

Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated that we must end the habitual discourses of non-actors speaking on behalf of actors. Verbatim acting processes are infinitely more rich and complex than we have been led to believe from the received narratives of writers, directors and academics. When I started my research for this thesis I had a number of expectations. Firstly, and perhaps as a result of my own experience of having been taught a range of acting approaches, I expected various practitioners (and their techniques) to be given concrete names and terminology. In particular, given the influence of his work on British actor-training, I assumed that Stanislavski's methods would be cited explicitly by the actors and that they would find them to be adaptable to documentary forms. Similarly, as the most obvious exponent of acting for political theatre, I expected Brecht to be a common reference point. As all but three actors in this thesis trained at British drama schools, I also expected the actors to associate their use of particular techniques to their training. In addition, as all the actors were involved in some kind of research, I expected them to emphasise that they were given more status in creative decision-making in these verbatim productions than in other kinds of production work. I also assumed that the actors would be highly concerned with physical resemblance and that much of their work would be predicated on achieving a physical likeness.

To take these assumptions in turn, it has become clear that Stanislavski was a reference point for many of these actors, but that they were not rigorously learned Stanislavskians in the way that Bella Merlin might be considered to be.

We must remember that there is virtually no theory on acting for documentary theatre, and even less on playing real people. Contrary to my expectations, it was particularly noticeable that Stanislavski's methods were not found to be easily adaptable by the actors. The repeated message across these three case-studies is that Stanislavski's techniques do not provide clear ways forward for playing a real person. Pervading the testimony of the *Talking to Terrorists* cast was the assumption that Stanislavski's methods could be applied, and they consistently ran aground. Whilst elements of his teaching can be employed, it is evident that some of the foundations of Stanislavski's work are not applicable to verbatim. For example, the actors' lack of access to their subjects meant that the cast of *The Girlfriend Experience* were denied the given circumstances which were evidently crucial to them, whilst in *Called to Account*, the actors' emphasis was firmly on the political and legal issues, not the personalities of their subjects and the psychological justification of their testimony. These are critical building blocks in Stanislavski's teaching, and their absence represents a fundamental departure from his system of work. However, my research has found that the foremost departure from Stanislavski's methods was the actors' minimalisation of the self in verbatim performance. Without exception, the actors in this thesis rejected using their own experiences as laid out in Stanislavski's technique of emotion memory. Furthermore, many actors believed that it was possible to subsume the self when playing a real person. I have suggested that the actors, like Merlin, were reticent to articulate their own creative interventions and personal decisions because they perceived that this might be deemed inappropriate when playing a real person. This reticence made research difficult as the actors themselves sometimes masked their own creative involvement.

Despite the profound problems of using Stanislavski's teaching, it is clear that the actors wanted to return to the familiar territory of using their own invention. This thesis has included numerous examples in which the actors looked outside the text for material to aid character-building, such as Shane Rimmer's research into Richard Perle and Debbie Chazen's creation of an imagined backstory. The strong inference is that the testimony alone was insufficient for character-building. This might be attributable to habit: actors were not used to these demands and not trained in verbatim practices, and perhaps reverted to familiar territory understood to be Stanislavskian, but found that this was fraught with obstacles.

Although Brecht was not explicitly referenced by the actors (though he was by Hill-Gibbins), his work was a constant presence throughout my interviews. In each case-study, I have identified working methods that are consistent with a Brechtian approach to character building. For example, in *Talking to Terrorists*, the hotseating process was based on reportage and narration. In *Called to Account*, this manifested itself both in the way in which the political implications of the testimony were privileged over the subjects' personality and emotions, and in Diane Fletcher's decision not to psychologically justify Clare Short's testimony. In *The Girlfriend Experience*, the cast experienced a profound form of alienation during rehearsals, which affected their awareness on stage and capacity for self-censorship. Many of the actors in this thesis were also aware of the distance between themselves and their role. This arose for various reasons: for Fletcher, the distance was created by Short's fame, as the audience could

actually measure the gap between her portrayal and their own knowledge of the politician. For Alexander Hanson in *Talking to Terrorists*, the distance was created by the differences he perceived between his personality and the Colonel that he played. For Alex Lowe in *The Girlfriend Experience*, the distance was prompted by the almost entire lack of information he was given about the men he played. Interestingly, rather than employ a Brechtian approach and exploit this distance, the actors looked for ways to close it. Frequently, this was by discovering more about the individual they played, and where that information wasn't available (as for Lowe), the actors repeatedly used their own imagination to build a character. In addition, these actors were not versed in Brecht's techniques, and the detail of his acting methods was not available to them. The drama schools these actors attended do not teach Brechtian acting techniques rigorously. I would contend that a greater awareness of Brecht's techniques would aid the actors' articulation of their work. The challenges that arose with regard to the distance between actor and role may well have been more cogently analysed with a knowledge of his techniques.

None of the actors explicitly related their work on these plays to the techniques they acquired through their training. Mary Luckhurst and I noted similar findings in our interviews for *Playing for Real*, as Luckhurst states in the introduction:

In the United Kingdom, mainstream actor training credentials do not tend to be defined by teachers, but by the professional parts an actor has played...[there is] a strong culture of belief that training is not first and foremost about the conservatoire but to do with the experience of professional work.¹

¹ Cantrell and Luckhurst, *Playing for Real*, p.20.

This was certainly the way in which the actors saw their work. However, whether they are conscious of it or not, their training appears to have provided them with a vocabulary which is infused by Stanislavski's teaching. My research was hampered by the fact that the actors referred to what were clearly Brechtian methods, without the vocabulary to identify them as such, and often tried to explain them through a Stanislavskian vocabulary. In addition, the actors' extraordinarily difficult task of describing their own processes was compounded by the staleness of existing vocabularies. Brecht, Stanislavski and Chekhov wrote their last works over fifty years ago, and much of their most celebrated writings are over seventy years old. Similarly, Adler's work is now over thirty years old. In addition, these vocabularies were not created for the specificities of verbatim theatre and deal with the fictionalisation of character.

This thesis is a first step towards identifying distinct acting processes in verbatim theatre, and makes it clear that actors do respond differently when preparing and performing a role based on a real person. The heightened claim of authenticity in verbatim theatre reinforces the actors' anxiety and sense of responsibility towards their subject. The differences in the actors' attitudes to the material have been a significant finding of this thesis. In *Talking to Terrorists*, the fact that six of the eight actors met the individual they played and discussed the circumstances surrounding their involvement with terrorism meant that the actors had a personal relationship to both the material and their subject. This had a specific effect upon their performance: the cast repeatedly recalled feeling an intense responsibility to their subject, and there was a tendency for actors to romanticise the 'bond' supposedly felt in one relatively brief meeting. We have

seen through Catherine Russell's account that, despite claims to authenticity, a director may insist on invention for the purposes of dramatic interest. A director's eye is in the shape of the show and on narrative and aesthetic cohesion; an actor's journey is entirely different. By contrast, the attitude of the cast of *Called to Account* to the material was quite different. The project of *Called to Account* was a serious attempt to make a political intervention in the form of destabilising the then government. The cast focused almost exclusively on the political specificities of their subjects' testimony as the stakes were as high as they could be. The DVD recording led to a particularly detailed replication of the original material. The actors in *Called to Account* were thus preoccupied with understanding the complex court terminology and ensuring that they were clear about the logic of their subjects' testimony. On the other hand, the attitudes of *The Girlfriend Experience* cast were different again. They were openly sceptical about the status of the truth claims in the material, aware that their subjects needed to protect themselves from any risk of being identified, and so routinely lie from day to day out of professional necessity. The actors, therefore, started from a critical position, which was a notable Brechtian feature, and one not found in either of the other case-studies.

I have noted my expectation that the actors would emphasise that they were empowered by their involvement in these plays. My assumption was a product of Stafford-Clark's own rhetoric surrounding the way in which he deploys actors in the research periods of his productions. However, this was not the case. In fact, the actors were not concerned with this question in any of my case-studies, but concerned with analysing the nature of their processes.

In my research for *Playing for Real*, which ran parallel to my work on this thesis, Mary Luckhurst and I found that, almost without exception, actors were very concerned with physical resemblance. To my surprise, this was not always the case in my interviews for this thesis. Very few actors spoke about resemblance, and when they did it was clear that this was of secondary importance to their work on their subject's testimony. It appears that resemblance was often a necessary feature of the production rather than an element which aided the actors' work. However, physical appearance was clearly central for Diane Fletcher. She stated that 'I couldn't have done it without the wig'. We must make a key distinction: Fletcher, like the vast majority of actors interviewed in *Playing for Real* (but unlike most of the actors in this thesis), played a celebrated person. This appears to alter the actors' attitude and affect their processes dramatically. Many actors in these plays were not playing well-known individuals, thus audience expectation was less of a problem for most of the actors in this thesis. For Fletcher, her subject's fame made it a crucial concern.

This thesis has also uncovered a mine of various terms, all understood differently by different actors. Mimicry, imitation and impersonation have all been used, as they are in *Playing for Real*, but most actors use them negatively and are persuaded that they are 'lower forms' of acting. These prejudices are widespread and perplexing. But other prejudices also exist in the rehearsal room, and further

work on interviewing actors, or encouraging other forms of descriptive accounts from actors, must come in to the public realm for the next steps to be made.²

² This work is already starting to happen in America. Ellen Margolis's and Lissa Tyler Renaud's edited volume, *The Politics of American Actor Training* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009) is an incendiary interrogation of actor training, exploding the myths surrounding certain drama schools and exploring the politics of training. The book provides, for the first time, a systematic analysis of the range of actor training outside of the traditional, long-established schools. One essay is particularly relevant. Derek S. Mud's "They accused me of bein' a homosexual": Playing Kerry Cook in *The Exonerated*' is a shocking account of the abuse of power balances on two postgraduate MFA programs, and interrogates the politics of actor training and the employment of certain techniques he was taught on the courses. Similar work in Britain is much needed.