psychology not to her conversation with 'Tessa', but to Hill-Gibbins's rehearsal techniques. She said: 'That is where the improvisations came in really useful. You had to dig deep beneath the lines to find the character. Only then can you start to establish what the lines mean.' In analysing her utilisation of these techniques, Chazen focussed particularly on a monologue by 'Tessa', in which she recounts her decision to close the brothel for three days:

This past – few weeks (*Beat.*) – I mean, we closed for three days. (*Beat.*) Oooh. (*Beat.*) Oh, I was gonna – stop everything. I'm looking through the paper looking for a fucking job. Bad. (*Beat.*) I needed a break. (*Beat.*) Just with everything, with Mike, with these dirty old men. Ohh, I just couldn't handle it. It was like 'wooh' put up the barriers quick. (*Laughs.*)<sup>91</sup>

This is perhaps the most personal moment for 'Tessa' in the play, as Chazen explains:

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<sup>91</sup> Blythe, *The Girlfriend Experience*, p.62.

The whole monologue is perhaps more truthful than she is being anywhere else in the play. We worked on that intensively. We did this whole improvisation where I was doing what I thought she did in those three days when she went off. She hasn't told anyone what she did. I asked her and she said she couldn't tell me. So for the character I acted out what I imagined she might have done. That was fantastic. That changed the monologue every night as I tried to remember how I felt doing the different bits of the improvisation, which changed the background.

Chazen's improvisations started with what she imagined 'Tessa' *did*, not how she *felt*, which then evidently prompted feelings. This was also Stanislavski's emphasis: 'ask yourself what would you do – not what you would feel – what physical actions you would perform'.<sup>92</sup> Like Lowe's and Coles's approach, Chazen's experiences are attributable to the lack of information she had about 'Tessa'. It appears that it was not, as she stated, digging 'beneath the lines' that was freeing for Chazen, but rather imagining the unknown circumstances that the subject refused to clarify. The women were evidently guarded and careful about what they revealed. Thus, in contrast to the previous case-studies in which the actors used their research to help them, here the actors used their own invention to a greater extent.

The improvisations were designed to enrich the unknown background to the testimony. We might compare Chazen's comment that 'This made quite a difference, I could fill in the gaps' with *Called to Account* cast-member Jeremy Clyde's statement that 'You don't fill in the gaps. Absolutely not.' These contrasting attitudes are a product of the different scope of the plays: in the politically nuanced testimony of *Called to Account*, psychological coherency was

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<sup>92</sup> Gorchakov, *Stanislavski Directs*, p.378.

subsumed to precision and restraint, whereas in *The Girlfriend Experience*, the sex workers' attitudes and interaction were foregrounded. In addition, in *Called to Account* much more could be researched about the individuals, whereas in *The Girlfriend Experience* as the actors had so little information, inventing a history was a valuable exercise for the actors

Not only did Chazen change the psychological and emotional stimuli for her comments, she also used a form of emotion memory to remember how she felt in different moments of the improvisations. Rather than use her own experiences to provide analogous feelings, these emotions were a product of the improvisations. In his final writings, it is evident that Stanislavski had changed his attitude towards emotion memory:

...the truth of physical actions and belief in them...can evoke the psychological experiencing of the role naturally, automatically, so that we do not assault our feelings...<sup>93</sup>

Stanislavski thus identified that physical actions, not an 'assault' on feelings could provide the necessary emotions for a role. From Stanislavski's own writings, and from those who worked with him, it is evident that his views changed considerably.<sup>94</sup> In one of Stanislavski's last writings, written three weeks before his death, he laid out a twenty-five point plan for the Method of Physical Actions entitled 'The Approach to the Role', in which emotion memory was not mentioned. The way in which Chazen employed the emotions engendered through her physical rendering of the role in improvised scenes thus

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<sup>93</sup> Stanislavski, *AAWR*, p.66-7.

<sup>94</sup> Toporkov quoted Stanislavski 'Don't think of the character, of the emotional experience. You just have a series of episodes.' *Stanislavski in Rehearsal*, p.126. Similarly, Gorchakov noted that 'physical action is the best channel-conductor to the emotion', *Stanislavsky Directs*, p.395.

bears resemblances to Stanislavski's Method of Physical Action. Her work still involved a personal input, as the improvisations were predicated on her own invention. However, despite some commonalities, particularly on the source of emotion, Chazen's approach was not Stanislavskian. Her identification of a fluid psychology which could change each performance completely contradicts the purpose of Stanislavski's teaching.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored one of the most unusual documentary performance approaches, and presents working methods quite different to those in the previous chapters. Analysing the use of headphones in performance is a completely new area of academic research, and as such has presented numerous challenges. As the writing, directing and acting processes are uncharted in the academy, it has been critical to locate the actors' work within the context of these atypical working methods. I have highlighted a set of problematic assumptions, and put some of the rhetoric associated with the headphone approach under the microscope. Unsurprisingly, this analysis has illustrated that the use of headphones was much more complex than it is possible to appreciate at first glance. I have made it clear that the actors' experiences are not always consistent with Blythe's or Hill-Gibbins's comments. In addition, I have found contradictions in Hill-Gibbins's and Blythe's accounts, and a disparity between what they said and what they did.

Once again, we are faced with the problem of vocabularies. Hill-Gibbins's description has proved interesting as he identified both Stanislavskian and Brechtian elements in his processes. His staging decisions were clearly inspired by Brecht. Whereas Hill-Gibbins was concerned with alienating the audience, and attempted to achieve this through the use of headphones, in fact the actors themselves experienced a profound form of alienation. Although we have seen how this developed as they mastered the technical demands associated with using the headphones, it is evident that the actors' focus on stage was quite different from work without headphones. They were alienated from both their own self-consciousness as actors, and from a complete immersion in the role. Alienation was thus achieved in the actors' performances in a way that it wasn't for the audience: the headphones did not function as alienating devices for the spectators, but rather they became a convention in performance and did not necessarily interrupt the narrative flow or the audience's identification with the characters.

It is clear why Hill-Gibbins evoked Stanislavski's late teaching in his articulation of his processes in the play. The movement from external action to internal processes was prescribed by the Recorded Delivery approach and thus Stanislavski's emphasis on action, rather than on emotion or psychology, was evidently a useful reference point for Hill-Gibbins. However, by examining the actors' processes in detail, and interrogating Stanislavski's late work, it has become evident that the cast did not work in the manner laid out in the Method of Physical Action. The main departure from Stanislavski's Method of Physical Action was the lack of given circumstances in the play. For Stanislavski, the

given circumstances became more central in his later work than they had been earlier in his career. These were the subject of intense scrutiny and research by his actors, and were critical in creating a context within which to develop the character's 'actions'. In *The Girlfriend Experience*, by contrast, the lack of circumstances, and the questionable veracity of those that were given, was a real problem for the cast. The very fact that these women keep their identity a secret in their work means that they are cautious by habit. Blythe's presence will only have increased their caution. *The Girlfriend Experience* cast's processes, therefore, were frequently a result of their lack of information about the people they portrayed. Lowe's reliance on the recording for many of his roles, Coles's mystery about her character's professional life, and the enigma surrounding 'Tessa's' actions over the three days for Chazen, are all testament to the lack of circumstances given in the play, and further foregrounded the audio as the most significant resource they had at their disposal.

Both the actors and the director expressed scepticism as to whether the individuals were speaking the truth. Although there is no proof in the other case-studies that the interviewees were doing so, in this case-study the actors brought a scepticism to the material which is unlike any of the other productions.

Knowing so little about these individuals arguably meant that the actors were less emotionally invested in their roles. The way in which the actors started from a position of critique was a Brechtian element of the actors' experience. The scepticism about the source material opened up a gap between actor and character as the actors did not have the same sense of integrity that came from believing their subjects were telling the truth.

Both practitioners that Hill-Gibbins mentions are thus of limited use. Although certain elements of the design were loosely Brechtian, and Stanislavski's Method of Physical Action has a broadly analogous external-internal route, such was the unusual nature of the working methods that none of the actors' processes can be encompassed within these practitioners' work. The headphone approach is so unusual that it challenges assumed notions of character, such as: what is a motivation when an actor is repeating words from a tape? What constitutes a given circumstance when subjects do not share personal information? In response to these fundamental questions, this chapter has outlined the actors' development of a different set of analytical skills.

It has also become clear in this case-study that working from the oral testimony alone did not provide enough stimulation for the actors. We have seen this to a lesser extent in the previous case-studies – here the issue was pronounced. The actors' difficulties which resulted from the dearth of given circumstances and their reliance on the improvisations to assist them reinforce the fact that working solely from the audio was restrictive, and that more information was evidently required. I would also speculate that their habits of ingrained Stanislavskian technique left them exposed and forced to invent other ways of working.

### **Active formulations**

In contrast to the previous chapters, in which some actors described their processes in passive terms, on the whole, the actors in *The Girlfriend Experience*

were most open in their articulation of the creative interventions they made. As I have explored, it appears that the actors in the previous chapters felt that to acknowledge their own interpretations would leave them open to accusations that they were not staying accurate to what they had observed. However, in *The Girlfriend Experience*, as the headphones spelt out the approach to the audience, and suggested (or, as we have seen, over-emphasised) the limitations on the actors for the audience, the cast more readily investigated how they functioned creatively, and how they adapted their character building skills in response to the specific demands of the production.