
Article:
Cantrell, Thomas Edward orcid.org/0000-0001-7413-1482 and Hogg, Christopher (2016) Returning to an Old Question:What Do Television Actors Do When They Act? Critical Studies in Television. 1. pp. 283-298. ISSN 1749-6020

https://doi.org/10.1177/1749602016662430

Article

Critical Studies in Television

Critical Studies in Television:
The International Journal of
Television Studies
1–16

DOI: 10.1177/1749602016662430
cst.sagepub.com
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Returning to an old question: What do television actors do when they act?

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Abstract
This article argues for acknowledging and exploring actors' processes in critical considerations of television drama. Theatre studies boasts a tradition of research privileging the actor, including a century's worth of actor-training manuals, academic works observing rehearsals and performances and actor accounts. However, such considerations within television studies are relatively nascent. Drawing upon continuing drama as a fertile case study for investigating the specificities of television acting, the article concludes that the only way to understand television acting is through the analysis of insights from actors themselves, in combination with the well-established practices of analysing the textual end products of television acting.

Keywords
Television acting, television performance, soap opera, continuing drama, actor training

In 2000, John Caughie published a chapter examining television acting entitled, 'What Do Actors Do When They Act?' Almost a decade and a half later, the same chapter was reprinted in a second edition of the collection, *British Television Drama: Past, Present and Future* (Bignell and Lacey, 2014). Taking Caughie's chapter as a starting point, this article considers whether or not we have yet arrived at substantive answers to this

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important question, from the perspectives of both television studies and professional actor training.

As Toby Miller recognizes, in looking back at the evolution of television studies, its 'intellectual genealogy ... is formidable and very interdisciplinary' (2002: 1). Yet, John Corner suggests caution with regard to such interdisciplinarity, in recognizing that it can sometimes result in a lack of clarity, or even 'mutual ignorance', as well as enhanced understanding (2004: 7). Drawing – as television studies has always done – from a diverse range of research traditions and perspectives has clear benefits in terms of the utilization of existing skills, approaches and insights. However, it also presents the possibility of obscuring some of the particularities of television as a technological, industrial, cultural and artistic form, through the imposition of ideas and agendas that have originated elsewhere.

This article argues that, although momentum is building and valuable new research has developed over the past few years, there is still much to be done to fully understand the role and processes of the actor within television drama. Theatre studies boasts an abundant tradition of research privileging the actor and their methods in working with character and story, including a century's worth of detailed actor-training manuals, works by academics observing rehearsals and performances and insightful accounts from the actors themselves. However, the same tradition of actor-focused research does not currently exist in relation to television drama. This is not to say that some very valuable interventions have not already been made in this area (Caughie, 2000, 2014; but also Pearson, 2010; and – more recently – Fife Donaldson, 2012; and Hewett, 2013, 2014, 2015), but there is still significant ground to cover, particularly in investigating the ways in which actors mobilize and adapt their training and techniques of preparation and delivery to meet the demands of televisual storytelling. Caughie too recognizes this conspicuous lack within television scholarship, in stating that 'the absence of theoretically informed critical writing about [television] acting is surprising', and that while there exists 'a considerable body of writing about film stardom, and some about television personalities ... there is very little attention to reading the actor' (2000: 162). Although we would argue that the textual 'reading' of end products with regard to television acting has witnessed notable progress in recent years (one only has to look to edited collections such as Christine Cornea's *Genre and Performance: Film and Television* [2010], or to previous volumes of this journal, to see the rich evidence of such analytical development), there remains a lack of specific attention paid to the *processes* of the television actor in realizing such end products on screen. Cynthia Baron and Sharon Marie Carnicke acknowledge a comparable issue in the context of critical considerations of cinematic acting, arguing that '[t]he mediated status of performance elements has led observers to elide the training, experience, and creativity that actors bring ... Often overlooked is the bank of knowledge and experience that actors draw on to produce the gestures, expressions, and intonations that collaborate and combine with other cinematic elements to create meaning ....' (2008: 17). Baron and Carnicke's observation that, resultantly, 'both academics and journalists ... identify film performance with almost anything other than actors' labor and agency' (2008: 17) remains equally true of television acting, we would maintain.

In response, this article adopts the following structure: after first outlining the different ways in which television acting has predominantly been defined and understood to date, the essay will consider the contexts within which such understandings have been formed. The latter part will then illustrate the value of (and need for) the further investigation of television acting from the perspective of the television actor and their methods and processes, through analysing interview material from four actors who have worked extensively on British continuing drama – and 'soap opera', more specifically – as an indicative case study.

What is television acting?

Although its meaning may seem straightforward, 'television acting' resists easy definition. As Caughie rightly recognizes, acting is 'very difficult to nail down analytically' (2000: 162) and 'tests the limits of critical language, complicating the ways in which meanings are made and read' (170). Indeed, existing academic considerations of television acting collectively evidence ambiguity and discord in precisely delineating their object of study.

As a starting point in addressing such ambiguities, a working distinction can be made between 'television acting' and 'television performance'. For our purposes, 'acting' refers specifically to the actor's portrayal of a character within a dramatic context, while 'performance' extends more broadly to other forms of performative involvement within television production, such as presenting game shows or appearing in reality-based programmes, or to the inflection of an actor's work by other elements beyond the contribution of the actor themselves, such as costume, lighting, framing and editing, for example. As Baron and Carnicke's (2008) observations above suggest, and this article shall consider, it is important to make such a working distinction, in light of existing critical tendencies towards television acting which elide the work of the actor with adjacent performative components within the construction of text.

Perhaps the most common-sense definition of television acting is 'what the actor does in front of a camera'. However, this proposed definition fails to account sufficiently for the various preparatory processes (whether undertaken independently or as part of the more formalized mechanics of production) which an actor may work through in advance of arriving at their mark ready for shooting. Steadily increasing economic pressures and commercial priorities within the television industry have resulted in ever-more limited (if any) rehearsal time for actors within many production schedules, particularly in the case of long-running shows where there exists a constant demand for the rapid turnaround and delivery of material.

Nevertheless, little to no formally scheduled rehearsal time for actors does not logically entail little to no preparation or thought on the part of the actor. As television director Sophie Lifschutz notes in relation to her work on the British continuing drama *EastEnders* (1985–): 'actors often come to the set with their own pre-formed ideas about how their characters would handle certain situations' (S. Lifschutz, Personal Interview, June 27, 2014). Compounding this, Baron and Carnicke reflect on comparable production conditions in a cinematic context, highlighting that such conditions necessitate

'more independent preparation than that required for stage performances', and that '[c]ompressed rehearsal time requires players to come to the set or location fully prepared, with a good understanding of their characters and a readiness to adjust that understanding to the director's vision as needed' (2008: 236). Thus, what happens before filming begins must also be acknowledged as contributing to the final 'shape' of what is seen on screen, with actors bringing their training and their skills to bear in constructing character and story. Yet, because these contributing elements often cannot be readily discerned (either in the presence of tangible rehearsal time within production schedules or in the ultimate composition of the text), they are all too easily overlooked. Consequently, as Caughie notes, the television actor is often understood as 'a movable piece in the chess games of creativity and artistic innovation' (2000: 166).

Alongside such predilections towards oversimplification in defining television acting, there is a danger (already acknowledged by the working distinction between 'television acting' and 'television performance' proposed earlier) that the particular contributions of the television actor become obscured within the larger technical mechanics of constructing a television performance, or within the broader mise en scène of the finished performance text (with camera set-up, set design, costume and lighting configurations, for instance, as parallel performative components). Indeed, such obfuscations are repeatedly made manifest in published critical responses to television acting (both scholarly and journalistic), in which observations about the actor's work regularly become entangled with the discussion of framing, editing, scripting and the overall production values. While Caughie justifiably asserts that television acting belongs to a 'tradition of ... detail' (2000: 167), the aesthetics of contemporary television drama production, with an ever-increasing emphasis upon visual style and spectacle, work to further subsume the actor within critical appraisals of end texts. Consequently, one of our chief concerns in reflecting on what existing critical discourses already offer in understanding television acting is that there is a tendency to bypass any substantive examination of television actors as contributing agents within the production process, with a set of skills and approaches that they bring to bear upon the construction of text. This is particularly the case in light of production trends towards conspicuous visual aesthetics and narrative 'events' that work seductively in diverting critical attention away from the work of the actor, work which, arguably, will be by nature inconspicuous, if executed effectively.

There are some key drivers behind such processes of critical conflation in relation to the work of the television actor. It is worth emphasizing that the broader production context *does* undoubtedly inflect the work of the television actor considerably and therefore certainly merits recognition in the analysis of television acting. Our contention, rather, is that this context should not conceal the work of the television actor. The framing of the actor, camera movements and the editing process, for example, are all production components that can be readily observed and considered by the researcher through watching the finished television text, perhaps proving more apt for television studies' now well-established parameters of interest and the 'quasi-scientific language of its analytic procedures' (Caughie, 2000: 163). The actor's processes of preparation and the physical and psychological nuances of their work, by contrast, prove harder to

precisely demarcate and examine in their 'messily humanist' (Caughie, 2000: 163) nature. Moreover, inheriting from the prevailing critical procedures of film studies, traditional emphases within television studies have been on the examination of television dramas as 'authored' texts (with the television 'author' being the writer, director, producer or – relatively more recently – show-runner 'hyphenate', but very rarely the actor), or as industrial commodities that are produced and sold, or as cultural objects of audience reception, in ways which can work to mask the television actor within these larger contexts. While acknowledging that the actor is by no means the sole contributor to what the viewer sees on screen, nor are they the only authority on television acting, to overlook their distinct contributions leads to an incomplete picture at best.

Television actor training: Recent developments

The question of precisely what television actors do when they act is a significant one not only for television scholarship but also for actor training institutions. In 2012, this article's authors organized a symposium at the University of York on acting for television titled *Playing the Small Screen*, which brought together actors, actor-trainers and academics (and those who traverse these roles) to discuss this area. A number of high-profile British drama schools were represented by staff who lead or contribute to the screen-training components of their programmes, including the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA), the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, Guilford School of Acting and Bristol Old Vic Theatre School. It became clear through round-table discussions and presentations that all of these schools have recently or are currently redesigning their training approaches for television, reflecting the fact that the specific demands of television acting, and how training institutions should best prepare students for this work, are presently high on the agenda.

The actor-trainers who spoke at the symposium were continuing to design innovative new programmes of training. Moreover, it was clear that such programmes were being constructed with an aim to move beyond the more well-established technical acting classes for television, in place, in various forms at RADA, for example, since the 1950s, in an attempt to meet the needs of a then relatively new performance medium. Richard Hewett (2015: 81) outlines the limited successes of such early classes at RADA, from the perspective of actors subsequently working on television. These classes, with their focus on becoming familiar with a studio environment and the industrial processes of making television, may have prepared actors for the technical practicalities of working in the medium but left most of the more fundamental questions of character construction and narrative development largely untouched. Indeed, there is a growing awareness within a training context that television acting requires more than particular technical proficiencies but also tailored strategies for character and story. One of the primary intentions of our research into television acting, and of our forthcoming books, *Acting in British Television* and *Exploring Television Acting*, is to develop a resource which might assist the theoretical underpinning of these current developments in actor training for television drama. When designing courses on acting for the stage, actor-trainers can choose

from a rich range of potential models of character construction and development. By contrast, the relative paucity of detailed television-acting testimony or 'process research' noted earlier means that designing new syllabuses to prepare actors for the specific challenges of television acting is a difficult undertaking. To offer an indicative example of such challenges and to highlight the need for further investigation, the article now turns to British soap opera as a genre case study.

Case study: Soap opera

In line with Caughie's observation that British television drama has 'evolved as a drama of incident and character rather than as a drama of the kind of ruthlessly driven goal-oriented narrative which is associated with classic Hollywood cinema' (2000: 166), the contemporary television landscape is undoubtedly becoming ever-more dominated by expansive, complex and continuing narrative forms. Despite being a genre that has been repeatedly overlooked – or, as Christine Geraghty calls it, 'neglected' (2010: 82) – within academic discourse, it is the ongoing narrative structures of continuing drama, and particularly those dramas commonly referred to as 'soap operas', that have clearly generated a strong magnetic pull for producers, commissioners and audiences alike. In a production environment in which risk aversion is key and loyal audiences are a necessity, genres which were once dominated by discrete plots have gravitated towards longer-form structures. John Ellis has called this tendency the 'soapisation' of television drama (2007: 104), while Geraghty has noted that '[c]hanges in British television since the 1980s… have seen serials, series and sit-com adopt features of the soap narrative form' (2010: 84–85). A prominent recent example since Geraghty's 2010 essay is heritage drama. Shows such as *Downton Abbey* (2010–15), *Call the Midwife* (2012–) and *Mr Selfridge* (2013–16) have all seen period stories and biographical adaptations, once chiefly characterized by lavish one-off episodes or mini-series, move towards open-ended narratives.

Connectedly, at the time of writing, we are at a point of change in the industry use of the term 'continuing drama' in relation to a number of programmes and spanning multiple genres. Given the porous and interchangeable ways in which the term has been applied to various programmes (see Geraghty, 2010 for a useful guide to this ambiguous terrain of definition), it is perhaps of little surprise that producers have begun to redefine and reframe particular productions as a result of wider structural changes to narrative norms. Rather than wade into this debate, for the purposes of this article, it is not the associated generic, stylistic or 'quality' questions surrounding 'soap opera' or 'continuing drama' more broadly which are of primary interest, but rather the structural properties of these dramas in terms of their storytelling strategies and, in particular, the effect that these properties have on actors' processes.

Narrative flux

A critical feature of continuing drama which has a particular impact on actors is narrative flux. This is notably true of soap operas which, in their employment of up to five or six 'flexi-narrative' (Nelson, 1997) strands at any time, deliver storylines in which the

characters, and the associated actors, can exist within a state of continual, unresolved narrative change across multiple episodes. In some soap storylines, this can continue without resolution for months. Dorothy Hobson (2008: 34) argues that such narrative paths offer a series of moments of catastasis for audiences, but while this may be true for audiences, for the actor it is, in fact, not climax but flux which characterizes their narrative experience. This raises significant questions about approaches to character development from the perspective of the television actor. To address these questions, this article will refer to four new interviews with soap actors, all conducted in 2014 and 2015: Julie Hesmondhalgh (Hayley Cropper in *Coronation Street* for 863 episodes between 1998 and 2014), Gary Beadle (Paul Trueman in *EastEnders* for 328 episodes between 2001 and 2004), Graeme Hawley (John Stape in *Coronation Street* for 343 episodes between 2007 and 2011) and Rachel Bright (Poppy Meadow in *EastEnders* for 147 episodes between 2011 and 2014).

None of the actors were given a long-term narrative plan for their character when they began work in the role. In fact, in all cases, the initial plans for character, as far as they were explained to the actor, were fundamentally adapted as the storylines unfolded, resulting in the 'flux' identified above. For example, Hesmondhalgh was clear that Hayley Patterson was introduced as a 'comic' example of Roy Cropper's (played by David Neilson) unsuccessful quest for love. The first transgender character in a soap, Hesmondhalgh recalled that, 'They initially saw the character as a joke. Hayley was to be part of a series of disastrous dates for Roy and some of the writers clearly thought that it would be amusing for him to go on a date with a transsexual' (J. Hesmondhalgh, Personal Interview, November 28, 2014). Over the course of 16 years, Hayley became one of *Coronation Street's* best-loved characters. Similarly, though John Stape was always designed to be a villain, there was no mention of him being a murderer when Hawley was cast.

> The producers tend not to give you a lot of information when introducing a character. I was given very basic character information when I started: he's a teacher; and his backstory: that he was a boyfriend of Fizz many years ago but they lost touch. I was then told quite soon after I started on the show that there was the idea that he would have an affair with Rosie Webster [a pupil attending the school at which Stape taught] but I wasn't made aware of that when I went for the job. In some ways this could be seen as a little naughty on their part as, although it wasn't quite a paedophile storyline, it was quite a dubious choice on the part of my character, and therefore likely to be a contentious storyline. (G. Hawley, Telephonic Interview, September 17, 2015)

Neither was there any suggestion that Paul Trueman would become involved in drug dealing, much to the frustration of Beadle, 'When I first joined they didn't tell me anything in terms of the backstory for the character. I had no idea about planned storylines – I just knew that I was going to be a member of this family' (G. Beadle, Telephonic Interview, November 13, 2015). Later in the interview, Beadle talked about the drug-dealing storyline.

> I was probably quite naïve going into it, really. [. . .] When storylines for Paul started to move towards drug dealing in a negative way, I was dissatisfied with how it was handled. I'm all for representing issues relating to drugs but if things are going to move in that way

> for the character, you need to know the journey [. . .] that's when I knew it was time to go. (G. Beadle, Telephonic Interview, November 13, 2015)

It is, we argue, such forms of narrative flux that pose the most uniquely televisual challenges for actors. The set of structural properties that characterize continuing drama prompts us to reconsider some of the fundamental building blocks of character from the viewpoint of formalized actor training. This point is worthy of emphasizing; it is not only acting in culturally prestigious literary adaptations and heritage dramas (of the sort upon which Caughie primarily focuses within his chapter, 2000; 2014) that merits research consideration and appreciation. In fact, it is often long-running drama formats like the police procedural and the soap opera, for example – those formats which Robin Nelson has referred to as 'regular TV fare' (2007: 2) – which place the most particularly televisual demands upon the actor's techniques, and which invite further reflection. Moreover, as these continuing forms proliferate in production popularity and audience demand, increasingly crossing over into the traditionally more 'high-end' terrain of heritage and literary adaptation, the questions they raise as to how actors approach their television work, and how they can be most effectively trained for such production contexts, become increasingly important.

Contexts and circumstances of character development

To explore this question further, we can analyse the ways in which the actors negotiated the challenges associated with narrative flux. In particular, we can probe the function of contexts and circumstances in building a role in television drama. These are two terms that have formed the basis of a wide range of actor-trainers' pedagogies designed initially and primarily for the stage. Based on both script analysis and rehearsal exploration, as well as the creative input of the stage director and design team, contexts and circumstances here refer to the acquisition of facts by the actor about their character – facts that allow the actor to begin to develop a character both physically and psychologically. The gathering of such facts is perhaps most closely associated with Konstantin Stanislavski's work on 'given circumstances', which was a key foundation of his system of actor training. Explaining the precise nature of these 'given circumstances', Stanislavski wrote:

> 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 to the actors as they rehearse. (2008: 52–53)

However, this is certainly not a technique limited to Stanislavski. Many actor-trainers also include this process as a key feature of their approach to character development. Bertolt Brecht, for example, noted how valuable the use of research into the contexts and circumstances of his *Mother Courage* (1941) was to his actors in the model book for the play (Jones, 1986: 87–88), while prominent contemporary theatre director Katie Mitchell has adapted Stanislavski's technique by prompting her actors to ask questions about their

characters, which they answer through analysis of the play and their findings in rehearsal (2008: 11–30). Thus, though the exact process may vary, this mode of script analysis is commonplace in most Western actor-training pedagogies.

Despite the fact that these directors and actor-trainers developed their approaches for theatre, on the surface, building a character on the facts that an actor can learn about them, and analysing the script for clues about their attitudes, likes, dislikes and emotional lives, might seem to fit the narratives of long-running television drama well enough. Indeed, a key focus of soap operas is the complex emotional lives and connections of their characters. Jonathan Bignell, for example, recognizes, 'Communities [in British soap opera] are bound together primarily by family and emotional relationships' (2008: 120). However, as their comments above suggest, the amount of information that the actors were provided with problematizes the use of traditional approaches to 'given circumstances'. As a character continues to develop, possibly over many years-worth of episodes, the usefulness of these tools for the television actor begins to unravel. Establishing contexts and circumstances has been developed by actor-trainers with finite theatrical narratives in mind. Although the approach has been successfully adapted by practitioners for film work (particularly by American post-Stanislavskian actor-trainers such as Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, Lee Strasberg and Uta Hagen), films still function within finite narrative structures, even in the case of film series, in that actors will most often have a complete view of their character's journey through the individual film in question before they start filming. But what happens when a dramatic structure is open-ended and ongoing? Do new narrative events and character actions, after the passage of time, become part of that character's 'given circumstances', even though they were not known by the actor from the outset? At what point does the television actor become aware of new narrative events or changes in their character's emotional or psychological state? And, crucially, how do they effectively develop a sense of character in a narrative form in which flux dominates?

The four actors cited here, all of whom have worked extensively on soap opera, had different attitudes towards these questions. A useful example of the way in which changing contexts and circumstances functioned for the actors can be found in Bright's experiences. Unlike the other actors, she received an information pack and had a subsequent hot-seating session when Poppy Meadow became a regular member of the cast of *EastEnders*. Bright recalled that:

> They gave me a pack which included information about character traits – some very basic biographical information such as where she is from and a basic questionnaire-style list of facts about her. I also had a hot-seating session as Poppy. They asked loads of questions and I could either answer in the character or for the character. So I responded instinctively to the questions that they were asking, based on both my own understanding of the character as I had performed her in the first episodes, and also the information that I had received in the pack. (R. Bright, Personal Interview, June 7, 2015)

This process, conducted after Bright had recorded only two episodes as Poppy, clearly relied heavily on Bright's own instincts about the character, based on the limited information in the pack that she had at her disposal, and her character decisions already

recorded in the episodes. This clearly allowed Bright the opportunity to personalize her work, though she was aware that these instinctive decisions were not always the most fitting character notes as she became more familiar with Poppy: 'I suppose because this came so early in the process and I didn't know Poppy as well as I did later on, some of my early decisions I looked back on and thought, no, that wasn't right about her' (R. Bright, Personal Interview, June 7, 2015). Embodying the character and improvising as her early in Bright's involvement was clearly a useful process, not only for the actor but also for the writers who were able to use this material in their development of storylines for Poppy: 'It was really interesting that some of the facts that I invented about her in that hot-seating session then were incorporated into the scripts and storylines that I was given' (R. Bright, Personal Interview, June 7, 2015). Across the range of interviews that we have conducted with television actors, this kind of input into material in soap is quite rare. It was, however, also an experience which Niamh Walsh, who played Cara Martinez, a series regular on *Holby City* (1999), mentioned in interview (N. Walsh, Personal Interview, November 27, 2015), perhaps suggesting that the British Broadcasting Corporation Continuing Drama Department value this process as a means of involving the actor in establishing contexts and circumstances for their characters.

There is also a more fundamental question to consider, which is whether the actors found it helpful to know future plans for their characters, and the destination of their current storylines. We framed the work of Stanislavski within discrete narrative forms as being implicitly useful to the actors and expected that the state of flux would be to the detriment of their work. To some extent this has been borne out in our interviews; indeed, it was clear that the working processes to which Bright alludes were designed to allow some conversation to take place between actor and script editor. The existence of particular organizational structures on *EastEnders* suggests that sharing future plans was privileged by the producers, and that they understood this to be of help to the actor. Bright commented that:

> You would have a meeting with the Executive Producer every three months. This was where you would find out where your stories were going and the longer term plans for your character. They could tell you more of the specifics – where the character is heading. You wouldn't know exactly how they were going to get there, but at least you had an idea of the destination. This would be for the next few months at least. [. . .] It was very helpful to have a sense of where my character was going. (R. Bright, Personal Interview, June 7, 2015)

However, it was certainly not the case that all the actors found that the more they knew the destination of the character, the more this advantaged their acting work. Both Bright and Hesmondhalgh commented that the state of 'not-knowing' was more true to life. Bright continued, 'This can work both ways, I quite liked not knowing where my character was heading before I received the script, because that is more true to life. We don't know the future. You know what you want, but you don't know whether you will get there' (R. Bright, Personal Interview, June 7, 2015). Similarly, Hesmondhalgh stated that, 'It is interesting working on a project where you don't know the ending – you don't know the character's arc. It can be a good thing. You don't try and play the ending from the beginning'(J. Hesmondhalgh, Personal Interview, November 28, 2014). By contrast, Hawley was given a series of arcs in his portrayal of John Stape. In his

interview, it became clear that this was an element that he found very helpful, and whereas Hesmondhalgh identified the value of not playing the ending, it allowed him to navigate the storyline with a strong sense of narrative progression.

> A common experience of acting in continuing drama is that you are never able to play an arc, because you never know where the ending is. However, *Coronation Street*, for me, was a slightly different experience, as I kept playing out endings. I was very fortunate with this [. . .] as much as I might say that you don't have an arc, I did, all the way through. It was like playing a four-act play over four years. (G. Hawley, Telephonic Interview, September 17, 2015)

Clearly, the actors differed on this, and it is not a simple fact that a lack of information about the character's progression is to the detriment of the actor's work. There is, however, another structural property to soap acting which further complicates the use of contexts and circumstances as tools for the television actor. Character backstories are frequently revised within long-running television dramas, in order to better suit the demands of current narrative developments, in a process referred to as 'retro-active continuity changes' or, in fan discourses, 'retcons'. Are we to understand that character histories and circumstances, in the context of television acting, can be continually evolving and even, in some instances, subject to retro-active change? How do actors experience this and how do they account for such continuing narrative instability? Or do they discard this tool entirely?

This feature of soap opera was universally seen to be problematic by the actors we interviewed. Hesmondhalgh provided a specific example from her work on *Coronation Street*, in which the writers, years into her portrayal of Hayley, introduced a son, who Hayley fathered before she transitioned to becoming a woman.

> I hated the storyline with my son. I love the actor who played him, but I wish that that storyline hadn't happened. When I found out that they were writing scenes about Hayley having a child when she was a man it felt like a betrayal to me. I was cross about that. It is very clear that Roy and Hayley were both virgins. There was a whole set of episodes about that, and from the transition of them being friends to being lovers. It was very beautifully and delicately done, and then a writer comes along with a new plotline which means that the circumstance that I played as true wasn't true. She was lying to him, and I have nothing to do with that decision. Sometimes you have to build a new past so everything that you thought was a fact was not true. You have to find a way to incorporate that. I found that hard. You do feel protective, particularly when you're playing a character like Hayley. (J. Hesmondhalgh, Personal Interview, November 28, 2014)

This is an example in which narrative flux can be seen as applying to the past as well as the future. Clearly, here, the role of the actor is fundamentally compromised as what Hesmondhalgh was playing as fact was later deemed (in a decision over which she had no control) to be a lie. Hewett has also identified this challenge for actors in long-running drama:

> According to Jamie Payne, however, the revelation of new character information in rewritten scripts can also cause actors to regret performance choices already made and

> recorded on film: 'Actors are given scenes, and they go: "Oh my God! If I knew [*sic*] that that was going to happen … I'd have played that completely differently."' (2015: 80)

One of the fundamental challenges of this kind of flux is that it moves beyond the character's view of the world. Bright and Hesmondhalgh both noted that not knowing the future was consistent with their character, and so, though it held challenges, art imitated life as both actor and character progressed towards unknown events. However, retroactive continuity changes require the actor to unpick some of the facts of their character's past. Similarly, *EastEnders* director Sophie Lifschutz reported that actors are confronted with an additional challenge, again highly specific to this type of narrative structure:

> I often don't know the end to storylines when I'm shooting. It is the same for the actors – with big storylines like a murder, it is often the case that they don't know who did it . . . this is a challenge. Sometimes, this lack of information can be seen as a method thing – people meet for the first time who are meant to meet for the first time – but of course in the case of a murder, a character would know if they had murdered that person or not. Part of this is a publicity decision – the more people know who did it, the more chance there is of it coming out. (S. Lifschutz, Personal Interview, June 27, 2014)

Although the actors we interviewed had not experienced the specific feature that Lifschutz identifies, it is again an example of flux for the actor which denies them information and prompts them to re-evaluate their understanding of their character.

We are cognizant that picking out these challenges might tend to suggest that the actor's role on soap opera is one characterized by frustration and compromise. This is certainly not the case. One of the significant benefits of the form from an actor's perspective is the fact that actors can offset the lack of information about a character's future with a lived experience of a character's past. In most theatre and film projects, the past is largely the province of the actor's imagination, and the future is charted in the project at hand. As indicated earlier, dominant, post-Stanislavskian actor-training pedagogies are based on the actor's imagination filling out the past and using this to inform or inflect the action of the play or film. However, in long-running television drama, the actor is placed in the opposite situation: the past has been lived, and the future is often, to a large extent, unknown. Hewett recently observed this feature of the actor's work.

> The only temporal advantage available today is that open to actors working on long-running series such as soaps, which, while depriving them of the luxury of a full table read, at least allows regular cast members more time to inhabit their characters than would be available in a finite serial or single drama. This arguably gives performers the time to collaborate with scriptwriters and directors familiar with their working methods, enabling leads in long-running series to 'own' their characters in a way that guest incoming actors or those starring in shorter series cannot. (2015: 76–77)

It is very clear across the interviews which comprise this case study that the actors were able to 'own' their characters. Much of this ownership comes from the lived experience of playing the character. A six-day-a-week, 12-hour filming schedule means that

the actor is on set, in costume for the vast majority of their time. As Hawley joked, 'When you're busy, you're spending 12 or 13 hours a day together. [. . .] In the first couple of years of my marriage, I spent more time with Jennie McAlpine than I did with my real wife!' (G. Hawley, Telephonic Interview, September 17, 2015). This sustained engagement with the character certainly became ownership for Hawley who stated that:

> The brilliant thing about playing a character for four years is that, by the end, I could have written a novel about John Stape – I knew him so well. And a lot of that stuff is private – stuff that never really influences or manifests itself in the stories. But I knew it . . . I knew everything about him. I knew his attitudes, beliefs and his thought processes. (G. Hawley, Telephonic Interview, September 17, 2015)

This prolonged engagement with the role meant that many of the events that are referenced in the programmes, such as marriages, separations, children growing up, are lived experiences for the actors. As Hawley identified, '[a]nother brilliant thing about working in this context is that you have the history. You never had to ask questions about your backstory – you'd played out your backstory over years' (G. Hawley, Telephonic Interview, September 17, 2015).

The experience of playing these characters over years, of spending hours working with fictional family members, and of welcoming new faces and losing others appears, from some of these actors' experiences at least, to be a real value of the form. Hesmondhalgh called this 'living with' the character.

> One of the hardest things for me to talk about and to describe is the sense of the loss of Hayley. She was this person who sat between me and the fiction [. . .] When I see recordings I get upset that she is not part of my life any more. I lived this whole experience with all of her friends, her community, her ups and her downs. (J. Hesmondhalgh, Personal Interview, November 28, 2014)

This intensely close relationship, though perhaps most keenly felt by Hesmondhalgh, having played Hayley for 16 years, was a shared experience across the interviewees in this case study. Hence, while the actor may, at the start of his or her journey, have very little information, the given circumstances and contexts of their current situation go on to be 'lived' daily in the portrayal of a character over, in some instances, many years of production time. In this context, Caughie's description of narrative performance as 'actors pretending to be people they were not' (2000: 170) belies the ways in which the 'lived experience' of the actor in a role can blur the actor–character divide. Thus, in pursuing this, we should resist viewing continuing drama as being inherently disadvantageous for the actor. Seen through the lens of theatre, with its comparatively longer rehearsal time and discrete narratives structures, it could easily be viewed as such. However, the experiences of the actors in this article suggest that if we are to fully explore how actors negotiate both the challenges and the opportunities of continuing drama, we need to be mindful that the lack of time for preparation does not necessarily equate to a lack of technique, skill or 'craft' on the part of the actor. It may be, rather, that these specific working processes open up opportunities for actors in new, unforeseen and (within a scholarly context, at least) currently unexplored ways.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly Caughie offers valuable insights in relation to the important question raised by his chapter, 'What Do Actors Do When They Act?' It is noteworthy, however, that despite the 14-year gap between the original publication and reprint, it is only recently that sustained energy has been applied to moving Caughie's reflections forward. Directly following both editions of Caughie's chapter, a transcribed interview with Timothy West is presented, in which the actor discusses some highly relevant issues relating to the central question of Caughie's piece. Yet, as the interview material is not analysed or discussed within the chapter itself, nor is it addressed in any part of the collection, it reads more as a signpost towards the value of actor testimony as opposed to meaningful engagement with such insights. Indeed, rather than following such a signpost, this level of engagement (or lack of) has largely been borne out in the subsequent work on television acting which has followed Caughie's chapter. We hope that in this short piece we have demonstrated how actors' experiences can inform our understanding of television acting.

In this article, we have begun to consider the actor's preparatory processes for understanding television characters. However, the television actor's work is largely personal and private; unlike theatre, academics cannot watch weeks of television-actor rehearsal. This informal, idiosyncratic and personal work can only be revealed through talking to the actors themselves. By doing so, we have started to find areas of shared experience and recurrent motifs through their work that provide us with fertile areas for analysis, to which further interview material will add detail. Moreover, we have stressed the potential of focusing television acting research not only on high-budget, one-off dramas, but also on ongoing televisual forms. As the industry is ever-increasingly evolving towards continuing forms, the questions we raise will be pertinent to the experiences of more and more actors. Crucially, these questions are distinctly televisual and thus warrant particular consideration. 'What do actors do when they act?' is a question not just for researchers to interrogate, so as to provide a fuller picture for scholarly and critical understanding, but a question that also demands answers for the purposes of professional actor training, in considering how best we prepare actors for the specific challenges of television drama.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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