

## **Chapter One: *Talking to Terrorists***

### **Contents**

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Stafford-Clark's and Soans's working methods</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>The Politics of the Interview and Feed-back Processes</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Acting in Stafford-Clark's fact based plays:</b>	
<b>Rehearsal and Performance in Theory and Practice</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>2. Acting Processes in <i>Talking to Terrorists</i></b>	<b>55</b>
<b>Pre-hotseating Approaches</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Hotseating</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>Post-hotseating Processes</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>104</b>

## Chapter One: *Talking to Terrorists*

### Introduction

*Talking to Terrorists*, written by Robin Soans and directed by Max Stafford-Clark, was produced by Stafford-Clark's company, Out of Joint, in 2005. The play was compiled by Soans from a series of interviews conducted by the writer, director and actors. The unusual involvement of the actors in the creation of the material as well as its performance led to specific challenges for the cast. In my focus on the actors' experiences of Stafford-Clark's working methods, particularly the foregrounding of actor-subject meetings and the way in which information was relayed to the writer and director, I will examine the contested function of these techniques.<sup>1</sup> A major problem is that the little testimony that exists has generally been formulated by directors, who have made certain claims about how these techniques function for actors. These claims are subjected to scrutiny in this chapter. The majority of this chapter is based on new interview material with actors providing, for the first time, a detailed actor-oriented view of these working processes.

*Talking to Terrorists* opened at the Theatre Royal, Bury St Edmunds on 21 April 2005, and toured nationally for nine weeks, before playing at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs for five weeks.<sup>2</sup> The play is a compilation of interwoven

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<sup>1</sup> By 'actor-subject meetings' I mean the actors' meetings with the actual people they were playing.

<sup>2</sup> The tour played at Bury St. Edmunds, Oxford, Malvern, Leeds, Manchester, Ipswich, Coventry, Salisbury and Liverpool. It opened at the Royal Court on 30 June 2005. The play was subsequently aired on BBC Radio 3 on 23 October 2005.

interviews from a wide range of people associated with so-called terrorist acts. Individuals depicted include those directly responsible for attacks; victims of terrorism; experts in mediation and peace-work, such as politicians and diplomats; and a psychologist who explores possible reasons for these acts. The material was generated from interviews which took place in two research phases and during rehearsals.<sup>3</sup>

### **Max Stafford-Clark's documentary productions**

Max Stafford-Clark is, arguably, Europe's most respected director of new plays. During his tenures as artistic director of the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh (1966-70), Joint Stock Theatre Company (1974-79), the Royal Court Theatre (1979-93) and more recently with his own company, Out of Joint (since 1993), he has commissioned and premiered new writers, including generations of political playwrights such as David Hare, Caryl Churchill and Howard Brenton, and more recently Mark Ravenhill, Stella Feehily and J T Rogers.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Henceforward the non-actor members of the company will be referred to as the 'creative team'. I use the term to refer to those involved in the research and rehearsal of the play. The term thus includes the director (Max Stafford-Clark), assistant director (Naomi Jones), writer (Robin Soans), designer (Jonathan Fensom) and stage manager (Terence Eldridge). In interview, Robin Soans has referred to himself as a writer rather than editor: See Will Hammond and Dan Steward, eds. *Verbatim: Verbatim* (London: Oberon, 2009), pp.17-44. Following his lead, the same terms will be employed here, though I recognise that in a form of theatre based on the spoken words of real people, this is problematic.

<sup>4</sup> Scholarship into Stafford-Clark's career is plentiful. See, for first-hand testimony in particular, Rob Richie, ed. *The Joint Stock Book* (London: Methuen, 1987); Philip Roberts and Max Stafford-Clark, *Taking Stock: The Theatre of Max Stafford-Clark* (London: Nick Hern, 2007); Ruth Little and Emily McLaughlin, *The Royal Court Theatre Inside Out* (London: Oberon, 2007). For more recent interviews with Stafford-Clark, see Duncan Wu, *Making Plays: Interviews with Contemporary British Dramatists and Directors* (USA: St. Martin's Press, 2000), pp.53-73; Mireia Aragay, Hildegard Klein, Enric Monforte and Pilar Zozaya, eds., *British Theatre of the 1990s: Interviews with Directors, Playwrights, Critics and Academics* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp.27-40,

Most relevant to this study is Stafford-Clark's long-standing advocacy of political theatre, and of documentary and verbatim forms in particular. He chose a documentary play as the inaugural production of Joint Stock, staging an adaptation of Heathcote Williams' novel *The Speakers* (1974). The book explored the lives of those who address the public at Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park.<sup>5</sup> It relied heavily on verbatim material, as co-director William Gaskill remembers, 'Max and I made the script ourselves using dialogue from the book, which was largely actual conversations and speeches recorded by Heathcote at the time he knew the speakers in Hyde Park.'<sup>6</sup> This was followed in 1976 by *Yesterday's News*, for which the cast interviewed those involved with what became known as the 'Colonel Callan affair'.

Stafford-Clark stated:

I think it was David Rintoul, one of the actors, who had read about this incident, in which Colonel Callan [...] had shot some of his own troops in Angola, they were mercenaries which had been recruited...and we followed the story.<sup>7</sup>

The play was thus performed almost contemporaneously with the story it staged.

Alongside these documentary productions have been plays that whilst not wholly

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and Hammond and Steward, *Verbatim: Verbatim*, pp.46-75. For a historical contextualisation of Joint Stock, see Ronald Hayman, *British Theatre since 1955: A Reassessment* (Oxford: OUP, 1979); and Sara Freeman, 'Writing the History of an Alternative-Theatre Company: Mythology and the Last Years of Joint Stock' *Theatre Survey*, Vol.47 (2006), pp.51-72. For more on Stafford-Clark at the Royal Court Theatre, see *Royal Court Special*, ed. Aleks Sierz. December 2005, London. <[www.theatrevoice.com/listen\\_now/player/?audioID=371](http://www.theatrevoice.com/listen_now/player/?audioID=371)>, accessed 12 March 2008; and Gresdna A Doty and Billy J Harbin, eds., *Inside the Royal Court Theatre, 1956-1981: Artists Talk* (USA: Louisiana University Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Speakers' Corner is an area of Hyde Park designed for public speaking on any matter.

<sup>6</sup> William Gaskill, *A Sense of Direction* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p.135.

<sup>7</sup> *Interview: Max Stafford-Clark*, ed. David Benedict. January 2004, London.

<[www.theatrevoice.com/listen\\_now/player/?audioID=93](http://www.theatrevoice.com/listen_now/player/?audioID=93)> accessed 5 March 2008.

fact-based, have involved substantial research periods.<sup>8</sup> Stafford-Clark's documentary productions continued during his artistic directorship at the Royal Court Theatre. In 1983, he directed Louise Page's play, *Falkland Sound/Voces de Malvinas*, the first half of which was a dramatisation of the letters of David Tinker RN, a young seaman who wrote regularly to his father describing his concerns about the Falklands War (1982), a conflict which eventually took his life. The second half of the play was drawn from verbatim interviews the cast had conducted with those involved in the conflict. The political topicality of the play was enhanced by the fact that it was performed only a year after Tinker's death, at a time when the Falklands War was still an issue of political controversy.

With *Out of Joint*, Stafford-Clark's verbatim and documentary plays have grown in number. In 2000, he directed *A State Affair*, his first collaboration with Robin Soans. The production was a contemporary response to Andrea Dunbar's play, *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (1982), and was based on the cast's and writer's interviews on the Bradford and Leeds estates in which Dunbar grew up, which were still areas of severe deprivation.<sup>9</sup> In 2003, he directed the premiere of David Hare's play, *The Permanent Way*, which investigated the privatisation of the railways and the

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<sup>8</sup> These include David Hare's *Fanshen* (1974), which was based on the Chinese Revolution, Howard Brenton's *Epsom Downs* (1977), based at the racecourse on Derby Day, Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* (1979), which took the actors' own sexual orientations and experiences as the starting point, and *Our Country's Good* (1998), Timberlake Wertenbaker's play about the first group of convicts deported to Australia and their production of *The Recruiting Officer* there. For an actor's view on the research for the play, see Mark Lambert, 'The Max Factor: Recent Productions at the Royal Court', *Theatre Ireland*, No. 17 (Dec 1988 – Mar 1989), pp.36-7. Also see Stafford-Clark's own diaries of the rehearsal processes in *Letters to George* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> Stafford-Clark also directed the premiere of Dunbar's play, which was revived in a double-bill with *A State Affair*. See Elaine Aston and Janelle Reinelt, 'Building Bridges: Life on Dunbar's Arbor, Past and Present' *Theatre Research International*, Vol. 26:3, (Oct 2001), pp.285-93; and John Ginman, 'Out of Joint: Max Stafford-Clark and the Temper of Our Time', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Vol. 13:3, (Aug 2003), pp.23-6.

personal tragedies of those involved in rail disasters since. His most recent documentary play, *Mixed Up North* (2008), is, after *Talking to Terrorists*, his third collaboration with Robin Soans, and is based loosely on the cast's and creative team's interviews with staff and young people in a youth drama group in Burnley, formed following the race riots in 2001.

### **A Political Partnership: Max Stafford-Clark and Scilla Elworthy**

Interestingly, Scilla Elworthy has been all but written out of the narrative surrounding *Talking to Terrorists*, and yet she was utterly instrumental in the play's genesis.<sup>10</sup> Elworthy is a three-time Nobel Peace Prize nominee who is internationally renowned for her work in promoting and facilitating dialogue between nations in conflict. She is the founder of the Oxford Research Group think-tank (ORG), which negotiates between the policy makers, politicians and the military in areas of conflict, aiming 'to promote a more sustainable approach to security for the UK and the world'.<sup>11</sup> In 2003, Elworthy founded Peace Direct, which supports peace work in conflict areas.<sup>12</sup> She has constantly returned to theatre as a medium to explore the issues surrounding her political work: 'I am passionate about political theatre... I am

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<sup>10</sup> I interviewed all the cast members, but only one, Chipu Chung, mentioned Elworthy. Similarly, in academic discourse surrounding the play, her name is curiously absent.

<sup>11</sup> *Oxford Research Group Website*, <[http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/about\\_us/](http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/about_us/)> accessed 12 June 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Peace Direct's website states 'In every conflict, there are local people working for peace. Peace Direct funds their work, promotes it and learns from it'. <<http://www.peacedirect.org/peace-direct/our-values.html>> accessed 12 June 2008. Elworthy has also written prolifically. Recent Publications include: Scilla Elworthy, Francesca Cerletti and Anita Roddick, eds., *Unarmed Heroes: The Courage to Go Beyond Violence*. (London: Clairview Books, 2004); Scilla Elworthy, *Hearts and Minds: Human Security Approaches to Political Violence* (London: Demos, 2005); Scilla Elworthy and Gabrielle Rifkind, eds., *Making Terrorism History*. (London: Rider, 2006).

fully convinced by its power to explore ethical and moral issues.’<sup>13</sup> For example, whilst chairing KUPUGANI, a nutrition education organisation in South Africa, she helped found the Market Theatre in Johannesburg in 1976, which, in its multi-ethnic casts and audiences, famously challenged the Apartheid regime, and became known globally as the ‘Theatre of Struggle’.<sup>14</sup> During the London transfer of Edgar’s play *The Prisoner’s Dilemma* (RSC: Stratford and London, 2001) at the Barbican, Elworthy organised a two-day seminar entitled ‘Theatre of War, Theatre of Peace’ (31 Jan – 1 Feb 2002).<sup>15</sup> In a real-life precursor to *Talking to Terrorists*, the event brought onto the same stage Pat Magee, the Brighton Bomber, and Jo Berry, whose father was killed by Magee’s bomb. Chaired by Elworthy, they entered into discussion in front of a live audience.<sup>16</sup> Significantly, Elworthy labelled these events, in which the individuals themselves appeared on stage, as ‘Verbatim Plus’.<sup>17</sup>

Elworthy’s involvement in *Talking to Terrorists* came about through a meeting with Stafford-Clark:

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Scilla Elworthy, 22 December 2008. All quotations from Elworthy hereafter, unless stated otherwise, are from this interview.

<sup>14</sup> *Market Theatre Website*, <<http://www.markettheatre.co.za/home.html>> accessed 12 June 2008. For a first-hand account of the first ten years of the Market Theatre, see Anne Fuchs, *Playing the Market: The Market Theatre Johannesburg, 1976-86* (Chur: Switzerland, New York: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1990). For essays on the political theatre of South Africa, see Marcia Blumberg and Dennis Walder, eds., *South African Theatre as/and Intervention* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> David Edgar’s *The Prisoner’s Dilemma* (London: Nick Hern, 2001) was the last of a trilogy of plays about the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall, focusing on the attempts to solve the conflicts on Europe’s Eastern border.

<sup>16</sup> This event is alluded to in *Talking to Terrorists*. The ex-member of the IRA says ‘Sixteen years later I met Jo Berry. Her father had been killed. We sat down and talked. It was an intense experience.’ p.85.

<sup>17</sup> Similarly, in September 2002, Elworthy, with ORG, launched a series of works at the Royal Opera House’s Linbury Studio around the theme of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As part of the series, individuals associated with terrorism, both perpetrators and victims, took to the stage.

Max read about my work and my involvement in *The Prisoner's Dilemma* in the paper and got in touch... Max asked me what I was doing, and I said 'well, in a nutshell, I'm talking to terrorists'. He said that that sounded like a title of a play.

After seeing a performance of *The Permanent Way* in Bath in December 2003, discussions about a play based on Elworthy's work began in earnest:

After a long discussion I told him the about the various protagonists whom he could talk to, from cabinet ministers to the actual people on the ground who are affected by terrorism as well as the people who could be classified as terrorists.

The whole project was driven by Elworthy's access to key contacts and the trusting relationship she had built with these individuals through her work. Her confidence that Stafford-Clark would respect their testimony was also paramount: she stated that 'If I hadn't trusted him, I would never have opened up my address book to him.' Based on this mutual understanding, Elworthy and Stafford-Clark arranged a series of interviews which provided the material for the play. As Elworthy said: 'Not all my contacts were presented on stage – but they were all people I had worked with.'<sup>18</sup>

The multifarious nature of Elworthy's work was evident in the final production of *Talking to Terrorists* which included twenty-nine interviewees involved with

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<sup>18</sup> Elworthy and Stafford-Clark organised a similar event to that which complemented *The Prisoner's Dilemma*, during the run of *Talking to Terrorists*. On 27 July 2005, they ran an afternoon seminar at the Royal Court Theatre entitled 'Engaging with Terror: Understanding the Politically Violent', which featured 'personal testimonies from those who have chosen the way of violence, and discussion of the path back through political engagement.' The discussion was chaired by Elworthy and included Terry Waite, who is one of the interviewees portrayed in the play. (Information from Peace Direct and Conciliation Resources websites: <[www.peacedirect.org/peace-direct/pastevents/seminar270805.html](http://www.peacedirect.org/peace-direct/pastevents/seminar270805.html)> accessed 19 Feb 2009 and <[www.c-r.org/pur-work/accord/engaging-groups/understanding-politically-violent.php](http://www.c-r.org/pur-work/accord/engaging-groups/understanding-politically-violent.php)> accessed 19 Feb 2009.)



terrorism from a diverse range of conflicts. The first category of those who appear are the ‘terrorists’ of the play’s title, although understandably they are all ex-terrorists, or rather, individuals who were once associated with groups which used terror as a political tool.<sup>19</sup> The play features five such interviews, including two connected with Northern Ireland: ex-members of both the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). Two of the interviews focus on conflicts in the Middle East, with an ex-member of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and an ex-head of the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, Bethlehem (AAB) interviewed, and one interview from Africa: an ex-member of the National Resistance Army, Uganda (NRA). All interviewees remain anonymous in the play-text, either by use of the abbreviations above, or by changing their names. To preserve their anonymity, I will refer to them by these abbreviations.

The second category of individuals comprises those who have been direct victims of terrorism. Again, the identities of the individuals in the printed text have been concealed. However, unlike those interviewed about their membership of terrorist groups, some of these individuals are recognisable and their identity is already in the public domain. The victims of terrorist acts are: an ‘Archbishop’s Envoy’: the celebrated humanitarian Terry Waite, who was held hostage in Lebanon for over four years (1987-91) whilst working for the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert

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<sup>19</sup> Christopher Innes views this as a positive feature: ‘Rather than diminishing the topicality of the material, their retirement makes it possible for the one-time terrorists to put their actions in some kind of perspective.’ See ‘Towards a Post-millennial Mainstream? Documents of the Times’ in *Modern Drama* Vol. 50:3 (Fall 2007), p.438. Given the political and legal difficulty of representing current terrorists, which the United Kingdom’s terror laws would not allow, they had little choice but to use ex-terrorists who have come to be involved in peace work.

Runcie; an 'ex-Secretary of State' and his wife: Norman and Margaret Tebbit, who were injured in the Brighton Bomb which exploded in their hotel during the 1984 Conservative Party Conference; and 'Caroline', a landowner and Conservative Party activist who, with the Tebbits, was caught in the Brighton hotel bombing.

The third category is neither terrorists nor direct victims, but those individuals who are concerned with these struggles, such as mediators, aid workers, foreign diplomats, army personnel and politicians. This category includes ex-ambassador Craig Murray, formally Ambassador to Uzbekistan, and his partner Nadira Alieva, called 'Nodira' in the play; an ex-Secretary of State: Mo Mowlam, who was Secretary of State for Northern Ireland from 1997 to 1999; 'Phoebe', a relief worker for Save the Children; a British Army Colonel; and 'Rima', a freelance journalist.

### **Stafford-Clark's and Soans's working methods**

The processes of research and rehearsal in *Talking to Terrorists* follow a path that Max Stafford-Clark has developed throughout his career. The function of these working methods is, however, a subject of contestation, with contrasting accounts from actors and the director.

A key feature of Stafford-Clark's work has been creating plays by means of research phases involving the actors and the writer. In a recent interview he stated, 'I've always used research...Extensive research was always part of the Joint Stock

repertoire'.<sup>20</sup> Michael Billington has noted that this emphasis strongly associated their work with fact-based plays. Writing specifically about Joint Stock, he states that the group 'stimulated companies to seek their source material in fact: something that was to have enormously beneficial results for British theatre over the next quarter of a century.'<sup>21</sup> Actors, the writer and the director together research a theme and collate material for the writer to use as the basis of the play. This is followed by a writing period, during which the play is drafted, then the play is cast and rehearsed. John Ginman explains:

Stafford-Clark identifies two types of new plays produced by Out of Joint: the workshop plays, where actors have contributed to the research and development of the project from a relatively unformed idea that may be initiated by Stafford-Clark himself; and those where the company rehearses and stages a writer's script from a developed or complete draft.<sup>22</sup>

These so-called 'workshop plays' are by no means new to Stafford-Clark in his projects with Out of Joint, but as we have seen, date back to his work with Joint Stock in the 1970s.

### **Contested ground: the received narrative of Stafford-Clark's working methods**

In his own publications, in the recent wave of interviews, and as a result of his distinguished status in the theatre community, published accounts of Stafford-

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<sup>20</sup> Hammond and Steward, *Verbatim: Verbatim*, p.50.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Billington, *State of the Nation*, p.268.

<sup>22</sup> John Ginman, 'Out of Joint: Max Stafford-Clark and the Temper of Our Time', *CTR*, Vol. 13: 3 (Aug 2003), p.18.

Clark's practice have almost exclusively been described from his point of view.<sup>23</sup>

Whilst illuminating, this director-centric material has meant that actors have traditionally been deprivileged in the creative narrative, their testimony sporadic and often anecdotal. This is a major problem which this case-study seeks to redress.

Stafford-Clark has argued that roles of actor/writer/director are broken down during the research phases for his productions, with everyone contributing. He states:

...all of you act as a research team during the workshop process. Your role becomes more of a conventional director during the rehearsal process. The roles are much looser in the workshop...and become much tighter in the rehearsal period.<sup>24</sup>

Stafford-Clark has maintained that involving the cast in the play's research periods nourishes the actor in a way that is impossible in a three or four week rehearsal period:

The role of the actor is often a passive one: you are summoned to do a job, you get it or you don't get it...So that to say, 'Look, this is a level playing-field, we're all in this together, and we don't quite know where it's going, and we'd like you to go off and talk to these stockbrokers', is perhaps unexpected and stimulating.<sup>25</sup>

It should be remembered that it was Stafford-Clark who hired and rejected actors, and that the actors did not choose the director, writer or area to research. Stafford-

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<sup>23</sup> See the list of publications in Footnote 4.

<sup>24</sup> Wu, *Making Plays*, p.58.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.60. Sandy Craig echoes this point stating, 'actors will only gain a true measure of democratic control over their own work within...permanent acting companies. For the moment the set-up of Joint Stock and many other groups is only a compromise.' See Sandy Craig, ed. *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain* (Derby: Amber Lane Press, 1980), p.115.

Clark's suggestion that actors are often 'passive' is provocative – many actors would entirely disagree – and suggests that he might see actors as instruments of his own will. Yet he is adamant that the experience is empowering for an actor:

...an actor's job is first of all to observe, and by saying, 'Your observation is very important and could indeed be crucial in the formation of the play', you give the actor an importance and a role that they don't normally have.<sup>26</sup>

This is a debatable point and presumes that actors, as a norm, do not make creative interventions. Although he may be rhetorically characterising actors' work to emphasise the inclusive nature of his own processes, these comments seriously under-acknowledge the actors' role. Stafford-Clark's narrative is that actors are given a sense of ownership of the material and are hierarchically elevated by his particular working processes.

In fact, the actors' testimony tells a rather different story. Much of the available material from actors in *Joint Stock*, for example, is concerned with describing rich and varied research themes.<sup>27</sup> Testimony about how the actors felt that their approaches had been affected by these working processes is limited, and there is little existing evidence that they felt empowered by Stafford-Clark's research practices. Some performers noted that a positive feature of the *Joint Stock* process was the strength of the ensemble it created. Antony Sher, for instance, experienced

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<sup>26</sup> Wu, *Making Plays*, p.60.

<sup>27</sup> Accounts by actors include research as various as the Chinese Revolution (Pauline Melville, for David Hare's *Fanshen*, 1975), see Richie, *Joint Stock Book*, pp.116-18; the lives of farm labourers in Cambridgeshire (Jennie Stoller, for Caryl Churchill's *Fen*, 1983), *Joint Stock Book*, pp.150-2; and journalism (Ralph Brown, for Stephen Wakelam's *Deadlines*, 1985), *Joint Stock Book*, pp.154-8.

‘a fabric of trust, honesty and affection being woven between us’ in the research phase for Churchill’s *Cloud Nine* (1979).<sup>28</sup> However, for Sher, the strength of the ensemble created in the research period was undermined by the structure of the working processes:

The rot began to set in with the enforced two-month break while the play was being written. This was, in my opinion, the most disastrous part of the Joint Stock structure...with the actors left suspended, unpaid but half committed to the project. The idealism of the workshop quickly corrupted into a paranoia about the actual written play...with the group chemistry mysteriously evaporating.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, Simon Callow has argued that the writing period, in which the actors ‘languished unemployed’ is the ‘snag of the Joint Stock method’.<sup>30</sup> We might compare this with Stafford-Clark’s previous comment that ‘we’re all in this together’. For many actors, this was not the case, as they were not employed for the final production.<sup>31</sup> Rather, these comments suggest that in the research phases the actors function as assistants, deployed by the writer and director, and that, in the early stages, the writing of the script is privileged above the actors.

Stafford-Clark’s comments are further thrown into question when we compare them to Callow’s other experiences. Writing about his involvement with Joint Stock in the 1970s, Callow states that ‘I had felt on a leash as an actor’, and that he experienced

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<sup>28</sup> Richie, *Joint Stock Book*, p.140. However, it should also be noted that *The Joint Stock Book* is peppered with references to actors leaving productions, indicating that the experience did not suit everyone, for example, see p.118.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.140.

<sup>30</sup> Simon Callow, *Being an Actor* (London: Penguin, 1984), p.66.

<sup>31</sup> For example, in *The Permanent Way*, of the original nine-actor team that took part in the research period, only four appeared in the final production. See David Hare, *The Permanent Way* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003).

Joint Stock as ‘a directocracy’; he notes ‘Joint Stock stood for the taste of its directors’.<sup>32</sup> Far from empowering him, Callow evidently experienced Joint Stock as authoritarian and paternalistic.

In addition to his comments about the ‘stimulating’ effect the research periods have on actors, Stafford-Clark has been clear that their foremost aim has been to create material for the writer. In an interview with Duncan Wu, he stated, ‘in the end, the whole purpose of the workshop is to stimulate the writer’.<sup>33</sup> He notes that:

...respect for the writer, handing the material back to the writer, and the kind of acceptance that the writer is the senior collaborator, is very much part of Joint Stock’s success – and Out of Joint’s tradition, too.<sup>34</sup>

In the same interview he adds ‘I am a Royal Court Director, so you are trained to be in the service of the writer’.<sup>35</sup> This is, of course, familiar (Royal Court) director’s rhetoric from the 1950s. Here, again, we are faced with contestation, with a variety of comments from writers about the effect the research periods had on their work. For example, Caryl Churchill has said ‘It is hard for me to explain exactly the relationship between the workshop and the text’,<sup>36</sup> whilst David Hare, writing in the introduction to *Fanshen*, similarly noted, ‘the work we had done with the actors had little influence on me in shaping the play, but I was crucially affected by [its]

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<sup>32</sup> Callow, *Being an Actor*, p.77.

<sup>33</sup> Wu, *Making Plays*, p.60.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p.58.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.69. This is despite the fact that at the time of the interview (1999) he was working with Out of Joint.

<sup>36</sup> Caryl Churchill, *Plays One* (London: Methuen, 1996), p.184.

spirit'.<sup>37</sup> In this light, the actors' role in the research process is apparently doubly deprived.

### **The Politics of the Interview and Feed-back Processes**

In critical literature on Stafford-Clark's working methods for *Talking to Terrorists*, there is a preponderance of factually inaccurate and misleading comments.

Particularly curious is the prevalence of the myth that Soans's and Stafford-Clark's work is based solely on exact quotation of their sources. Indicative of the problem is Jenny Hughes's erroneous statement that '*Talking to Terrorists* is based entirely on the testimony of those interviewed, with no dialogue created by the playwright', which, as we shall see, is not the case.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Christopher Innes's comment that 'every word of the script came from recorded interviews conducted by the cast over the previous years', is even further from the truth.<sup>39</sup> Had the interviews been recorded, as these commentators claim, the actors' processes would, no doubt, have been somewhat different. This chapter seeks to clarify the actors' working processes on *Talking to Terrorists* once and for all.

#### **Research Phase One, April 2004**

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<sup>37</sup> David Hare, *The Asian Plays: Fanshen, Saigon and A Map of the World* (Boston: Faber, 1986), p.viii.

<sup>38</sup> Jenny Hughes, 'Theatre, Performance and the 'War on Terror': Ethical and Political Questions arising from British Theatrical Responses to War and Terrorism', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Vol. 17:2 (2007), p.150.

<sup>39</sup> Christopher Innes, 'Towards a Post-millennial Mainstream? Documents of the Times' in *Modern Drama* Vol. 50:3 (2007), p.437.



The first research phase ran for two weeks, from 19 to 30 April 2004.<sup>40</sup> Stafford-Clark and Elworthy were joined by the original commissioned writer of *Talking to Terrorists*, April de Angelis, and a team of twelve actors.<sup>41</sup> Together they conducted research for the play. Seven of the actors were recruited from the cast and creative team of Stafford-Clark's production of Hare's *The Permanent Way*, which by April was midway through its run at the National Theatre.<sup>42</sup> Only three of the initial research team, Chris Ryman, Lloyd Hutchinson and Chipo Chung, appeared in the final production of *Talking to Terrorists*.

In this two-week period the first round of interviews took place, which included ex-ambassador Craig Murray and the ex-member of the IRA talking to the group at the Out of Joint rehearsal room. Also as part of the first research phase, Chris Ryman, Stafford-Clark and de Angelis flew out to Ireland to interview the ex-Head of the AAB in Dublin and conduct further interviews with the ex-IRA member. Scilla Elworthy and Chris Ryman travelled to Luton to visit a mosque and talk to the Imam, whilst Chipo Chung and Ian Redford interviewed the British Army Colonel at his Wiltshire base.<sup>43</sup> However, despite the number of interviews completed, the

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<sup>40</sup> Dates supplied in email correspondence with Graham Cowley, the producer of *Talking to Terrorists*, 21 Jan 2009.

<sup>41</sup> April de Angelis had been commissioned twice before by Stafford-Clark, for *The Positive Hour* (1998) and *A Laughing Matter* (2002).

<sup>42</sup> The tour of *The Permanent Way* opened at York Theatre Royal on 13 November 2003. It ran at the National Theatre from 8 January – 1 May 2004. The researchers involved with the first research phase of *Talking to Terrorists* were: from *The Permanent Way*, actors Lloyd Hutchinson, Kika Markham, Bella Merlin and Ian Redford, assistant director Naomi Jones, and sound designer Philip Arditti. They were joined by Nathalie Armin, Chipo Chung, Sidney Cole, Matthew Dunster, Nabil Elouahabi and Chris Ryman.

<sup>43</sup> The arrangement of interviews is recorded in Stafford-Clark's diaries, which include 'Th[urs] 22 A[pril] 'Luton Scylla [sic], Chris, Sid and Nabil' (p.28.) and 'M[on] 26 A[pril] Chipo and Ian meet Colonel' (p.40), Max Stafford-Clark's diary, March 2004 – November 2005. Uncatalogued, British Library. At the time of completing this thesis, Stafford-Clark's diary had just become available to

writing did not progress. De Angelis left the project towards the end of 2004, and was replaced by Robin Soans.<sup>44</sup> Soans is an actor and playwright who has become known for his documentary plays. In addition to *A State Affair, Talking to Terrorists* and *Mixed Up North* for Out of Joint, he has also written *Across the Divide* (1997), *The Arab-Israeli Cookbook* (2004) and *Life After Scandal* (2007).<sup>45</sup> He took over from April de Angelis on *Talking to Terrorists* at the beginning of the second research period in November 2004.

### **Research Phase Two: November - December 2004**

The second research phase began on 22 November 2004, and interviews continued through December. It was the main research phase for the production, and involved Soans and the actors (the same team as for the first research phase) re-interviewing the individuals to whom de Angelis had already spoken, and talking to new individuals.<sup>46</sup>

In the first research phase, interviewees had often talked to the group at the rehearsal rooms. By contrast, in the second phase, many of the team travelled to meet their

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view via special arrangement with the British Library. Although some facts are recorded in this chapter, more work with the diary is necessary.

<sup>44</sup> Anxieties over the progress of the play become evident in November 2004. On 16 November 2004, Stafford-Clark asks in his diary 'Does April have time for T2T?' Stafford-Clark diary, p.166.

<sup>45</sup> See *Rita, Sue and Bob Too & A State Affair* (London: Methuen, 2000); *Mixed Up North* (London: Oberon, 2009); *The Arab/Israeli Cookbook* (London: Aurora Metro Publications, 2004) and *Life After Scandal* (London: Oberon, 2007). For a full account of Soans's work, see the author's own essay in Hammond and Steward, *Verbatim: Verbatim*, pp.17-44. He has also acted in six plays directed by Stafford-Clark, including Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Three Birds Alighting on a Field* (1982), and Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* (1996).

<sup>46</sup> The fact that some individuals were interviewed on several occasions (for example, the ex-member of the IRA was interviewed three times) suggests that interviewees had a chance to rehearse their narratives which, of course, complicates matters considerably.

subjects. For example, Soans and Stafford-Clark visited Mo and John Mowlam, and Norman and Margaret Tebbit in their own homes. Soans also visited Terry Waite and ‘Caroline’ at their respective homes during this period. Soans and Lloyd Hutchinson together re-visited the ex-member of the IRA in a Belfast hotel and with Chris Ryman talked (as Ryman had previously done with April de Angelis) to the ex-Head of the AAB in Dublin. Soans and Stafford-Clark also flew out to Denmark to interview the ex-member of the Ugandan National Resistance Army. Interviewees who talked to the cast in the Out of Joint rehearsal rooms in Finsbury Park included ‘Phoebe’ from Save the Children and ex-ambassador Craig Murray and his partner Nadira.

It is important to note that although the actors were present at some of the meetings, this does not mean that they were solely responsible for creating the material. Soans related that between the second research phase and the completion of the script, he had met every single individual apart from the British Army Colonel: ‘I didn’t interview [the Colonel]. That was on the first Monday and I couldn’t go...David Hare stood in for me that day, and wrote comprehensive notes on him.’<sup>47</sup> This meant that although actors were present at the interviews, and often portrayed the individuals they met, Soans was not reliant on the actors for material. Thus, although the actors were involved with the process, Soans still functioned as a writer, assisted by the actors.

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with Robin Soans, 15 June 2008. All quotations from Soans, unless stated otherwise, are from this interview.

Similarly, the actors weren't empowered to act as independent researchers as the questions they asked were planned and pre-determined by Stafford-Clark and Soans. Prior to their meeting, the actors were given precise instruction; as Lloyd Hutchinson stated, 'everybody's briefed before we go away'.<sup>48</sup> Chipo Chung was emphatic that she was 'asking very particular questions', and that the actors did not work to their own open brief.<sup>49</sup>

Each interview was conducted by different combinations of people (with the only constant being Soans's presence). Some interviews took place in the rehearsal rooms before all the cast and creative team, whilst others were conducted in the intimate surroundings of the individual's own home with only one or two interviewers. Some were at the individual's work place, whilst others were held in public spaces, such as Soans's meeting with the ex-IRA member, which he conducted in the foyer of the Europa Hotel, Belfast.

Very few of the interviews were recorded, which makes Stafford-Clark's methods unusual in verbatim theatre. Stafford-Clark stated, 'The actors did not tend to record but rather took notes', whilst Soans has said:

I only use a notepad and pencil. If someone comes to us, I think it is acceptable for there to be a microphone on the table, but if I go to talk to someone like Mo Mowlam in her house, I'm not going

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<sup>48</sup> Interview with Lloyd Hutchinson, 4 March 2008. All quotations from Hutchinson, unless stated otherwise, are from this interview.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Chipo Chung, 7 March 2008. All quotations from Chung, unless stated otherwise, are from this interview.

to start messing around with finding a plug...and also, it takes people ages to relax if you're pointing a microphone at them.<sup>50</sup>

Of course this approach also allowed him a certain creative freedom. If verbatim theatre is defined as 'a theatre whose practitioners, if called to account, could provide interviewed sources for its dialogue', as Mary Luckhurst argues, this raises interesting questions.<sup>51</sup> Whilst interviewees could be identified, there was no official interview transcript.<sup>52</sup> Evidently, there is an ethical problem with the issue of transparency here, but this suited Stafford-Clark and Soans, permitting them a greater degree of imaginative freedom.

With all the material (his own notes, actors' notes, recordings and transcripts) from both research phases at his disposal, Soans constructed the play over a ten-week writing period in early 2005, before rehearsals began on 14 March. It was during this period that the play was cast. Only Ryman, Hutchinson and Chung from the research phases appeared in the final production. In an echo of Antony Sher's experience, Lloyd Hutchinson noted:

You didn't know whether you'd see it through to the production, because you might have got another job between. I

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<sup>50</sup> Elsewhere, Soans has stated, 'When collecting material, I favour a notebook and pencil because they seem unthreatening; electronic gadgetry in the room doesn't tend to put people at ease'. Hammond and Steward, *Verbatim: Verbatim*, p.34.

<sup>51</sup> Mary Luckhurst, 'Verbatim Theatre, Media Relations, and Ethics' in Nadine Holdsworth and Mary Luckhurst, eds. *The Concise Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Drama* (London: Blackwells, 2008), p.201.

<sup>52</sup> There were rare exceptions to this, however. Catherine Russell, for example, said that she recorded and transcribed her interview with 'Rima' ready for the hotseating process. However, Soans's favoured approach for the production was to take detailed notes. Christopher Innes and Jenny Hughes, as suggested on p.16, perpetuate mythologies by presuming that all interviews were recorded.

mean Max kind of knows that those are the actors that he'd like to be involved in the final project, but sometimes, depending on the nature of the way the writer has gone with the work, there might not be parts for everyone.

By contrast, the actors cast after the two research phases were brought in to play particular roles. Citing the example of the casting for the British Army Colonel, Stafford-Clark explained:

At a later stage we thought that the Colonel was going to be part of it, we don't have anyone to play him, and then we cast Alexander Hanson. So you find some of the actors first, then find the characters they are going to play, then fill in the gaps.<sup>53</sup>

Stafford-Clark argued that close physical resemblance did not inform his casting choices: 'No, no, [it was] more general than that. I wanted to cover all the bases.' Given that the actors played multiple roles, Stafford-Clark cast actors of roughly the right age, gender and ethnicity to play the interviewees, rather than foregrounding physical aptness. The actors cast after the two research phases were Jonathan Cullen, Christopher Ettridge, Alexander Hanson, Catherine Russell and June Watson, constituting a cast of eight. Between them, they played all twenty-nine characters, each playing at least three roles.

It is no coincidence that, with the exception of Alexander Hanson, all the actors in the final cast had worked with Stafford-Clark in the past.<sup>54</sup> This perhaps suggests

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<sup>53</sup> Interview with Max Stafford-Clark, 26 February 2008. All quotations from Stafford-Clark, unless stated otherwise, are from this interview.

<sup>54</sup> The cast's recent work with Stafford-Clark includes: Chipu Chung and Chris Ryman appeared in *Macbeth* (2004); Lloyd Hutchinson performed in *The Permanent Way* (2003) and *Shopping and*

that the production demanded particular techniques and skills which Stafford-Clark must have been confident these actors could deliver. However, only Jonathan Cullen (*Falkland Sound*, 1983 and *The Permanent Way*, 2003) and Lloyd Hutchinson (*The Permanent Way*) had worked on his verbatim productions before. Stafford-Clark thus built an ensemble of trusted actors, rather than of famous faces.<sup>55</sup> Alexander Hanson was right when he noted ‘it was...a fantastic cast, no stars but A1 actors’.<sup>56</sup>

### **Full cast research during rehearsals**

When the production went into rehearsal in March 2005, more meetings were arranged. For example, Alexander Hanson met the British Army Colonel at his Wiltshire Military Base, and Catherine Russell met ‘Rima’ the journalist she played, and ‘Phoebe’ from ‘Save the Children’. Similarly, Christopher Ettridge met ‘Edward’ the psychologist during the rehearsal period, allowing both the actors who took part in the research phases and those cast later in the process, to meet the individual they played. Thus, all the cast (with the exception of June Watson and Jonathan Cullen) met at least one of the individuals they portrayed before the production opened.

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*Fucking* (1996); Jonathan Cullen also appeared in *The Permanent Way* (2003) and *Feelgood* (2001); Christopher Ettridge appeared in *Three Birds Alighting on a Field* (1991); Catherine Russell appeared in *Break of Day* (1995) and *Three Sisters* (1995) and June Watson’s work with Stafford-Clark includes *Our Lady of Sligo* (1998) and *Sliding with Suzanne* (2001).

<sup>55</sup> The lack of ‘star’ actors has been a feature of Stafford-Clark’s productions.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Alexander Hanson, 9 July 2008. All quotations from Hanson, unless stated otherwise, are from this interview.

In the printed text of *Talking to Terrorists*, the term ‘actor-researcher’ has been used to distinguish the actors cast before the research phases from those who joined the production at the beginning of rehearsals. Bella Merlin, who performed in Stafford-Clark’s production of David Hare’s *The Permanent Way* (2004), has subsequently employed the term to describe her work with him.<sup>57</sup> In addition, it has started to enter general usage among commentators.<sup>58</sup> However, in this chapter the term will not be used for two reasons. Firstly, in the case of the cast of *Talking to Terrorists*, it would falsely privilege the experiences of the three actors involved throughout, which is unjustified, as in fact all the actors conducted research. Secondly, in the wider context of this thesis the term would suggest a greater involvement in this production as compared to the actors’ processes explored in the following chapters. In fact, the term ‘research’ needs to be put under the microscope. Although some actors in *Talking to Terrorists* were present in the interviews, which is evidently a particular kind of research, the term perhaps suggests a greater level of involvement than was the case, and is potentially misleading.

### **The Feed-back process**

The process by which the cast relayed their interview experiences to Soans was ‘hotseating’. This is a technique that Stafford-Clark has used extensively to gather material for new plays: ‘In this kind of work I normally use hotseating. They are

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<sup>57</sup> See Merlin’s article in *Contemporary Theatre Review* and chapter in the *Cambridge Companion to David Hare*.

<sup>58</sup> For example, several researchers used the term to refer to actors in Stafford-Clark’s fact-based plays at a symposium at Reading University entitled ‘Acting with Facts’ (9 May 2009).



able then to improvise from their notes.’<sup>59</sup> The actors drew from the notes they took during the interview and recreated the interviewee’s responses, whilst Stafford-Clark, Soans and the other cast members repeated the original questions the actor had asked the interviewee. In the hotseating exercise, Stafford-Clark asked the actors to render ‘as accurate a recreation as possible’, by which he hoped for a detailed and precise portrayal of the interviewee. As the hotseating process was a major factor in the cast’s experiences of the play, its function and effect on the actors’ approaches will be considered at length.

We can appreciate that whilst the actors were involved to some extent with the research for the production, Stafford-Clark’s claim of ‘a level playing-field’, which implies that the cast acted as a team of independently functioning researchers, each with the same level of investment and responsibility, is inaccurate. In fact, Soans had edited a working draft of the script and had selected the majority of the material by the time the cast met their subjects in the rehearsal period. However, the script did change as a result of actors’ meetings with interviewees. Catherine Russell estimated that:

About 70% of the script stayed as it was at the beginning of rehearsals, and 30% was added or changed depending upon what we had discovered and the conversations we’d had.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> I have been unable to locate the origin of hotseating. However, it certainly predates Stafford-Clark’s use, and appears to have strong associations with the work of Lee Strasberg.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Catherine Russell, 16 June 2008. All quotations from Russell, unless stated otherwise, are from this interview. Russell’s figure is her impression rather than an official statistic.

Soans has said that in the rehearsal process he would be ‘constantly adapting...adding and subtracting’, which indicates that the actors’ contributions had a considerable effect on his writing. A critical question is the extent to which the other actors experienced their agency and whether they felt empowered, as Stafford-Clark argues. Equally intriguing is how far they found that these particular working methods challenged their approaches, and how they adapted their work as a result of Stafford-Clark’s processes.

### **Acting in Stafford-Clark’s fact based plays: Rehearsal and Performance in Theory and Practice**

Throughout his career, Stafford-Clark has deployed both Brechtian and Stanislavskian based methods. The influence of Brecht on his work is evident predominantly in the composition of the companies he has run and in his collaborative approach to play-making, rather than in his direction of actors in rehearsal.<sup>61</sup> Although I have questioned the received understanding of the nature of group endeavour in his work, it is evident that Stafford-Clark’s emphasis on cast and creative team research and (particularly in his documentary productions) on multiple role-playing owes a debt to the Brechtian notion of the ensemble.<sup>62</sup> In this respect,

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<sup>61</sup> According to Stafford-Clark, during his tenure at the Royal Court, Stafford-Clark sought to reorganise the company to create a more collective structure: ‘My own diaries of 1981 were full of meetings at the Royal Court in order to plan how to turn what was a hierarchical institutional structure into a co-operative.’ Wu p.70. Elsewhere, he has said that ‘we had flirted with the idea of some form of co-operation at the Court. There were meetings talking about whether or not the salaries should be equal...’ Roberts and Stafford-Clark, *Taking Stock*, p.179.

<sup>62</sup> Such an ensemble was seen in Britain for the first time when the Berliner Ensemble presented, among others, *Mother Courage* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* in London in 1956. See the chapter

the influence of William Gaskell, a knowledgeable Brechtian exponent, early in Stafford-Clark's career cannot be over-estimated.<sup>63</sup> Gaskell stated: 'I was politicised by the Berliner Ensemble when I first saw them in 1956...I'd never seen such good theatre before'.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Stafford-Clark has noted that 'Bill had been influenced by the Berliner Ensemble and Brecht', indeed Gaskell directed well-received early productions of Brecht's plays in Britain.<sup>65</sup> Gaskell was Stafford-Clark's main creative partner in the creation of Joint Stock, and together they co-directed many of the company's most successful early productions, including *The Speakers* (1974), *Fanshen* (1975) and *Yesterday's News* (1976). *Fanshen*, in particular, had a recognisably Brechtian aesthetic, as Kenneth Tynan wrote 'This is the first native offshoot of the Brechtian tradition that seems to me to stand comparison with the native tree'.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, Keith Peacock has argued that:

*Fanshen* by William Hinton, was formalistically a documentary in that it was based on the factual experience of real people and employed the documentary epic structure originated by Piscator and adopted by Brecht.<sup>67</sup>

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'Bertolt Brecht: the theory and practice of the dramaturg' in Mary Luckhurst, *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp.109-51.

<sup>63</sup> Gaskell was the Artistic Director of the English Stage Company (1965-72), before he left to work with Stafford-Clark at Joint Stock.

<sup>64</sup> Catherine Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), p.222. During a tour in 1955 of *King Lear* which included the Hebbel Theatre in Berlin, Devine met Brecht and, according to Irving Wardle, over dinner with him secured the rights to perform *The Good Person of Setzuan* (which premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in October 1956). See Irving Wardle, *The Theatre of George Devine* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978), p.170.

<sup>65</sup> <[www.theatrevoice.com/listen\\_now/player/?audioID=93](http://www.theatrevoice.com/listen_now/player/?audioID=93)>, accessed 5 March 2008. In the 1960s, Gaskell introduced a British audience to Brecht's work, including *Baal* (Theatre Royal, Bristol, 1963); *Mother Courage and her Children* (NT, 1965); and *Man is Man* (Royal Court Theatre, 1971). See also, Martin Esslin, 'Brecht and the English Theatre', *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 11:2 (Winter, 1966), pp. 63-70.

<sup>66</sup> Tynan quoted in Michael Billington, *State of the Nation*, p.268.

<sup>67</sup> Keith Peacock, *Thatcher's Theatre* (USA: Greenwood Press, 1999), p.5.

There is evidently a rich Brechtian legacy behind Stafford-Clark's work.<sup>68</sup> However, Stafford-Clark's particular focus on the actor's intention when speaking a line is a post-Stanislovskian influence. He is most associated with 'actioning', a process by which the director and actor agree on a transitive verb for each line, according to how one character is trying to influence the other. This technique is a post-Stanislovskian reworking of 'objectives' or 'tasks', which were a cornerstone of Stanislavski's approach to character psychology.<sup>69</sup> The process was developed by Richard Boleslavsky, who wrote:<sup>70</sup>

You could take a pencil and write 'music of action' under every word or speech...you would have to memorize your actions. You would have to know distinctly the difference between 'I complained' and 'I scorned'.<sup>71</sup>

This process, to which Stafford-Clark dedicates significant time in rehearsals, focuses the actor on the intention of their character. The technique, however, is not the only Stanislavskian method that Stafford-Clark employs. Actress Chipu Chung, who appeared in Stafford-Clark's production of J.T. Rogers's *The Overwhelming* (2006) as well as *Talking to Terrorists*, noted:

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<sup>68</sup> For more on the Brechtian influence on *Fanshen*, see Janelle Reinelt, 'Fanshen, Hare and Brecht' in Hersh Zeifman, ed., *David Hare: A Casebook*. (London: Routledge, 1994), pp.127-39.

<sup>69</sup> See 'Bits and Tasks' chapter in Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, trans. Jean Benedetti. (London: Routledge, 2008), pp.135-151. (Henceforward AAW)

<sup>70</sup> Boleslavski was one of Stanislavski's actors at the Moscow Art Theatre and, under Stanislavski, ran theatre's first studio. He emigrated to the United States in the 1920s, and with fellow Moscow Art Theatre veteran Maria Ouspenskaya founded the American Laboratory Theatre in 1923. Here, he developed a system of actor training which adapted his own work with Stanislavski. His work became known as method acting, and he taught a new generation of Stanislavski inspired actor trainers, such as Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler.

<sup>71</sup> Richard Boleslavsky, *Acting: The First Six Lessons* (New York: Theatre Arts Book, Routledge, 1933), p.60.

[We did some] Stanislavskian emotion memory work. It was...a great opportunity with Max because he is a Stanislavski-ite [sic]. I think that because of time restraints his processes are often limited to step one which is actioning, so it was great to know that he actually has a whole library of Stanislavski's techniques.

In the rehearsal room, therefore, techniques appear to be predicated on the actors' close association with their characters' intentions.

The work of Bella Merlin is illuminating in her exploration of the complex relationship between these different influences.<sup>72</sup> Significantly, in relation to the function of Brechtian and Stanislavskian influences on Stafford-Clark's processes, Merlin has written extensively on Stanislavski following her training at the State Institute of Cinematography, Moscow.<sup>73</sup> In her two publications on *The Permanent Way*, Merlin analysed her use of Stanislavski's techniques. She played the 'Second Bereaved Mother', whose eldest son was killed in the Ladbroke Grove rail crash in 1999. Crucially, she experienced a crisis in her method, discovering that her Stanislavskian training did not equip her for some of the experiences of working on Stafford-Clark's production. She was fundamentally challenged, to the extent that she had to rethink her technique. I will examine the difficulties which Merlin faced in some detail as her problems are highly pertinent to this study.

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<sup>72</sup> In addition to appearing in Hare's *The Permanent Way*, Merlin also took part in the first research phase of *Talking to Terrorists* (see footnote 43). Merlin has also appeared in Stafford-Clark's productions of *The Queen and I* (1994), *A Laughing Matter* (2002) and *She Stoops to Conquer* (2002).

<sup>73</sup> Merlin's publications include *Beyond Stanislavski* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2001), *Konstantin Stanislavski* (London: Routledge, 2003) and *The Complete Stanislavski Toolkit* (London: Nick Hern, 2007). She also commissioned a translation of Maria Knebel's work (one of Stanislavski's assistant directors at the Opera Dramatic Studio when he died in 1938). For ease of reading, I have standardised the spelling of Stanislavski. The bibliography includes the differences for referencing purposes.

## **The Limits of Stanislavski: Bella Merlin and *The Permanent Way***

Stanislavski did not, of course, base his theories on portraying real people. He did, however, write briefly about his 1915 portrayal of Antonio Salieri in Pushkin's 1831 play, *Mozart and Salieri*.<sup>74</sup> In this short note, Stanislavski offers no adaptation to his techniques in the light of playing a real person. In fact, he does not address the issue of what it is to play a real person. Although he mentions the use of historical data, he places more emphasis on the actor's imagination. For example, writing about his research into the facts of Salieri's life, he states:

He must know what Salieri's childhood was like, who his family, his brothers, sisters, friends were. He should see in his mind's eye the church where the young Salieri first heard music and wept for joy. He must recall on which pew, on which sunlit or cloudy day, in which atmosphere, this first encounter with art took place [...] He creates using his own feelings, memories, his own body.<sup>75</sup>

Later, he again foregrounds the actor's imagination: 'First he has to create Salieri's childhood. The actor's own memory should provide the necessary material for that'.<sup>76</sup> Researched information is thus deemed less important than the actor's ability to invent. Stanislavski's comment that he found the role 'one of the most difficult tasks for an actor' is illuminating, and suggests an inherent tension in the use of his

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<sup>74</sup> Konstantin Stanislavski, 'Work on a Role: Salieri 1915' in *An Actor's Work on a Role*, trans. Jean Benedetti (London: Routledge, 2010), pp.95-7. (Henceforward AAWR)

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p.96.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p.97.

techniques when approaching the portrayal of a real-life figure.<sup>77</sup> In the absence of any Stanislavskian theories specific to portraying a real person, Merlin's deployment of his techniques necessitated some degree of adaptation for her own purposes.

Stafford-Clark employed comparable working methods in *The Permanent Way* to those for *Talking to Terrorists*. Research periods were used to gather testimony, before a writing period and the commencement of rehearsals. Merlin's employment of Stanislavskian techniques constantly aided her preparation for the production. She met the 'Second Bereaved Mother' several times in the play's research periods and rehearsals:

...while her physical appearance...inevitably formed part of my early 'research' into character, it was the contradiction between her *personal external atmosphere*... and her *inner tempo-rhythm*...that proffered significant creative possibilities.<sup>78</sup>

Rather than place emphasis on her physical appearance, Merlin saw that 'if I was to tell the mother's story with the appropriate integrity and honour, then my challenge would lie in finding a way to manifest the inner/outer conflict'.<sup>79</sup> Significantly, she had to do this 'not only in performance, but much sooner, in the very feeding back of information'.<sup>80</sup> Here, Merlin refers to the hotseating process, the first stage in which she had to portray the individual. This, in Merlin's experience, was critical and

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<sup>77</sup> Stanislavski, *AAWR*, p.95. Moscow Art Theatre director Nikolai Gorchakov includes a chapter on 'Biographical Drama' in his book *Stanislavsky Directs* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1954), in which he focuses on Stanislavski's supervision of his direction of Bulgakov's play, *Moliere* (1936). Once again, little reference is made to the facts of the play.

<sup>78</sup> Merlin, *CTR*, p.43. Original emphasis.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p.42-3.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p.43.

distinguished her work in this play's preparation from her previous acting experiences: 'the actor's role directly connects the *collation* of the material with its *embodiment*.'<sup>81</sup> Merlin's first consideration was how to feedback what she had witnessed to Stafford-Clark and Hare:

Stafford-Clark's requisite for the feeding back of interviews to Hare through the process of actors filtering the information via their bodies ... was not that the actors should *impersonate* their subjects. Rather, they were to 'embody the spirit' of the interviewees.<sup>82</sup>

External replication was thus subsumed to capturing the less definable 'spirit', which raises questions about the role of accuracy. Merlin uses a language of mystique which is imprecise. More clear are her comments about the 'superobjective'; she states that she had 'to take a snap decision about the character's 'superobjective'.'<sup>83</sup> This presents an intriguing contradiction in Stanislavskian terms, and is an example of how Merlin took considerable liberties with Stanislavskian techniques in her preparation. Merlin suggests that she established her superobjective, which Stanislavski defines as 'the quintessence of the role' and the 'all embracing central supertask', at the beginning rather than end, of her process.<sup>84</sup> According to Stanislavski, the superobjective can only be decided upon once all the character's objectives are set.<sup>85</sup> It appears that the timing of the hotseating exercise, placed right at the beginning of her process, forced Merlin to reverse his technique. Merlin states that establishing the superobjective so early 'fuelled both the *choice of*

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<sup>81</sup> Merlin, *Cambridge Companion*, p.128.

<sup>82</sup> Merlin, *CTR*, p.43.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p.43.

<sup>84</sup> Stanislavski, *AAWR*, p.160.

<sup>85</sup> See Stanislavski, *AAW*, pp.336-7.



*material*...and the *manner* in which that information was shared.’<sup>86</sup> In this way, Merlin was aware of her function in selecting what information to give Hare. She states: ‘we were subconsciously editing and filtering the material through our own creative sieves’.<sup>87</sup> It certainly appears that Merlin’s description of ‘editing and filtering’ more accurately describes the active and creative process of decision-making than the passive verb ‘collate’ that she uses above.

Merlin also used techniques associated with the work of Maria Knebel. She states:

One of the crucial lessons that I took...[was that] the external-internal route into a character and the manner in which the changing physical body can influence the sensitive inner mechanism should not be underestimated.<sup>88</sup>

Towards the end of his career, Stanislavski focused increasingly on how the body, gesture and physicality can affect the actor’s emotions. In the last five years of his life (the period during which Knebel worked with him) Stanislavski worked on ‘The Method of Physical Action.’<sup>89</sup> In relation to his planned production of *Othello*, between 1930 and 1933, he wrote:

An actor on the stage need [*sic*] only a sense of the smallest modicum of organic physical truth in his action or general state and

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<sup>86</sup> Merlin, *CTR*, p.43. Original emphasis.

<sup>87</sup> Merlin, *Cambridge Companion*, p.125.

<sup>88</sup> Merlin, *CTR*, p.48.

<sup>89</sup> See Jean Benedetti, *Stanislavski: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1982), p.68. For more on the (still emerging) work of Maria Knebel, see Sharon Marie Carnicke, ‘The Knebel Technique’ in Alison Hodge, ed. *Actor Training (Second Edition)* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp.99-116.

instantly his emotions will respond to his inner faith in the genuineness of what his body is doing.<sup>90</sup>

Even more pronounced, in the rehearsals for his final (though never completed) production of *Tartuffe* (1938), he is quoted as saying ‘Do not speak to me about feeling. We cannot set feeling; we can only set physical action.’<sup>91</sup> Merlin’s approach, therefore, was still based on Stanislavski’s later teaching.<sup>92</sup>

However, Merlin struggled to apply her Stanislavskian training in performance. During the previews for the play, the real-life ‘Second Bereaved Mother’ attended a performance with her husband. After the performance, she told Merlin that she felt her portrayal ‘had been rather ‘hard’’.<sup>93</sup> Merlin wrote:

My quandary as an actor was whether or not I was right to ‘forsake’ the real person to some degree in order that the theatricality of the subject matter and the play’s overall visceral quality was maintained.<sup>94</sup>

She associates this problem with the structure of the play. In order to create a powerful polemic, Hare organised the play so as to juxtapose events, stories and characters in a montage of scenes and speeches. Merlin’s portrayal and Hare’s narrative thus may have depicted her as ‘hard’. She commented, ‘he had no wish to show her temperate side; he had other characters to demonstrate temperance at other

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<sup>90</sup> Constantin Stanislavski, *Creating a Role*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1961), p.150.

<sup>91</sup> Vasily Toporkov, *Stanislavski in Rehearsal* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1979), p.160.

<sup>92</sup> The Method of Physical Action is the subject of detailed investigation in the third chapter of this thesis.

<sup>93</sup> Merlin, *Cambridge Companion*, p.132.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

places in the play.’<sup>95</sup> Without losing the narrative function of the character, Merlin adapted her portrayal following the mother’s feedback. In the early performances, Merlin noted that her emotional rendering of the part, which she described as ‘becoming somewhat shrill, a little highly strung... didn’t feel wholly appropriate’.<sup>96</sup> She found creating a greater distance between herself and the role to be more effective: ‘there was no room for my own emotional response... Any emotion, any tears, had to be *her* emotions, *her* tears, and not *my* pity suffered on her behalf.’<sup>97</sup> It appears Merlin felt that using her own emotional recall, as she was accustomed to doing, was not legitimate. However, Merlin’s claim of self-erasure perpetuates the myth that actors can totally suppress their own emotions in performance. Indeed, the presumption is that not to do so is somehow inappropriate and disrespectful to the person being played. Merlin could not use ‘*her* emotions’ (those of the real life mother) in the same way that an actor cannot entirely transform him or herself. The romantic notion that she could remove herself from her portrayal and thereby allow the original emotion of the mother to surface is of course a fallacy, and yet is a common concern of actors who play real people.<sup>98</sup>

Merlin felt that she had to find a greater distance between herself and the role than her Stanislavskian training had taught her. It is thus understandable that she began to wonder whether Brecht provides better tools:

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<sup>95</sup> Merlin, *Cambridge Companion*, p.132.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p.134. Original emphasis.

<sup>98</sup> See Cantrell and Luckhurst, *Playing for Real*.

I realised a particular style of performance was developing, one that seemed to straddle the perspectives of Stanislavski and Brecht...the character seemed to be in front of me, and in the course of the storytelling, I metaphorically had one eye on the character and the other on the audience.<sup>99</sup>

To pinpoint more precisely the ways in which Merlin moved away from her Stanislavskian approach, I interviewed her about the specific challenges:

My approach to performance was more Brechtian, but I use the term very loosely. I found what was happening was a demonstration of character whilst at the same time being connected and committed. The character stood in front of me like a puppet. It was as if the Second Bereaved Mother stood in front of me, all I had to do was manipulate the head and breathing. I had to get out of the way. I was less and less emotionally attached, in fact the performances where I had a strong connection seemed to be the weaker ones.<sup>100</sup>

Merlin describes how she experienced an emotional restraint that is not foregrounded in Stanislavski's teaching. This contained emotional engagement is a fascinating discovery for an actor so experienced in the practical application of Stanislavski's work, as is Merlin's identification that the duality she experienced may be more aligned to a Brechtian rendering of character. However, there is a danger of simplistically polarising Stanislavski and Brecht, and thus we must exercise caution. It is sufficient that Merlin's experience prompted her to search for a different, non-Stanislavskian terminology to analyse her process.

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<sup>99</sup> Merlin, *CTR*, p.48.

<sup>100</sup> Telephone interview with Bella Merlin, 23 July 2007.

## Acting Processes

I interviewed the cast of *Talking to Terrorists* between 15 February and 9 July 2008.<sup>101</sup> I found that the actors used vocabulary indebted to Stanislavski, having been taught in what Derek Paget has called ‘the Stanislavski-based, stage-focused approach of British actor training’.<sup>102</sup> However, the cast of *Talking to Terrorists* were not thoroughgoing Stanislavskians. Using Merlin’s work as a point of comparison, I will interrogate the extent to which Stanislavski’s particular theories might provide a useful terminology to illuminate the actors’ processes in *Talking to Terrorists*, or whether, like Merlin, the actors turned to other theorists. To this end, I quote from Jean Benedetti’s *An Actor’s Work* (2008), which realises Stanislavski’s conception of *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character* as a single work, and from *An Actor’s Work on a Role* (2010), a retranslation of the material in *Creating a Role*. At the points in which the actors depart from a Stanislavskian terminology, I will analyse other the work of theorists and practitioners to explore whether more helpful frames of reference can be found. Merlin suggests that Brecht may be a useful reference point, but she does not interrogate this in any depth. Here, where

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<sup>101</sup> All the interviews, with the exception of Christopher Ettridge, whom I interviewed in person, were conducted over the telephone. The order of the interviews was purely down to the availability of the actors. In addition to those already cited, the interviews dates were as follows: Chris Ryman, 15 February 2008; Christopher Ettridge, Leeds, 23 May 2008; June Watson, 2 June 2008; Jonathan Cullen, 4 June 2008. All quotations from actors, the director and writer, unless stated otherwise, are from these interviews.

<sup>102</sup> Paget, ‘Acting with Facts’, p.169. The actors’ training was as follows: Chipu Chung and Lloyd Hutchinson trained at RADA, Jonathan Cullen, Chris Ryman and Alexander Hanson at Guildhall School of Music and Drama, Christopher Ettridge at Drama Centre, Catherine Russell at Central School of Music and Drama and June Watson at Edinburgh College of Drama. None of these schools has a commitment to a single theorist, but all introduce actors to aspects of Stanislavski’s work.

other theorists are referenced, the practical application of their techniques will be examined in detail.

Whereas Merlin noted that her Stanislavskian approach was seriously challenged in performance, my interviews revealed that the cast's major preoccupation was a process- rather than performance-based issue. The actors who took part in the bipartite process of meeting their subject and the subsequent hotseating session recognised how formative the experience had been in their character construction and spoke about how it had affected their work thereafter. Taking my lead from the actors' testimony, this hitherto under-explored area will form the focus of my analysis. I will concentrate on these actors' experiences because their involvement was what Stafford-Clark and Soans sought to create in their working methods, although I will compare these processes to those of the actors that did not take part in the research stages. Since the hotseating exercise repeatedly emerged as a pivot-point in these actors' processes, their experiences are explored through three sections: pre-hotseating processes; their experiences of the hotseating exercise itself; and the challenges they faced following it.

### **Pre-hotseating Approaches**

In my interviews it became clear that whilst the actors were aware of the need to observe first-hand external features such as voice and appearance, these were of secondary importance to trying to absorb as much as they could about the

individual's mind-set, history and attitude to the subject matter within the bounds of the pre-arranged questions they had at their disposal. Four actors, Chris Ryman, Catherine Russell, Jonathan Cullen and Alexander Hanson elaborated on the precise way in which they approached observation.

### **Empathetic observation: Chris Ryman**

Chris Ryman explained that as the writer and director took the lead in questioning in his interview with the ex-head of the AAB, he was at liberty to observe the individual. As the meeting was conducted in the first research phase, and formed the basis of the testimony in the play, he was also able to note the emotional narrative of the man's story:

Max and the writer were asking questions. The writer would write down various bits and pieces and I would be picking up the character aspects... because I had met him [AAB], and knowing the kind of person he was, it was easy for me to know which emotions to act...for example when I talked about his kids I would have a real empathy.

Here Ryman links his rendering of emotions in performance to the fact that he experienced an empathetic response when he witnessed the man recount the same story. However, we must question how much credibility can be given to the assertion that he knew 'the kind of person he was'. This was a formal interview during which the individual recounted his story in front of a group of strangers with the express purpose of making a play from his words, which clearly constituted a

performance from the interviewee.<sup>103</sup> Thus, any claim to ‘knowing’ him has to be simplistic, but suggests that Ryman needed to believe he had an emotional connection with the individual. Can an actor make an adequate assessment of their subject’s psychological and emotional state in one brief, highly mediated and formal meeting? It would be patronising to assume so, but Ryman seems to have worked from an intuitive connection he believed he experienced.

### **Emotion memory**

The way in which Ryman described employing the empathy he experienced can be understood through a particular (though often overlooked) formulation of emotion memory by Stanislavski. In his early to mid-career writings, emotion memory was Stanislavski’s preferred technique to summon an emotion in performance. The term is almost exclusively understood as it is described in the chapter ‘Emotion Memory’ in *An Actor’s Work*:

Just as your visual memory resurrects long forgotten things, a landscape or the image of a person, before your inner eye, so feelings you once experienced are resurrected in your Emotion Memory.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> We could employ Bill Nichols’s term ‘social actors’ to describe the role played by the interviewees. Looking specifically at screen documentary, he states: ‘This term stands for ‘individuals’ or ‘people’. Those whom we observe are seldom trained or coaxed in their behaviour. I use ‘social actor’ to stress the degree to which individuals represent themselves to others; this can be construed as a performance.’ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991), p.42.

<sup>104</sup> Stanislavski, *AAW*, p.199.



However, this was not Ryman's emphasis. Later in my interview, he stated: 'I wouldn't have to imagine the emotions, because I was there and saw him. It was about my memory of what he was doing.' It appears that Ryman did not utilise his own personal experiences and associated emotions in the way Stanislavski describes, as he experienced an empathetic response to the man's story. Bella Merlin also avoided this particular formulation of emotion memory in *The Permanent Way*:

I am not a great advocate of 'emotion memory'. Whilst I acknowledge it is a profound and important tool in Stanislavski's toolkit, I am aware that it is far too easy for actors to misinterpret its use...and overlay the playwright's script onto their own personal histories.<sup>105</sup>

In contrast to playing a fictional character, when the script is based on the words of real people, the possibility of 'overlaying' evidently was too great a risk for Merlin, who was anxious to distance this work from her own psychology or emotions.

However, Ryman did use a form of emotion memory as he utilised the memory of the empathetic connection he described experiencing in his observation of the man's story. This is a technique which can be found elsewhere in Stanislavski's work:

Although generally overlooked in favour of his chapter in *An Actor's Work*, Stanislavski also explored emotion memory in *Creating a Role*. In his writings on the preparation for a role in Griboyedov's *Woe from Wit*, for the first time Stanislavski suggested that emotion memory can be 'acquired through study and preserved in his intellectual memory.'<sup>106</sup> Thus, Stanislavski argues that actors can

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<sup>105</sup> Merlin, *CTR*, p.46.

<sup>106</sup> Stanislavski, *Creating a Role*, p.9. This particular sentence, however, does not appear in Jean Benedetti's recent retranslation, *An Actor's Work on a Role* (2010).

utilise the emotional responses they have experienced in study or research rather than via personally experienced emotion. In other words, they can draw on their emotional responses to other people's stories. Although Stanislavski does not predicate this acquisition on first-hand observation of the subject, it is clear that his lesser-acknowledged formulation is closer to the way in which Ryman worked. Ryman stated: 'It is a blessing to have a template to work from, a grounding'. He was able to ground his performance of emotion in the behaviour he had observed. However, it is also evident that he shared Merlin's concern with regard to 'overlying' his own experiences. At no point did Ryman recall using his own personal experiences; instead he foregrounded his powers of active observation.

### **Given and Found Circumstances: Catherine Russell and Jonathan Cullen**

A specific Stanislavskian technique that proved particularly helpful to two of the actors in the meetings with their subjects was establishing the given circumstances of the role. Comparing the experiences of Jonathan Cullen (who didn't meet the people he played) and Catherine Russell (who met both her subjects) will illustrate how formative these meetings were, but also suggests some of the associated difficulties of representation which problematise Stafford-Clark's claims.

Jonathan Cullen did not meet either of his characters (the ex-Ambassador Craig Murray and the ex-member of the UVF) before the play opened, and thus only Russell was hotseated. Both actors were cast once the play had been written (at least

in draft form), and so both could analyse the script to establish certain circumstances of their subjects' life. Cullen commented that this was an important feature of his work:

For every part I sit down and I note what I say about myself, what others say about me and what I say about other people... then I list what I know about the character – the circumstances... That can be revelatory.

As Cullen did not meet either of the individuals he played in *Talking to Terrorists*, he chose to employ this recognisable Stanislavskian technique:

I decided very early on, if I was going to do this [play] I had to accept I hadn't met him and you have to do it on the basis of what is there on the page.

By contrast, although Russell's subjects 'Rima' and 'Phoebe' had already been interviewed, she was able to meet them one-to-one during rehearsals. The point in the process at which these meetings took place is vital here. As Russell had the draft script of the play, she was able to study it ahead of her meetings and establish which questions would be helpful in her portrayals. In addition, as Soans had already drafted her subjects' testimony, he was not wholly reliant on Russell for content, and so she enjoyed a greater freedom as to the questions she asked. Russell consciously used these meetings to find out more of the circumstances of both their lives, 'Because I spoke to them for so long, I didn't just speak to them about their work, I

spoke to them about their marriages, children – their lives.’<sup>107</sup> Russell’s and Cullen’s comments indicate their different access to, and thus engagement with, their subjects’ circumstances.

Establishing the ‘given circumstances’ is a Stanislavskian technique which has been widely accepted by a range of theorists and actor-trainers, including Brecht.<sup>108</sup> In *An Actor’s Work*, Stanislavski provides an almost exhaustive list of what can constitute the given circumstances of a role:

They mean the plot, the facts, the incidents, the period, the time and place of action, the way of life, how we as actors and directors understand the play, the contributions we ourselves make, the mise-en-scène, the sets and costumes, the props, the stage dressing, the sound effects etc., etc., everything which is given for the actors as they rehearse.<sup>109</sup>

Given the limited access to her subject, in her interview Russell only approached some of the areas that Stanislavski identified:

I didn’t just speak to them about their work, I spoke to them about their marriages, children, their lives and childhood, upbringing – all the things in Chekhov you would create for yourself, all of those things I found out for real.

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<sup>107</sup> ‘Rima’s’ story focuses on her experiences as a journalist working in Iraq, whilst Phoebe describes her work with child soldiers, particularly in Rwanda.

<sup>108</sup> For example, David Richard Jones, in his research into Brecht’s model-book for *Mother Courage* (the ‘Couragemodell’), noted that Brecht’s actors used their imagination within the ‘given circumstances’ to build their characters: ‘They attempted to approximate premature ageing by actively imagining the background: child abuse, hard labours, rapes, disfigurements, having to lick boots of many colours. With the character thus far along, they attached behavioural specifics.’ See David Richard Jones, *Great Directors at Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp.87-9.

<sup>109</sup> Stanislavski, *AAW*, pp.52-3.

In her comparison between Chekhov's imaginary characters and the exigencies of portraying a real person, Russell identifies a major difference: Stanislavski was primarily interested in imagination, whereas documentary actively rejects this in favour of fact-based sources. A meeting between strangers for the purposes of a theatrical presentation evidently compromised the scope of the given circumstances that Stanislavski laid down. The research that Stanislavski lists could take weeks, and would have been impossible to encompass in the interview, given both time constraints and the fact that the interviewee would be unlikely to share personal information. We can see from Russell's comment that she found out the facts that were useful to her. These were more associated with her own agenda as an interviewer than achieving the sort of wide-ranging background that Stanislavski lists. Finding out this information was critical in creating a character for Russell:

You do get a character from the interview, as long as you don't just go for what is in the play, as long as you make sure your interview goes outside of that, otherwise you are in the normal situation of having to make it up, which is a waste – if the person is there in front of you, you can find out the real backstory.

We must problematise notions of a 'real backstory', and acknowledge the highly constructed nature of their meeting. It is clear, though, that Russell had a far greater access to her subjects' lives than Cullen. She was able to find circumstances *not* given in the play, and also start to explore the circumstances that *were* given. Despite the play's predication on interview material, Russell clearly turned to sources beyond the script to aid her work. However, the way in which Russell

utilised this information departs from Stanislavski's application of the given circumstances.

### **Given Circumstances and the 'If...I'**

Stanislavski saw the given circumstances as being inseparably combined with the actor's imagination through their symbiotic bond with the "if":

One is a hypothesis ("if"), the other is a corollary to it (the Given Circumstances). "If" always launches the creative act and the Given Circumstances develop it further. One can't exist without the other, or acquire the strength they need. But their functions are somewhat different. "If" is a spur to the dormant imagination, and the Given Circumstances provide the substance for it.<sup>110</sup>

"If", therefore, works within the structure created by the given circumstances and transports the dry circumstances into the actors' imaginative plane. This requires the actors to locate themselves in these circumstances, so as to start to imagine how the circumstances might affect them. Benedetti cites Stanislavski's illustration: '*if everything around me on stage were true, this is what I would do, this is how I would respond to this or that event.*'<sup>111</sup> Stanislavski's deployment of the given circumstances with "if" consequently calls upon the actor's own experiences to provoke inner feeling. According to Stanislavski, this personalises the given circumstances through 'his own impressions, genuine feeling and life

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<sup>110</sup> Stanislavski, *AAW*, p.53.

<sup>111</sup> Benedetti, *Stanislavski: An Introduction*, p.35. My emphasis.

experiences'.<sup>112</sup> We could call this feature of the "if" the "if...I". The twinning of the given circumstances with the "if...I" is thus Stanislavski's acknowledgement that more is needed than the text itself. As documentary above all privileges the text and the sources it is derived from, this feature was problematic for Russell.

In contrast to Stanislavski's strategies for utilising the given circumstances, Russell's comments suggest a much less conscious application of the facts she discovered: 'I'm just looking at my rehearsal notebook here and my notes go on for pages. It all sinks in at some level, even if you don't consciously use it.' She used a similar osmotic analogy when she said: 'it probably did seep through...certainly her sense of absolute commitment, I hope that came through'. Her comments are symptomatic of the difficulty of actors articulating approaches that they don't fully understand themselves. It appears that as this process was new to Russell, she struggled to find a helpful vocabulary to describe her work.

Again, like Ryman, Russell's departure from Stanislavski is in her rejection of employing her own experiences in the role: the 'if...I'. One reason for this focus can be found in Shomit Mitter's comment that 'Stanislavski's "magic if" obliterates the claims of actuality in order to allow the actor a more compelling release into the imagined truths of character'.<sup>113</sup> In light of Mitter's comment, the way in which Russell foregrounded observation over imagination appears largely attributable to the fact that the 'claims of actuality' were central to the production. Stanislavski

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<sup>112</sup> Stanislavski, *AAWR*, p.119.

<sup>113</sup> Shomit Mitter, *Systems of Rehearsal: Stanislavski, Brecht, Grotowski and Brook* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.49.

formulated his techniques in relation to playing fictional roles; here, by contrast, the ‘compelling release’ which might result from using ‘imagined truths’ may not have been deemed appropriate when portraying a real person in the play.

A more helpful vocabulary to investigate Russell’s use of the given circumstances can be found in Stella Adler’s development of the technique.<sup>114</sup> Although again based on fictional roles, Adler questioned the use of “if” to personalise the given circumstances for the actor (the ‘*if...I*’), and instead stressed the importance of noting the differences in circumstances between the actor and subject as opposed to the similarities.

The playwright gives you the play, the idea, the style, the conflict, the character, etc. The background life of the character will be made up of the social, cultural, political, historical, and geographical situation in which the author places him...Through the proper use of craft, the actor will be able to see the differences...between himself and the character. Through his craft he will be able to translate these difficulties and use them to arrive at the character.<sup>115</sup>

Adler’s emphasis on the character’s given circumstances and background life are consistent with Russell’s technique, particularly in the departure from using the actors’ own experiences. As Adler states, ‘You will never have your own name and personality or be in your own house...every word, every action, must originate in

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<sup>114</sup> Adler met Stanislavski in 1934, when he was working on *The Method of Physical Action*. It was as a result of this meeting that Adler broke away from Strasberg’s emphasis on the psychology of the actor, and investigated the uses of the actor’s imagination. See Stella Adler, *The Technique of Acting* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988). For an overview of Adler’s work, see David Krasner, ‘Strasberg, Adler and Meisner: Method Acting’ in Alison Hodge, ed., *Twentieth Century Actor Training* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp.144-163.

<sup>115</sup> Stella Adler, ‘Interview: The Reality of Doing’, *Tulane Drama Review*, Vol.9:1, (Fall 1964), p.149.



the actor's imagination'.<sup>116</sup> However, despite the similarities with her process, Russell was much less specific with regard to her use of imagination. Although it would be glib to suggest that an actor could perform without any imagination, Russell's comments suggest a gradual enrichment of her portrayal through these circumstances rather than a developed imaginative application of them.

Russell and Cullen had quite different approaches, based on the access to the individuals they later played. As a result of her access to the individuals she portrayed, Russell was able to learn a lot more about them than Cullen, and could take this information into her hotseating sessions. Although, in comparison to Cullen's experiences, learning more about the women may have benefited Russell's understanding of the people she played, it severely hampered her later process, as will be considered.

### **Experiments with self-analysis: Alexander Hanson**

The examples of Ryman and Russell illustrate specific ways in which they approached the interview and prepared themselves for hotseating. Through Ryman's use of empathetic observation and Russell's stress on establishing the given and found circumstances, they both foregrounded their attempts to understand the inner workings of their subject, although the extent to which this can be achieved through the interviews has been questioned. Both actors were sincere in their belief that they experienced an emotional connection to their subjects. Although a Stanislavskian

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<sup>116</sup> Adler, *The Technique of Acting*, p.17.

vocabulary has been helpful to interrogate their processes, as Merlin found, transferring his techniques based on fictional characters to playing a real person has highlighted specific limitations. These are particularly evident in both actors' rejection of their own emotional and experiential recall. However, when I spoke to Alexander Hanson about his experiences of meeting the Colonel, it became clear that his process had a different emphasis.

Hanson visited the Army Colonel at his Wiltshire base during the rehearsal process, at which point the script was in draft form. His preconceptions about the Colonel, based on Stafford-Clark's description of meeting him, were reversed by his own experience.

Max filled me in a bit... and told me what he was like... so I had this image in my mind and then I met him and he was quite different – he wasn't intimidating at all... he was incredibly friendly actually. We went for a walk and went for dinner and chatted.

The meeting was extremely valuable as it allowed Hanson to form his own opinion. Similarly, Chipso Chung's experience of meeting Nadira, the ex-ambassador Craig Murray's partner, completely changed her preconceived ideas:

She's extremely flirtatious and I think a 'floozy' is a very good word to describe her... But when I met her and I heard her story, coming from a very poverty stricken background, having to feed her family and that's why she was working in a belly dancing club like that, and a police state where young girls are sent into custody and raped and she'd experienced this many times... she'd experienced many horrible things at a much younger age than I was, and I found her very impressive.

Chung's and Hanson's descriptions strongly suggest that the writer and director had constructed their own views of how they wanted to present certain people before the actors met them. Indeed, Chung was so concerned with Nadira's depiction in Soans's script that she insisted on inviting her into rehearsals. Cast member Jonathan Cullen reported that Nadira seemed to be a device for comic relief:

[Nadira] said that 'I feel I am just someone to laugh at. And I also have a story' ...I don't think by any means Max invited her in. Chipo fought to get her in. She sensed Nadira was worried. She is no fool. But she was right, it was represented as purely comedic.<sup>117</sup>

In the case of Chung and Nadira, the actor's concerns were not satisfactorily addressed.<sup>118</sup> It is also evident that far from being a collaborative endeavour which elevates the actor, Stafford-Clark and Soans had complete power over what was included. The actors' views were not privileged by Stafford-Clark.

Hanson's description of the purpose of his meeting marks a quite different emphasis from the other actors: 'It was great for me to watch him and see what he was like as a person, because obviously you are aiming to find the essence of him in yourself.' Hanson actively sought out similarities between the Colonel and himself. However, Hanson's comment again prompts the question as to whether these similarities were

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<sup>117</sup> Nadira staged her own one-woman play about her life at the Arcola theatre, entitled *The British Ambassador's Belly Dancer* in 2008.

<sup>118</sup> The questionable portrayal of Nadira has been criticised by Paola Botham who contends that 'There was... gratuitous national and gender stereotyping in the second act, which opened with the counterpoint of an experienced British ex-ambassador (talking about human rights) and his young Uzbek partner, a belly dancer (talking about their private life)'. Paola Botham, 'From Deconstruction to Reconstruction: A Habermasian Framework for Contemporary Political Theatre', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Vol. 18:3 (2008), p.314.

indeed there, or whether he needed to imagine the connections existed in order to play the Colonel. Whilst this is an important question, the very fact that he saw his preparation in those terms is interesting, and unique among his fellow cast members.

One mode of interrogation into these four divergent pre-hotseating approaches is to view them according to Stanislavski's notes on 'Analysis'. Hanson's description follows this process to a greater extent than Russell's, and yet, arguably, does not follow it to the logical conclusion Stanislavski sets out. Stanislavski identifies a five-stage system of script and role analysis, but it is the first three stages that are particularly relevant here:

1. Studying the writer's work.
2. Searching for the inner and other kinds of material for creative purposes to be found within the play and the role.<sup>119</sup>

Ryman, Russell and Cullen followed the first two stages, albeit on divergent paths from Stanislavski. In their search for 'material for creative purposes', Ryman summoned his empathy from the interview, Russell used her knowledge of the circumstances to guide her, and Cullen listed both the circumstances and what was said about his subject. However, in his approach, Hanson experimented with the next stage:

3. Searching for the same material in ourselves as actors (self-analysis).<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Stanislavski, *AAWR*, p.103.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

Of all the cast, Hanson was the only actor to report that he actively used ‘self analysis’ to prepare himself for hotseating. Stanislavski subsequently expanded on this technique, stating: ‘the actor’s imagination has the ability to get close to someone else’s life, transform it into his own, discover exciting qualities and traits they have in common’.<sup>121</sup> In contrast to the link between Russell’s process and Adler’s teaching, Hanson was drawn to the Colonel and sought shared features. However, Stanislavski’s third stage of analysis goes further than merely finding similarities in the actor:

3. [cont.] The material under discussion consists of living, personal memories drawn from our five senses, contained in an actor’s affective memory [...] these memories must always be similar to the feelings in the play and the role.<sup>122</sup>

Hanson, therefore, sought out similarities between himself and the Colonel, but he did not recall consciously employing his own ‘personal memories’ to assist him. This is a critical distinction. By identifying these similarities, Hanson was able to base his portrayal on the elements of the Colonel’s personality that he found reflected his own. However, like Ryman and Russell before him, Hanson made no reference to using his own specific experiences to do this. Although he based his portrayal on his own personality to a greater extent than Russell or Ryman, this was predicated on the shared features he observed in the meeting, rather than actively translating these through his own emotion memory.

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<sup>121</sup> Stanislavski, *AAWR*, p.114.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p.103. The two further stages are ‘4: Preparing the soil in your own mind for the birth of the creative urge, both consciously and, mostly, unconsciously.’ and ‘5: Searching for creative stimuli that will produce new bursts of creative fervour...’

## **Hotseating**

The hotseating sessions took place as soon as possible after the actor-subject meetings, often the following day. They were held in the Out of Joint rehearsal room in front of the cast and creative team. In comparison to their pre-hotseating processes, which were private, here the actors' early work was shared and therefore subject to scrutiny from all involved. It was the first point at which the actors performed as the person that they had met. Thus, their processes started by, rather than culminated in, performing as the individual. Here I will explore how the process functioned and establish its key features.

In the hotseat, the cast and creative team asked the pre-set interview questions that the actors themselves had asked when they met the individual. The actor then replied as the interviewee. As few of the interviews were recorded, the sessions were based on recollected improvisation and the actors' notes. Stafford-Clark states that 'it makes you dependent on the actors' imagination'. However, it should be remembered that as Soans was present at all but one of the interviews, the actors' hotseating sessions provided additional viewpoints rather than being the primary method to gather material.

Despite their improvisatory nature, Stafford-Clark advised the actors to give 'as accurate a recreation as possible', suggesting that the hotseating sessions required

the actors to stay as close as possible to their recollections of the interview. Like many documentary practitioners, Stafford-Clark places a heavy insistence on the authenticity of the process. As the sessions were based on the actors' notes, memory and improvised interpretation of what they had heard and observed, arguing that the portrayals are 'accurate' is misleading. Lloyd Hutchinson observed:

Basically what happens is you'd come back to rehearsal room with notes [or] with the audio tape, you probably might have listened to the interview on the way back, or gone over your notes, but what happens is the rest of the group sits at one end of the room, or one end of the table, you sit at the other and they basically ask you questions.

Hutchinson went on to describe how the actors in the hotseat responded to these questions:

You try and keep to the truth of what the person had said to you in the interview. If you don't know the answer to a question that's being given to you, you can act your way out of that, or tell them you don't know...that's basically how it worked, it's always out of improvisation.

Similarly, Christopher Ettridge laid out the journey of the hotseating process:

It is a very gentle shift; Max starts by asking you what he [the interviewee] said, and then saying 'just do that as him'. You get asked questions and you answer as the character.

The session started by Ettridge describing his meeting with 'Edward', the psychologist, in the third person, before being encouraged to start answering as him.

Chipo Chung described the process as a mixture of reportage and re-enactment:

When we reported back, we'd still be reading from our notes, but re-enacting at the same time. That's something that Max would often do. He'd get us to re-enact simultaneously so that we would both be playing them and at the same time able to give different aspects of the character.

Chung's and Ettridge's comments suggest that the early stages of the hotseating sessions included recognisable Brechtian strategies.

### **Responding in the third-person: 'Simultaneous Re-enactment'**

Chung's term 'simultaneous re-enactment' is useful to describe this first stage of hotseating, as it indicates the dual awareness of the actor in the process. However, a word of caution regarding the term 're-enactment' may be necessary for clarity. The formulation of 're-enactment' in this case-study should be understood as referring to the creative enterprise of reproducing and reconstructing the words of the interviewee; although Stafford-Clark aimed for 'as accurate a recreation as possible', the actors were involved in editing and filtering just as Merlin described in her accounts. As Stafford-Clark stated, 'the script would be filtered through their memory in a rather curious way'. Chung suggests that in the 'simultaneous re-enactment' stage, the actors were aware both of their role as a performer, narrating and describing the interviewee, and also of actually responding in character as them.



Brecht's description of a 'double role', wherein the actor 'does not disappear in the role he is playing', shares certain features with the hotseating process.<sup>123</sup> Citing the example of Charles Laughton playing Galileo, Brecht states:

... The actor appears onstage in a double role... the showman Laughton does not disappear in the Galileo whom he is showing... Laughton is actually there, standing on stage and showing us what he imagines Galileo to have been.<sup>124</sup>

Like Brecht's description, by responding in the third person, Chung was able to share her own subjective view of the interviewee. Again, it should be noted that, by consciously expounding his own emphasis on duality (or plurality), Brecht over-emphasises a polemical dichotomy between himself and Stanislavski. Stanislavski did not claim his actors 'disappeared into the roles they were playing'. Rather, Brecht promotes a more conscious use of this dual awareness. The 'double role' is also explored by Brecht in 'The Street Scene', which he used to illustrate the dramatic functions of his epic style. He described 'The Street Scene' as 'primitive', suggesting that it represented the most basic type of reported narration.<sup>125</sup> In it, Brecht analysed the way in which an individual, standing on a street corner, could describe a recent traffic accident to a group of onlookers.<sup>126</sup> The way in which the demonstrator functions as the guide, describing and recounting what happened,

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<sup>123</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'A Short Organum for the Theatre' (1948), in John Willett ed., *Brecht on Theatre* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1964), p.194. (Henceforward, *BT*)

<sup>124</sup> Oliver Double and Michael Wilson, 'Brecht and Cabaret' in *Cambridge Companion to Bertolt Brecht*, p.55.

<sup>125</sup> Brecht, quoted in Arrigo Subiotto, 'Epic Theatre: a theatre for a scientific age' in Graham Bartram and Anthony Wayne, eds., *Brecht in Perspective* (New York: Longman, 1987), p.35.

<sup>126</sup> Brecht, 'The Street Scene' (1938), in Willett, *BT*, p.121.

whilst also quoting those involved, evidently shares some features with the re-enactment stage in the actors' hotseating:

The event has taken place; what you are seeing now is a repeat...the street-corner demonstration admits it is a demonstration (and does not pretend to be the actual event)...There is no question that the street-corner demonstrator has been through an event, but he is not out to make his demonstration serve as an 'experience' for the audience...He is not interested in creating pure emotions.<sup>127</sup>

Brecht later states that 'It is most important that one of the main features of ordinary theatre be excluded from our street scene: the engendering of illusion.'<sup>128</sup> In the 'simultaneous re-enactment' stage, there was a lack of illusion, and rather an emphasis on describing and recreating the content of the interview.

The technique of transferring speech into the third person is also a Brechtian rehearsal exercise. This was one of the exercises that Brecht conducted with his actors to create a 'double role'. In his essay, *A Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect*, Brecht investigated techniques by which the actor could interrupt the audience's identification with his/her character, and thus 'make the spectator adopt an attitude of enquiry and criticism'.<sup>129</sup> In Brecht's view, avoiding a complete transformation was critical to achieve this:

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<sup>127</sup> Willett, *BT*, p.122.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> Brecht, 'Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect' (1940), in Willett, *BT*, p.136. Like many commentators, I prefer the translation of 'Verfremdung' as 'defamiliarisation' to Willett's 'alienation'.

He reproduces their remarks as authentically as he can; he puts forward their way of behaving to the best of his abilities and knowledge of men; but he never tries to persuade himself (and thereby others) that this amounts to a complete transformation... Given this lack of total transformation there are three aids which may help to alienate the actions and remarks of the characters being portrayed:

1. Transposition into the third person
2. Transposition into the past
3. Speaking the stage directions out loud <sup>130</sup>

Brecht's comments have a very strong resonance with this first stage of hotseating.

'Simultaneous re-enactment' represents a move away from an emotional or psychological rendering of character, and rather allows the actor to comment on the character, thereby promoting a critical engagement with the unfolding narrative in the spectator (here the actors and creative team).

In addition to Chung's comment that this stage allowed her to 'give different aspects of the character', where more than one actor was present in an interview, both actors would perform as the interviewee in the hotseat. Stafford-Clark commented that:

I sometimes got both the people who interviewed [the subject] to hotseat as them. So if you and I interviewed [someone], the next day we would improvise [as him]. I might say something in my notes which prompts you to go further because you remember the next bit. <sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Willett, *BT*, pp.137-8.

<sup>131</sup> Stafford-Clark also states that 'it is very interesting when two actors return from an interview with a new character. Usually I get them to play the character simultaneously...irrespective of sex. It often leads to quite fascinating moments when they respond simultaneously to a particular question', Hammond and Steward, *Verbatim: Verbatim*, p.65.

By garnering more than one opinion, this stage precluded engendering illusion, and rather foregrounded the different attitudes of the actors towards the individual they interviewed.

Like these techniques, Brecht encouraged his actors to search for differences and contradictions throughout the drama, in the plot, scenes and characters:

In order to unearth society's laws of motion this method treats social situations as processes, and traces out all their inconsistencies. It regards nothing as existing except in so far as it changes...this also goes for those human feelings, opinions and attitudes.<sup>132</sup>

Ekkehard Schall, one of Brecht's leading actors, identified how Brecht's statement practically affected his process:

The actor does not play contradictions and development, but rather contradictions as development...the actor's experience must construct the figure in a purely subjective way...as a vehicle and expression of contradictions.<sup>133</sup>

The character, in Schall's experience, is thus built from the contradictions in the text.

He goes on to suggest the lure of this dialectical process: 'It is rewarding and exciting that this dialectical procedure produces unities in the most complex form and vigorously maintains their contradictions for as long as possible.'<sup>134</sup> These techniques, as we have seen in Schall's comments, were designed by Brecht to

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<sup>132</sup> Brecht, 'A Short Organum', in Willett, *BT*, p.193. Similarly, Meg Mumford contends that Brecht's life was above all concerned with change and flux, see 'A Life of Flux' in Meg Mumford, *Bertolt Brecht* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp.1-47.

<sup>133</sup> Ekkehard Schall, *The Craft of Theatre* (London: Methuen, 2000), p.11-12.

<sup>134</sup> Schall, *The Craft of Theatre*, p.21.

create a dialectical view of the character. However, it is on this point that this stage of the hotseating process departs from creating a Brechtian rendering of character. ‘Simultaneous re-enactment’ encouraged the actors to adopt an analytical view of their subjects, but we must remember Stafford-Clark’s assertion that the research stages were designed ‘to stimulate the writer’.<sup>135</sup> It appears that whilst the actors may have benefited, the simultaneous re-enactment stage was primarily designed to provide the writer and director with rich and plentiful material from multiple view-points, rather than a strategy to assist the actors to build a dialectical view of their subject.

### **First person recollection: experiments with inhabitation**

The process of ‘simultaneous re-enactment’ was only the first stage in the hotseating process. As Ettridge states, after answering in the third person, he was instructed to ‘do that as him [his subject]’ and respond in the first person. Chris Ryman echoes Ettridge:

[After meeting them] we’d then come back and we would just say what happened, what we saw, what we heard, and then we’d go into the scene, we would re-enact and improvise the kind of the things we heard.

Ettridge recalled that in the second stage of hotseating ‘you drift in a quite seamless way into becoming that character...It is a very gentle shift that Max does’.

Hutchinson described that ‘you take on the character’, whilst Catherine Russell

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<sup>135</sup> Wu, *Making Plays*, p.60.

recalled that ‘you’d become the character in the room’. When I questioned the actors further about the specific nature of this transformation, particular experiences were articulated. Alexander Hanson recalled:

...the cast sat round the table, and I was there as the Colonel, and basically they asked me questions about army policy, so you are really on the rack. You are taken out of your comfort zone...

As the actors did not read from their script, they were both physically and mentally engaged in improvising responses to the questions, whilst staying as close to what they could remember of the interviewee’s testimony as possible and trying to capture, unrehearsed, the way in which it was given. This represents a departure from Brecht’s view that:

The actor must remain a demonstrator; he must present the person demonstrated as a stranger, he must not suppress the ‘*he* did that, *he* said that’ element in his performance. He must not go as far as to be wholly transformed into the person demonstrated.<sup>136</sup>

As we have already seen, it should be noted that Brecht is a polemicist and defines himself against Stanislavski in sometimes over-emphatic and unhelpful ways; Stanislavski did not claim that an actor can be ‘wholly transformed into the person’.<sup>137</sup> Hanson did not mythologise his process in this way, but rather indicated that answering as the Colonel felt ‘false’: ‘I did a very bold version of him...It feels false if you try to do it’. Similarly, Lloyd Hutchinson commented that:

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<sup>136</sup> Brecht, ‘The Street Scene’, in Willett, *BT*, p.123.

<sup>137</sup> As Benedetti states, ‘If I really believe I am someone else then I am, in Stanislavski’s words, a pathological case and need psychiatric help’, *Stanislavski and the Actor* (London: Methuen, 1998), p.1.

I would say to begin with I was sort of impersonating in the hotseat, I didn't completely inhabit him. Then after a while, later in the process, that just goes out the window when you're faced with things on the page, intentions that the writer had.

Perhaps as a result of the timing of the session, so soon after the meeting, these actors were aware of the limitations of their inhabitation and remained particularly conscious of the duality in their performance. This may well have also been a product of the preceding 'simultaneous re-enactment' stage, which meant that when they replied as the individual, they did not lose the narratorial quality the previous stage had established. Whilst this second stage may have departed from Brecht's writings, the actors' awareness of duality finds resonance in Stanislavski's work, most fully explored in *An Actor's Work*.

### **Hotseating and Stanislavski**

Although Stanislavski does not use the term 'hotseating', in *An Actor's Work*, he places the young actor 'Kostya' in a similar situation. Kostya takes part in an improvisation in which he plays an acerbic critic. After the improvisation, he stays in character when questioned by the director, Tortsov. He notes: 'I'm happy because I know what being someone else requires, what *transformation and physical characterisation are*'.<sup>138</sup> However, when Stanislavski explains the nature of this 'immersion', he notes a duality not dissimilar to that which Cullen's and

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<sup>138</sup> Stanislavski, *AAW*, p.526. Original emphasis.

Hutchinson's comments suggest was created through the two-stage hotseating exercise:

...while I was living the Critic I still didn't lose contact with myself, Kostya. I drew this conclusion because all the time I was acting I took enormous pleasure in observing my own physical transformation... The Critic came out of me. I, as it were, split down the middle. One half was the actor, the other watched like an audience. Strange. This sense of being split in two wasn't a hindrance, it fired and encouraged the creative process.<sup>139</sup>

Stanislavski expounds a duality in which part of the actor's awareness is focused on observing the character created. This represents a significant overlap with Brecht's theories, and yet in academic discourse on Stanislavski's work, his comments on duality are often overlooked, arguably in an attempt to polarise the two theorists' work.

When playing a real person only hours after meeting them, it is little surprise that the actors were pre-occupied with adhering to the specifics of the original interview. This may well have been more keenly felt in Stafford-Clark's and Soans's working processes (as Hanson said, he was 'on the rack'), because unlike Stanislavski's description, they were not only portraying a real person, but also a person the writer and (often) the director had met. The added pressure of the writer's and director's familiarity with the subject appears to have increased the actors' dual awareness, since they had to monitor, censor and control their portrayals.

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<sup>139</sup> Stanislavski, *AAW*, p.527.



## Post-hotseating Processes

### **Alexander Hanson: From a ‘false’ portrayal to a ‘half-way house’ and Chekhov’s ‘Imaginary Body’**

As we have seen, Hanson sought to establish the similarities between himself and the Colonel in his meeting. By contrast, Stafford-Clark’s demand for an ‘accurate recreation’ meant that Hanson moved away from his own mannerisms to replicate the Colonel’s responses:

The next day I went in the hotseat, I did a very bold version of him. Particularly his way of speaking. It feels false if you try to do it, but eventually you begin to own the actions.

It is informative to consider what Hanson means by ‘a bold version’ of ‘his way of speaking’. Hanson implies that he exaggerated his portrayal; an enlargement which meant his performance felt ‘false’. However, Hanson’s comment that ‘eventually you begin to own the actions’, suggests that his journey post-hotseat was predicated on using the shared features he established in the meeting to psychologically justify and thereby ‘own’ his portrayal.

Hanson stated that a critical stage in this journey was establishing a ‘half-way house’ between himself and the Colonel. This was based on a combination of his observation in the meeting and his awareness of what was theatrically viable:

You bring what you have as an individual...and you create that half-way house. You want to maintain the integrity of the person you are playing, but you also know what works – what turns an audience on – what keeps attention, which is your craft.

In contrast to the actors' descriptions of their preparation for the hotseat, here Hanson more readily acknowledges his own creative agency and interpretive interventions in constructing the role. The creation of this 'half-way house' between Hanson and the Colonel allowed Hanson to develop his portrayal beyond the performance he gave in the hotseat. He stated:

...you're not really copying the individual, you try and be him, but ultimately of course you find a half-way house between yourself and that person.

Hanson's description of the 'half-way house' does not find a particular resonance in Stanislavski's writings, but has many similarities with Michael Chekhov's description of the 'imaginary body'.<sup>140</sup>

Hanson's 'bold version' in the hotseat necessarily emphasised the differences between, for example, his voice and the Colonel's. Chekhov suggests that a character is defined by the ways in which it is distinct from the actor: 'That which constitutes their *difference* makes them *characters*.'<sup>141</sup> Using a similar vocabulary to Stella Adler, Chekhov writes that the actor should therefore ask 'What is the *difference* – however subtle or slight this difference may be – between myself and

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<sup>140</sup> Chekhov was one of Stanislavski's leading actors who, using Stanislavski's work as a base (and point of departure), became a successful actor-trainer.

<sup>141</sup> Michael Chekhov, *To the Actor* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.78. (Henceforward, *TTA*) Original emphasis.

the character as it is described by the playwright?’<sup>142</sup> Michael Chekhov states that the character should be created through these differences. He calls this creation an ‘imaginary body’:

You are going to imagine that in the same space you occupy with your own, real body, there exists another body – the imaginary body of your character, which you have just created in your mind.<sup>143</sup>

Like Merlin’s realisation of the power of physicality to directly affect emotion, this imaginary body ‘influences your psychology...your *whole being, psychologically and physically*, will be changed’.<sup>144</sup> Chekhov, in contrast to Stanislavski, argued that complete transformation was possible. This is evidently a fallacy, and yet his comments regarding the ‘imaginary body’ provide a fascinating alternative to a Stanislavskian approach to character creation.

Chekhov warns against ““performing” your imaginary body prematurely’:<sup>145</sup>

Do not exaggerate outwardly by stressing, pushing and over-doing those subtle inspirations which come to you from your ‘new body’. And only when you begin to feel absolutely free, true and natural in using it should you start rehearsing your character with its lines and business.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Chekhov, *TTA*, p.78. Original emphasis

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p.79. Original emphasis.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p.80.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*,

This relates very closely to Hanson's experience in the hotseat; his 'bold version' may have felt 'false' because his session took place so early in his preparation for the play. He was, to use Chekhov's words, 'outwardly...stressing, pushing and over-doing' his portrayal, because of Stafford-Clark's request for an accurate representation of the Colonel in the hotseat so soon after the meeting. However, Hanson's remark that he began to 'own the actions' has a strong resonance with Chekhov's statement that 'you begin to feel absolutely free, true and natural'. Again, we must question the use of these terms. Acting is not 'true and natural'. Rather, we can understand these comments as referring to the actor's physical and emotional confidence in the role. Seen through Chekhov's description, therefore, we can understand Hanson's performance in the hotseat as an exercise which both fulfilled Stafford-Clark's wish for accuracy and at the same time set the parameters within which his 'half-way house' or 'imaginary body' could be located.

### **Chekhov's tripartite construct and emotion memory**

Chekhov's advice about the rendering of emotion within the 'imaginary body' provides a further frame through which to understand Hanson's process. Like Hanson's description that he did not consciously use his own emotional memory in his preparation, Chekhov states that 'the imaginary body stands, as it were, *between* your real body and your psychology'.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Chekhov, *TTA*, p.79.

Chekhov's theory of the actor - imaginary body - character is mirrored in his tripartite construct of the 'self' (a term which he uses interchangeably with the '*I*'). This is composed of three different levels of consciousness, which he terms the 'everyday *I*', the 'higher *I*' and the 'character's *I*'. On the most basic level is the 'everyday *I*', which is the actor's own 'emotions, voice and mobile body'.<sup>148</sup> The features of the 'everyday *I*' provide the material with which the 'higher *I*' can work. Chekhov explains that the 'higher *I*' is the 'expanded self', a feeling the actor experiences in the moment of creation. Thus, when an actor is performing, 'you are two selves'. It is the relationship between these two selves that allows inspiration to occur, by 'putting you into a *creative state*'.<sup>149</sup> Chekhov identifies the 'everyday *I*' as a solid base on which to build; it is the 'common-sense regulator', which 'controls the canvas upon which the creative individuality [the higher *I*] draws its designs'.<sup>150</sup> This higher self is quite detached from the actor's everyday personality, as it is present only when on stage in the moment of creation. The third consciousness is the 'character's *I*', which is created by the 'everyday *I*' and the 'higher *I*'. This third entity 'becomes the focal point of the higher self's creative impulses'.<sup>151</sup> To apply this directly to Hanson's comments above (on p.67), he was able to bring 'what you have as an individual' (the 'everyday *I*'), but also 'your craft' (the creative 'higher *I*') which together Hanson used to create 'a half-way house' between himself and the Colonel.

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<sup>148</sup> Chekhov, *TTA*, p.87.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p.87. Original emphasis.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, p.88.

<sup>151</sup> The similarities to Freud's tripartite structural model of the psyche cannot be overlooked. Freud's construction of the id, ego, and superego was first published in his 1920 essay, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', at a time when Chekhov was creating some of his most celebrated roles with the Moscow Art Theatre.

The crucial departure from Stanislavski (and one which aligns Hanson's process more closely with Chekhov) is in the way in which the actor's own experiences are deployed in the 'character's *I*'. As examined above, Stanislavski used "if" to draw on the actor's own experiences in relation to the circumstances of a role. Although Chekhov acknowledges that the material for character creation stems from the actor's own experiences, he states that the emotions engendered by the 'higher *I*' are 'as "unreal" as the "soul" of the character itself'.<sup>152</sup> As they are so strongly linked to the moment of inspiration, they are not part of the actor's 'everyday *I*', but rather a product of imagination and creative individuality. Although Stanislavski suggested a dual awareness of the actor and role and that the actor is never completely lost in the character, he never deconstructed the psychological side of character creation to this extent. Indeed, unlike Stanislavski, Chekhov warns the actor against using experiences directly sourced from his or her 'everyday *I*'; if they do:

...they would become forever yours, indelibly impressed upon you after the performance is over... You would not be able to draw the line of demarcation between the illusory life of your character and that of your own. In no time you would be driven mad. If creative feelings were not "unreal" you would not be able to enjoy playing villains or other undesirable characters.<sup>153</sup>

Chekhov develops, like Stanislavski, an understanding of rendering emotion on stage which acknowledges the use of the actor's own feelings. However, through his

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<sup>152</sup> Chekhov, *TTA*, p.90.

<sup>153</sup> Chekhov, *TTA*, p.90. Chekhov's warning about being 'driven mad' is perhaps levelled at the method school, whose actors, in their use of affective memory, were reported to have experienced emotional and psychological difficulties.

elaboration of the ‘higher *I*’, Chekhov foregrounds imagination, rather than the provocation of personal experiences, which means that specific analogous events are not called upon. As Mel Gordon argues in his introduction to Chekhov’s *Lessons for the Professional Actor*:

Where Stanislavski’s emotion memory exercises played upon the actor’s sensory recall of an actual event, which then had to be used as a substitute in a similar occurrence in a script, Chekhov schooled his students in finding imaginary, external stimuli to fire their imaginations.<sup>154</sup>

Hanson thus combined his pre-hotseating approach of establishing the similarities between himself and the Colonel with his hotseating session in which he moved his portrayal away from himself and started to embody another ‘imaginary body’ which lay between the two. In contrast to his pre-hotseating approach, the way in which Hanson described his rehearsal process shows a conscious acceptance of his own creative endeavours. This is perhaps best summarised by Hanson’s comment that ‘the person I was portraying sort of wasn’t him, but it was his words.’ Hanson did not attempt to minutely recreate what he had observed, but still based the character he created on the individual he met. We have found two main departures from the available vocabularies to describe Hanson’s work. Despite involving his own personality to create a character, he did not admit consciously to using his own analogous experiences for the source of emotion, which departs from Stanislavski’s five-point process of ‘Analysis’. More applicable to his post-hotseating process was

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<sup>154</sup> Michael Chekhov, *Lesson for the Professional Actor* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1985), p.18. However, it should be noted that this refers to Stanislavski’s early work. He spent his career grappling with the use of emotion memory.

Chekhov's 'imaginary body' and the 'higher I'. However, the exigencies of playing a real person using Stafford-Clark's particular working methods meant that Hanson's focus was not, as Chekhov would have it, on imagination, but rather on the creative manipulation and utilisation of what Hanson had observed in his meeting with the Colonel.

A major determinant in Hanson's process was his relaxed sense of accountability to the real life Colonel. Indeed, when I asked how he felt about the Colonel's presence at a performance of the play, Hanson answered: 'I was rather proud of what I was doing...that didn't faze me'. There are several possible reasons for Hanson's relaxed approach to playing the Colonel. The Colonel talked to the group (and later to Hanson personally) in his capacity as a senior member of the British Army. His testimony in the play thus focuses on official policy. Although the Colonel may describe harrowing events he (or his soldiers) witnessed, he does so in his professional role, in which the events are analysed with reference to army policy rather than reliving deeply personal memories. This is in contrast to others who appear in the play who recount their own terrorist acts, or the way in which they have been acutely affected by them. Carol Martin's 'rules of admissibility' provide a useful frame of reference in relation to Hanson's attitude towards his character:<sup>155</sup>

Documentary theatre emphasises certain kinds of memory and buries others. What is outside the archive – glances, gestures, body language, the felt experience of space, and the proximity of bodies –

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<sup>155</sup> Carol Martin, 'Bodies of Evidence' in *TDR*, Vol.50:3 (Fall 2006), p.11.



is created by actors and directors according to their own rules of admissibility.<sup>156</sup>

Martin's comments are problematic in that she delimits 'the archive' in verbatim theatre. In the case of *Talking to Terrorists*, as a result of the bipartite process of interview and hotseating, the archive includes many of the features which Martin contends are 'outside' it. Where, therefore, Martin describes these features as 'created by actors and directors', we might substitute 're-imagined'. However, the notion of 'rules of admissibility' and particularly whether these rules are set by the actors or director is highly instructive with regard to Stafford-Clark's claims to empower the actors. As Hanson was not responsible for handling particularly personally sensitive material when playing the Colonel, his 'rules of admissibility' were somewhat more relaxed than we shall see in the experiences of other actors.

A further determinant was the Colonel's personality. Hanson did not need to radically alter what he saw to make his representation theatrically viable. Hanson said, 'The Colonel was very open, confident and charismatic'. Thus, although his recreation in the hotseat felt 'false', there was an inherent theatricality to the Colonel that meant that Hanson's task of translating his behaviour for the stage was relatively straightforward. Equally critical to his unconstrained experience was the fact that Stafford-Clark was also satisfied by his portrayal in the hotseat: it met the director's 'rules of admissibility'. By contrast, the issue of theatrical viability was

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<sup>156</sup> Martin, *TDR*, p.11. Martin is an American academic. In America, verbatim theatre is referred to as documentary.

central to both Lloyd Hutchinson's and Catherine Russell's approaches. Their experiences illustrate contrasting challenges to Hanson's approach.

### **Creating a theatrical truth: Lloyd Hutchinson**

Hutchinson met the ex-IRA member in Belfast with Robin Soans during the second research phase. The individual had previously spoken to the cast in the first research phase at the Out of Joint rehearsal room, where his interview was recorded, so there was already a draft of the interview. Throughout his process, Hutchinson was aware of the importance of theatrical viability. As the interviewee was well versed in recounting his story, in the interview Hutchinson and Soans searched for new, dramatically interesting information to enrich the testimony that April de Angelis had already collated. Hutchinson recalled:

[He's] been involved in reconciliation work, so he'd told his story many, many times both on television, radio and the printed media. What we wanted was something from him that wasn't basically him giving us a load of sound bites. Something from a more human angle. Something that would be ultimately more theatrical, I suppose, something that would work in a theatre.

Hutchinson's concern with theatricality was realised with regard to the content; the ex-IRA member's story of planting the Brighton Bomb is utterly chilling, particularly as Soans inter-cuts the bomber's story with testimony from the victims

of the attack, constructing a powerful montaged polemic.<sup>157</sup> However, Hutchinson found that recreating the *manner* in which this information was given was more problematic.

In addition to his description of his ‘impersonation’, Hutchinson described that in the hotseating sessions ‘...you take on the character, and they ask you questions and basically you try and give an impression of the person that you met.’ The way in which he foregrounded externality as a means to achieve this in the hotseat became more pronounced when he said: ‘You maybe start by using certain physical things and vocal things that they have, but then you kind of forget about them.’ However, the care Hutchinson took in replicating these external features resulted in difficulties because of the theatrical viability of his subject. To illustrate these challenges, Hutchinson contrasted his experiences of playing the ex-IRA member with his portrayal of the Archbishop’s Envoy, Terry Waite:

...the problem with [the ex-IRA member] is that he is an unbelievably soft spoken man, so I had to find a way that you could convey his naturally subdued behaviour in a theatre; whereas Terry Waite has quite big and expansive gestures, so that’s pretty easy to do.

It is evident from Hutchinson’s comments above that whilst an accurate recreation was helpful in his portrayal of Terry Waite, it was not theatrically viable for the ex-IRA member. Due to Terry Waite’s larger than life physique and personality,

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<sup>157</sup> Jenny Hughes similarly noted that ‘The play provides an opportunity to witness remarkable testimony from and is extremely moving in its juxtaposition of testimony from victims and perpetrators’. See *CTR*, p.152.

Hutchinson felt he did not consciously have to adapt his observations for his portrayal:

I mean why do you feel you need to create something when you've already got those, the living, breathing model of them sitting there in front of you? If you're playing a real person there are indications of how the role should be played.

Whilst this is evidently true of his portrayal of Waite, Hutchinson certainly had to 'create something' to adapt his portrayal of the 'unbelievably soft spoken' ex-IRA member to make it theatrically viable (or at the very least, theatrically audible).

### **Adaptation and Theatrical Viability**

Adaptation has to take place as you are performing in public. You are performing in front of four hundred people, where in the interview, it was to one person.

Max Stafford-Clark

Here, the term 'adaptation' is understood to refer to the conscious changes imposed by the director and/or actors between the person interviewed and the actor's portrayal of them. As Max Stafford-Clark states, there can be no performance without some degree of adaptation, and yet his direction for the actors to be 'accurate' in the hotseat was clearly an effort to limit adaptation as far as possible. The journey for the actors was thus to develop a theatrically viable character from the precise recreation they gave in the hotseat, a journey that clearly varied

depending on the interviewee. Whether the direction of the journey was according to the actors' 'rules of admissibility' or Stafford-Clark's will be considered below.

Whilst observation is unanimously hailed as one of the most important tools for an actor, the way in which the actor can utilise observed behaviour has been explored in various ways. For example, Sanford Meisner instructs a young actor that:

When you put the real situation on the stage, you need to keep its reality so that it's believable both to you and to the audience, but you have to raise it to a level above real life. Otherwise it doesn't communicate.<sup>158</sup>

Brecht was similarly mindful of avoiding exact recreation:

Observation is a major part of acting. The actor observes his fellow-men with all his nerves and muscles in an act of imitation which is at the same time a process of the mind. For pure imitation would only bring out what had been observed; and this is not enough, because the original said what it had to say with too subdued a voice.<sup>159</sup>

For Brecht, therefore, it is the 'process of the mind' which is the actor's key creative aid to avoid reliance on 'pure imitation'.

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<sup>158</sup> Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell, *Sanford Meisner: On Acting* (New York: Vintage Original, 1987), p.146. Meisner was a hugely influential actor trainer in the United States who was one of the original group of actors to be trained at the Group Theatre in New York under the direction of Lee Strasberg. Meisner, like Strasberg was greatly indebted to Stanislavski, and took both Stanislavski's work and that of Strasberg's method school as a point of departure in his own actor training.

<sup>159</sup> Brecht, 'A Short Organum', in Willett, *BT*, p.196.

However, Hutchinson's comments most closely relate to Stanislavski's writings on 'theatrical truth' or 'theatrical fact'. The concept is one of the cornerstones of Stanislavski's system. In *An Actor's Work* he states:

...in the real world, genuine truth and belief create themselves...But when there is no reality onstage and you have acting...truth and belief first arise in the imagination, as an artistic fiction, which is then translated onto the stage...[You] create theatrical truth and belief onstage. So, in life there is truth, what is, what exists, what people really know. Onstage we call truth that which does not exist in reality but could happen.<sup>160</sup>

Later in *An Actor's Work*, Stanislavski states that to perform 'actual truth' is impossible for an actor:

Genuine "facts", the normal world, do not exist on stage. The normal world is not art...The actor's task is to use his creative skills to transform the story of the play into *theatrical fact*. Our imagination has an enormous role to play here.<sup>161</sup>

Hanson and Hutchinson described how they developed their role beyond 'impersonation' and the 'false' feeling they experienced in the hotseat. As we have seen, for Hanson this was predicated on creating a 'half-way house'. For Hutchinson, the notion of choice and selection was critical. This issue came to the fore when he considered how to adapt the quietness of his subject:

You choose the elements that will work. So I didn't copy [ex-IRA's] quiet voice, but I did use his stillness. It is about selecting what is going to work.

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<sup>160</sup> Stanislavski, *AAW*, p.153.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p.60. This further evidences his lack of belief in complete transformation, unlike Chekhov.

Hutchinson's comments are consistent with Stanislavski's statement that the actor must choose 'what is essential' in his/her portrayal, which is evidently an entirely subjective intervention by the actor. In his short note 'On Being Truthful in Acting', Stanislavski asked:

What does it really mean to be truthful on the stage? ...Does it mean that you conduct yourself as you do in everyday life? Not at all. Truthfulness in those terms would be sheer triviality. There is the same difference between artistic and inartistic truth as exists between a painting and a photograph: the latter reproduces everything, the former only what is essential.<sup>162</sup>

Hutchinson, therefore, created a theatrical truth by finding an alternative approach to portraying a feature that was not theatrically viable, which clearly involved his observational skills. His comments echo those of Bella Merlin, who states:

The process that the actors were asked to engage in with Stafford-Clark and Hare was, I would argue, the distilling of 'actual fact' into 'scenic truth'. This distillation...was not the *diminishment* of truth, rather the condensation of 'truth' into a palatable and manageable artistic form.<sup>163</sup>

Continuing an emerging trend of experience among the cast, Hutchinson's approach was more associated with observational memory, here adapted to create a 'theatrical truth', than it was with his own experiential recall. Stanislavski stated that

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<sup>162</sup> Constantin Stanislavski, *Stanislavski's Legacy*, edited and translated by Elisabeth Reynolds Hapgood (London: Methuen, 1968), p.20. It should be noted that this statement was written in 1905 at a time when photography was a new and exciting art, and as such appears dated. The relationship between a painting and a photograph is much more complex to the modern reader.

<sup>163</sup> Merlin, *CTR*, p.42. 'Theatrical truth' is Jean Benedetti's new translation, previously known as 'scenic truth' in the translation by ER Hapgood. Merlin noted that David Hare's phrase for creating a scenic truth was 'raising the temperature'. Merlin, 'Sleeping with the Enemy', 2010.

Not all the truths we know in life are good for the theatre. Truth in the theatre must be genuine, not glamorized. It must be purged of unnecessary, mundane details. It must be true in a realistic sense but made poetic by creative ideas.<sup>164</sup>

Stanislavski's comment has a strong resonance with Hutchinson's process, although 'creative observation' may be closer to his working method. Like Stafford-Clark's statement that 'I make no claim to the absolute authenticity of it, but it is true to the spirit of it', Hutchinson was able to maintain the qualities which he felt were indispensable (here the ex-IRA member's quietness) by consciously adapting his performance to create a 'theatrical truth'. Hutchinson actively intervened with character creation, and thus his post-hotseating processes moved away from the impersonation he gave in the hotseat. It is also noteworthy that Hutchinson's process was based on his own 'rules of admissibility'. He identified, and was able to fix, the problem of theatrical viability in his portrayal of the ex-IRA member. However, Stafford-Clark's notion of staying 'true to the spirit of it' is significantly problematised by Catherine Russell's experiences.

### **Catherine Russell: adaptation/re-invention**

Catherine Russell played 'Rima', the journalist, and 'Phoebe', a relief worker for Save the Children. She used her meetings with them to establish the circumstances of their lives and careers which were outside the testimony Soans had already

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<sup>164</sup> Stanislavski, *AAW*, p.192.



drafted. However, Russell's experience of hotseating fundamentally challenged her approach.

Russell found her hotseating session as 'Rima' was very helpful due to the inherent theatricality of her subject: 'she is an extremely theatrical character and her personality transfers very well to the stage as she is very entertaining.' However, her portrayal of 'Phoebe' was a very different experience. She recalled that in the hotseat:

Max was saying, 'well that is not very entertaining'. Poor woman!  
So actually that really set me back a few weeks meeting her, as I had her very firmly in my mind but that is not what the director and the writer wanted, it didn't fit in. So I had to create somebody who wasn't her.

This represents a complete contrast to the experiences of the other actors above and provokes serious questions about Stafford-Clark's working methods. Although Hutchinson had to adapt certain elements to make his portrayal theatrically viable, the core of his observational work remained intact. When translating something to create a 'theatrical truth', Stanislavski only proposed finding the 'poetical equivalent', rather than entirely re-inventing the character. The care Russell had taken to find out more of 'Phoebe's' circumstances in her pre-hotseating work was of very little use to her, as she felt she had to dismiss it and 'create somebody that wasn't her'. The changes demanded by Stafford-Clark severely hampered her approach:

It made it really, really difficult, it's the same with most things, once you've learnt or got your head around something, it is very difficult then to change. I found it an incredibly difficult rehearsal process from that point of view.

Russell thus had to completely re-imagine a character; one unrelated to the 'not very entertaining' (yet more accurate) portrayal she gave in the hotseat. The contrast between her pre-hotseat preparation and what was imposed on her by Stafford-Clark was enough to make her ask: 'was it useful meeting her? Not really... what I wanted to do was to play her.' This evidently was not the agenda shared by the director. In contrast to Hutchinson's experiences, in her portrayal of 'Phoebe', Russell was entirely at the mercy of Stafford-Clark's and Soans's 'rules of admissibility'. Stafford-Clark's comment that he'd 'always go for theatricality' meant that he privileged a workable dramaturgy over a precise rendering of the interviewee; thus a high level of adaptation (indeed complete re-invention) was admissible in order that the portrayals were interesting, which evidently presented a very problematic conundrum for Russell.

To return to the comparison between Catherine Russell's and Jonathan Cullen's experiences, as Cullen didn't meet anyone he played before the production opened, he was wholly reliant on Stafford-Clark and Soans for guidance. Despite the fact that this vested power in the director and writer, it also meant that he was spared the problems that Russell experienced. Cullen said: 'they [the actors who took part in the research phases] were coming from a very different place as they had done the

interviews themselves and knew the people they were talking about.’ However, he did not see himself as being at a disadvantage:

I think there are two big dangers...one is that you get too attached to the person you have interviewed, and you don’t want to betray them, so you want all of their words in, and the other one is that you know too much about them, and you forget to represent that, to make it dramatic for the audience, who don’t know that person. But I was spared these problems, I was in the same situation as the audience, I was coming to it fresh.

Here Cullen alludes to some of the problems which were evidently informing Stafford-Clark’s advice to Russell. For Cullen, bypassing the hotseating session avoided this very delicate negotiation, which, in the example of Russell, was detrimental to her preparation. This is not surprising, as these problems are completely outside any theories of acting or actor training.

Chipo Chung, like Cullen didn’t meet the ex-member of the National Resistance Army, Uganda whom she played. We have already seen the difficulties surrounding her portrayal of Nadira, whom she had met. When I asked her how she felt about not meeting the ex-NRA member, she stated:

I was quite, not devastated by it, but quite disappointed. It gives you a huge hook to the character to meet them... I could only go on, you know, a lot of direction [from Soans and Stafford Clark] saying ‘this is how she did it’ and ‘this is how she said it’, which is quite difficult as an actor because you’re not supported by knowing what you’re aiming for yourself.

Like Cullen, the fact that Chung did not meet her subject evidently handed the creative impetus to the director and writer, which she found problematic. However, Russell's evidence creates doubt as to whether the situation would be improved by meeting her.

When viewed in comparison to Cullen's and Chung's experiences, Russell's comments are highly significant in relation to Stafford-Clark's claims regarding his research processes. Russell was not empowered or nourished by her involvement, indeed quite the opposite. Her process was far more problematic than Cullen's, who didn't meet his subjects at all. The experience was evidently frustrating for Russell and reinforced the status of the director, to the detriment of her own work. In this way, her comments echo Simon Callow's view that these working processes can create a 'directocracy'. Indeed, although Russell did not feel her hotseating session as 'Phoebe' helped her, there were aspects which assisted both Soans and particularly Stafford-Clark. With regard to content, it should be remembered that 'Phoebe' talked to the research team at the Out of Joint rehearsal room during the second research phase, before Russell had been cast in the play. This is in contrast to *The Permanent Way*, in which the actors had a much larger role to play in the generation of material.<sup>165</sup> For example, David Hare relied on Bella Merlin for the content of the script as well as the way in which the testimony was given. Derek Paget has suggested that the hotseating exercise in *The Permanent Way* 'was also a

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<sup>165</sup> Lloyd Hutchinson told me: 'in *The Permanent Way*, David Hare didn't see the Squadron Leader who I played...so he used the material I'd gathered and fashioned the play out of that.' June Watson also said: 'I know that with *The Permanent Way* the actors were much more involved, but here Max and Robin did most of the interviewing'

kind of audition' in that the actors were pitching their interviewees to the director and writer.<sup>166</sup> When Russell became involved, Soans and Stafford-Clark had already decided that 'Phoebe' would appear in the play, and furthermore, that Russell would play her. Russell, therefore, was not 'pitching' 'Phoebe', who had been included, but rather pitching her performance of her. Although Russell's hotseating session did provide more additional material for Soans, most notably Russell's hotseating process assisted Stafford-Clark as he was able, at the earliest possible opportunity, to change Russell's portrayal to fit his own notions of theatrical viability. Russell's comments suggest that, for her, the hotseating process was a rite of passage in which she needed to 'pass' Stafford-Clark's test.

Russell's experience prompts wider questions about Stafford-Clark's and Soans's manipulation of the stories of a real person. Summarising her feelings, Russell stated:

...there is the question of accuracy for an actor. Like with [Phoebe] from *Save the Children*, an accurate portrayal of her would not have been theatrical. So when you are presenting the truth, you are not really presenting the truth.

Russell's experiences can be juxtaposed against Stafford-Clark's comment that 'observation and accuracy, which are part of any actor's training, are very much what you look for'.<sup>167</sup> As we have seen, Russell's work on both these areas was dismissed by the director. Russell's comments also cast severe doubt over Stafford-

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<sup>166</sup> Derek Paget, 'Acting with Facts', p.171.

<sup>167</sup> Hammond and Steward, *Verbatim: Verbatim*, p.65.

Clark's argument that 'I make no claim to absolute authenticity of it, but it is true to the spirit of it'. Rather, evidently, we might add the highly problematic caveat: 'when the interviewee is interesting enough'. It appears that, in the depiction of 'Phoebe', Stafford-Clark's foregrounding of theatricality over accuracy eclipsed his claims to be 'true to the spirit' of the interview. However, in his defence, it was Stafford-Clark, and not the actors who had a perspective on the whole play. We can compare this to Merlin's experience with regard to the Mother finding her performance 'hard', which Merlin attributed to the function of the character in the play. In the montage of speeches in *Talking to Terrorists*, Stafford-Clark was able to see the narrative function of the characters in the play as a whole. This was a luxury which, in their multiple roles and counter-pointed monologues, the actors themselves were denied.

### **Conclusion**

It is evident from the actors' testimony that their involvement in the production's research phases, particularly their meetings with the individuals they later played, had a significant effect on their work. Although in all cases the meetings stimulated their creative processes, problems appear to have arisen in the disparity between the actors' relationship to their subject and the director's personal plans for their portrayals. It is, however, clear that the production presented the actors with challenges which were new, and for which the actors' training seemingly had not prepared them.

It has become clear that despite the actors' grounding in a popular understanding of Stanislavski's work, his teaching has repeatedly been found to be inadequate to encompass the complexity of their approaches. Analysed in relation to Stanislavski's work, the disparity between the actors' description of their processes and Stanislavski's teaching became more evident. Thus, the actors experienced a constant struggle to find a vocabulary appropriate to articulate what they did. Whilst Merlin is the only verbatim practitioner to have written about her use of Stanislavski, it is evident that we need a more subtle, sophisticated and varied vocabulary to analyse the actors' processes.

From interrogating these actors' testimonies, it is possible to be quite specific about the limited applicability of Stanislavski's techniques. The primary departure from a Stanislavskian rendering of character occurs on the deployment of the actor's own emotion memory and experiential recall. All the actors here distanced their work on their subject from their own emotions and experiences, or what I have called the 'if...I'. In a play such as *Talking to Terrorists*, the actors argued against modifying the interviewees' stories because they felt it would leave them open to accusations that they were not staying accurate to what they had observed. As a result of these concerns, common features of the actors' testimony were in-depth descriptions of highly pragmatic strategies with regard to the interviews. These included Stanislavskian features such as establishing the given circumstances, creating a scenic truth and Christopher Ryman's own reformulation of emotion memory. Here,

the actors were precise about their processes. However, when they articulated how they utilised this information, their vocabulary frequently became more passive and inexact. Although this may be attributable to the difficulties of describing processes which fall outside their past experiences or training, their use of a passive terminology also suggests that the actors are uncomfortable about the ethics of arguing that they make their own creative interventions when playing real people.

If the work of Stanislavski himself is under question, then the work of particular post-Stanislavskian practitioners has proved helpful at certain points. The applicability of their work is no coincidence. Both Stella Adler and Michael Chekhov reformulated Stanislavski's teaching as a result of their experience of working with him as actors.<sup>168</sup> Crucially, their adaptation of his work centred on moving away from the issue of using the actor's own experiences as the root of summoning emotion on stage, and thus is more relevant here. Adler's emphasis on imagination rather than experience and Chekhov's identification of the 'higher I' provide useful frames for furthering our understanding of these actors' processes. However, neither Chekhov's nor Adler's teaching provides a fully workable terminology.

This chapter has also explored the use of Brecht's theories. The actors' descriptions of a less conscious use of their own experiential recall, and the desire for a greater distance between role and self suggest that Brecht may indeed provide a useful

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<sup>168</sup> Chekhov acted with Stanislavski for many years at the Moscow Art Theatre, Adler met Stanislavski for a fortnight-long discussion of his methods.



frame of reference. At certain points his work bears striking resemblances to the working methods analysed here. For example, his writings on reportage and narration are particularly applicable to the ‘simultaneous re-enactment’ stage of hotseating. However, as with Stanislavski, the actors’ practices do not fully conform to Brechtian techniques. Whilst Brecht encouraged actors to undertake research, the *Talking to Terrorists* cast’s emphasis on their subject’s personality and motivation was quite different from Brecht’s interest in political contexts and Marxism. From this case-study, it appears that using a Stanislavskian vocabulary is more problematic than a Brechtian one, and that Brecht may be able to offer techniques more relevant to these actors’ experiences. However, like most British actors, the cast were not trained in Brechtian techniques, and so his vocabulary was not available to the actors. This makes research more complicated and may be a contributing factor to their difficulties of articulation.

Despite the actors’ research, the working methods in *Talking to Terrorists* did not give the cast a higher status in the production as Stafford-Clark has claimed. The fact that Soans met all but one of the subjects himself, and Stafford-Clark the great majority, meant that the actors did not have ownership of the material. Their input was controlled by Stafford-Clark, who did not appear to share the actors’ preoccupations about their roles. Indeed, the creative impulse which resulted from the meetings could very easily be destroyed by Stafford-Clark as a result of his own predetermined and personal notion of theatrical viability. Whether the actors’ creativity was nurtured or destroyed thus appears to be based on what Stafford-Clark

judged dramatically desirable. These actors had a limited and specific role to play within the research phases. They did not function independently but were quite clearly at the service of the writer and the director. It is difficult adequately to contextualise Catherine Russell's crisis through the work of any actor-trainer as her experiences so clearly illustrate how an actor's work can be negated by a director. As has been evidenced by the comparison between Russell and Jonathan Cullen, those involved in the research periods were not necessarily placed in a more advantageous position than those who conducted no research at all. In fact, such was the power vested in the director, Catherine Russell was at a distinct disadvantage having conducted her own research. These experiences significantly counter and problematise Stafford-Clark's claims, and by doing so, suggest that the prevailing narratives about actors' work voiced by non-actors need a more sceptical treatment.