‘In the Doc’: Acting processes in Brian Hill’s docudrama, *Consent.*

Dr Tom Cantrell, University of York

**Biography**

Dr Tom Cantrell is Head of Theatre at the University of York. He has published on modern British drama, documentary theatre and acting processes. He has recently written two books on acting. The first, *Playing for Real: Actors on Playing Real People* (Palgrave, 2010) was co-edited with Professor Mary Luckhurst. The book is a collection of interviews with high-profile actors who have portrayed real people on stage and screen. His second book, a monograph entitled *Acting in Documentary Theatre* (Palgrave 2013), was the first to analyse how actors approach verbatim and documentary theatre. He is currently co-editing two books with Christopher Hogg which focus on acting for television: *Acting in British Television* (Palgrave) and *Exploring Television Acting* (Bloomsbury).

Tom.Cantrell@york.ac.uk

**Abstract**

This article explores Brian Hill’s award-winning docudrama, *Consent*, from the point of view of the actor. Consideration of actors’ processes has remained conspicuously absent in analyses of docudrama or documentary television. To redress this balance, this article is based on new interview material with Anna Madeley, one of the two leading actors in the piece. A complex blend of fact and fiction, *Consent* follows a fictional rape trial from the rape itself, the reporting of the attack with the police, the victim’s visit to a doctor, and through to the court case, the jury’s deliberations, and the judge’s verdict. Actors Anna Madeley and Daniel Mays played the victim and perpetrator, but all of the professionals with whom they came into contact – the police, medical professionals, lawyers, judge, court staff and jury members – were played by real people in their professional capacity. This article analyses the workingmethods of the project from the actor’s perspective. Anna Madeley’s acting processes are explored in detail, with particular focus on her use ofmemory and recollection*,* and on her experience ofimprovisation and the question of agency that the project prompts. The article demonstrates the value of placing actors’ experiences at the heart of research into television performance, as well as raising searching questions about the way that we understand and codify performance in docudrama.

**Keywords**

Docudrama

Acting Processes

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Introduction

Brian Hill’s docudrama, *Consent*, was transmitted on Channel 4 on 21 January 2007. Made under the auspices of Hill’s documentary production company, Century Films, and written by Anna Maloney, the 100-minute film won a Grierson Award for Best Drama Documentary.[[1]](#endnote-1) Hill’s impetus to make the docudrama was based on ‘the fact that only 5-10% cases of rape cases that go to court end in a conviction’ (Century Films 2007). A complex blend of fact and fiction, the film follows a fictional rape trial from the rape itself, the reporting of the attack with the police, the victim’s visit to a doctor, and through to the court case, the jury’s deliberations, and the judge’s verdict. Actors Anna Madeley and Daniel Mays played the victim and perpetrator, but all of the professionals with whom they came into contact – the police, medical professionals, lawyers, judge, court staff and jury members – were played by real people in their professional capacity. Although all concerned were aware that this was a fictional case, they followed the process as they did routinely in their professional lives. The result was a provocative docudrama which combined scripted scenes performed by professional actors with entirely improvised meetings with non-actors and a trial in which the actors appeared alongside these professionals. As this article will go on to demonstrate, this unusual project led to specific and hitherto underexplored acting challenges. *Consent* prompts us to explore how actors approach performance in docudrama and, in particular, how this unusual blend of fact and fiction affected their processes. The exacting demands on the actors will, finally, ask us to consider how we codify and understand ‘performance’ within this context.

Acting in Docudrama

Despite the fact that Derek Paget’s seminal work, *No Other Way to Tell It* (1998), was first published eighteen years ago, the host of questions that he raised about acting in docudrama have largely gone unanswered. His identification, back in 1998, that ‘At the screen docudrama’s centre, and rarely remarked on in any but the most obvious ways, is the actor’, still holds today (1998: 46). Aside from a small group of researchers, including Heather Sutherland, John R. Cook, John Corner, Stephen Lacey and Ruth McElroy, most of whom were involved in Paget’s AHRC project, ‘Acting With Facts’ (University of Reading, 2007-2010), little attention has been paid to actors’ work in this high-profile and popular form of television. Indeed, commentaries on acting are conspicuously absent from major publications on the form, such as Alan Rosenthal’s influential collection *Why Docudrama? Fact-Fiction on Film and TV* (1999). Where researchers have explored acting, the focus has tended to be on the semiotic complexities that lie at the heart of an actor appearing in a fact-based project (see Nichols 1992, Corner 1999, Paget 2011) or on the use of non-actors in docudrama projects (see Cook 2010, Lacey and McElroy 2010). The former point is useful to consider by way of introduction to this analysis. Paget, taking his lead from Nichols (1992), notes that:

In the presence of the actor, docudrama audiences confront the most visible sign of the docudrama’s essential inauthenticity as documentary...the human agent on screen is always both more and less than the real individual being impersonated. They are more in the sense that their body signifies an excess that is always fictional (as any acting is); they are less in the sense that this body emphasises the structuring absence of the Real Person Subject (2011: 46).

As Paget identifies, the presence of the actor makes manifest the inherent tension between fact and fiction. If actors are a clear indication of fiction, and drama’s inherent inauthenticity, then how do we understand the relationship between actors’ creativity and the documentary in which they appear? This is a question that I have explored at length in previous research into documentary theatre (Cantrell 2011, 2013), and will be a reference point in this analysis. However, the particular project under scrutiny here raises an additional set of questions, one of which focuses on improvisation. How do actors approach performance in a docudrama which is not fully scripted and, rather than following the contours of an actor-, writer-, or director-led improvisation (such as in the work of Mike Leigh, for example), follows a strict and clearly delineated judicial process, with all its attendant rules, protocols and procedures?

As noted above, non-actors appearing in docudrama have been the focus of some scholarly attention. Cook notes, for example, the challenges that Peter Watkins experienced when requiring non-actors to perform in long takes on his work *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* (2010: 237). However, in this particular analysis of *Consent*, it is important to unpick the term ‘non-actor’. In *Consent*, the actors (and, by extension, the director) were faced not with issues over a lack of skill, technique or preparation from these individuals, but rather quite the opposite. The non-actors all appeared in their professional capacities. For example, the lawyers who worked on *Consent* were highly-trained, eminent barristers of the calibre that regularly take on such cases. This raised, as we might expect, new and specific challenges for the actor, and makes the notion of ‘performance’ even more complex.

It is also important to note that the actors in *Consent* were not, unlike many docudramas, playing real people. One of the central questions that this essay will pursue is how an actor portrays a fictional character and scenario within the real apparatus of the law. The fact that the actors did not play a real person makes this an atypical docudrama, and one which deserves particular scrutiny. *Consent* was, from an actor’s point of view, a rule-breaker. It is commonly acknowledged that one of the defining features of the genre is that actors play real people, as Paget notes, ‘Docudrama, of course, does not have characters in any conventional dramatic sense. It attempts to portray real-world individuals...’ (2011: 43). In *Consent*, both the victim and perpetrator were fictional. Rather than pursuing the path of how actors’ processes change when their subject is real, and the ethical considerations which go hand in hand with portraying them, this essay will analyse their performance of an invented (though tightly structured) scenario within a real judicial process.

Instead of providing a textual analysis of the drama and to view performance, as has become a dominant mode of analysis among television researchers, purely through the finished product, here I am concerned with the process of generating the performance. I will place the actor’s approach, experiences and reflection at the centre of the examination of this celebrated docudrama. To this end, I interviewed Anna Madeley about her experiences of the project.[[2]](#endnote-2) This article will first consider the scope and structure of *Consent*, before analysing the workingmethods of the project from the actor’s perspective. Madeley’s acting processes will then be explored in detail, with particular focus on her use ofmemory and recollection*,* and on her experience ofimprovisation and the question of agency that the project raises.

*Consent* as Courtroom Drama

*Consent* follows the experiences of two work colleagues, Rebecca ‘Becky’ Palmer (Madeley) and Steven Roberts (Mays). It is, however, Becky’s story that the viewer follows, and her point of view that is privileged in the narrative. In the opening voice-over (spoken over images of the jury discussing the case), Madeley states the premise of the drama and the use of actors and non-actors:

This jury is deliberating at a rape trial. I should know – I'm the woman who made the accusation. We were at a party. He wasn't a stranger, we worked together. The jury didn't see what happened next, but you will. This jury is made up of ordinary men and women picked at random through the electoral register. The people that you will see during this trial are real. The defence barrister, the barrister for the prosecution, the judge, the court staff, the police officers, the doctor. The jury will hear evidence and record a verdict based on a fictional story. Only the accused, me – his alleged victim – and my colleagues and friends are played by actors. You can't film a real trial, but this is as real as it gets. (Maloney 2007)

In the early scenes, which serve as a prologue of sorts to the court case that is to come, Becky and Steve are established as colleagues at work, and it is made clear that they are attracted to each other. This is complicated by the introduction of a plotline in which they are in direct competition for promotion. The narrative follows the pair to a work event in which they stay in a hotel. After a montage of an evening of drinks, the glamour of which is enhanced by a richly saturated mise-en-scene of reds and oranges, the drama cuts to a CCTV-style shot of the corridor of the hotel, and we see them enter Becky’s bedroom. After a kiss in the bedroom, against a soundtrack of the prophetic ‘Memories are Made of This’ (Dean Martin, 1955), the image fades to black. The events which took place in the hotel room are not revealed to the viewer until the closing scene. A stark aesthetic contrast follows, in which the saturated hues are replaced with bleached out images of blue and white, and we see Becky on the platform, leaving the work event early and returning home. Through this contrasting visual composition, Hill establishes the differences between stylised televisual techniques and signifiers of ‘authentic’ content, such as the CCTV-style images. By doing so, his composition complements the combination of actors working alongside real-people which forms the focus of this analysis. Up to this point and the scenes that immediately follow, in which Becky tells her friend that she has been raped and we see the pair back in the office at work, were fully scripted by Maloney.[[3]](#endnote-3) However, from the moment that Steve is arrested at work by two real policemen, the piece is improvised, and both Madeley and Mays appear in numerous scenes with the professionals listed above.

The majority of the drama (51 minutes) is shot inside a courtroom (a real, disused courtroom in Kingston, London). Becky and Steve are cross-examined in detail by real lawyers about the events of the night in question. The questioning is precise and acutely personal. Following the cross-examinations, the action moves to the jury’s deliberations. The jury of twelve considers the evidence that they have heard. In the denouement of the piece, they deliver a ‘not guilty’ verdict, and Steve is acquitted. After close up reaction shots of both protagonists, who are both in tears, the drama returns to the hotel room seen earlier. In a graphic and violent scene, Steve rapes Becky. Anna Madeley recalls that ‘The lawyers didn’t know what happened in the hotel room until they came for the screening [of the completed film]. They watched the screening and they were very surprised that they got it wrong.’

The drama serves as a stark reminder of how few rapes are reported, and the fallibility of the legal system in successfully prosecuting those that do go to court. In addition, through the harrowing experience of the victim, the drama is also an incisive critique of this model of justice. This latter point is made clear as the viewer follows Becky through the apparatus of the law. The drama focuses, in particular, on the horrific nature of the cross-examination in which the victim recounts, and is interrogated about, her recollection of the attack. Neither the viewer, nor the actor, is spared the intimate detail of the attack. This line of questioning resulted in the character reduced to tears, visibly shaking, and finding it difficult to articulate her thoughts.

It is little surprise, given the nature of the project, that Anna Madeley found this to be a very specific acting challenge. In interview it became clear that *Consent* prompted her to consider her approach, her understanding of performance, and how she could adapt her experiences of scripted television drama in the face of these unfamiliar challenges.

Working methods on *Consent:* the actor’s point of view

Most prominent in Madeley’s experiences was the way in which the working methods of the project had a profound effect upon her process. There were several elements in the making of *Consent* which were designed to shape Madeley’s work in particular ways. Firstly, in order for the actors to follow the criminal justice system, and in doing so mimic the journey of those involved in a real case, the piece was recorded in chronological order.[[4]](#endnote-4) For example, although the rape itself was shown at the end of the film, the actors shot the scene within the first few days. Thus, where most dramas (including docudramas – see Paget 2011:43) tend to record out of sequence and then reconstruct the chronology in the final edit, here the process was reversed and the order was designed to allow the actors to experience events in the order in which they would happen in reality, which proved to be a crucial determinant in Madeley’s process.

Similarly, following the real process that they were recreating, once the scripted scenes had been recorded, Madeley and Mays rarely saw each other, and were kept separate throughout the court case. They did not discuss the rape scene which they enacted, nor did they compare notes on the process as they went through it. Madeley noted that ‘Daniel and I never discussed it [the rape scene] afterwards, we deliberately avoided this’. Only at the very end of the filming did they discuss the process: ‘It was very odd finishing. Danny and I stayed quite apart during the court filming, we didn’t hang out. We both had a sense of relief that we had made it through the process.’

The scenes with professionals, such as Becky’s visit to The Haven Sexual Assault Referral Centre, the discussions with lawyers and the courtroom trial itself, were recorded in real time, as live, without retakes and without discussion between the actors and the professionals with whom they were working. Although sometimes tempted, Madeley noted that she never discussed the project, the scene, or her conversations with the professionals before or after they recorded it. Using the example of the visit to The Haven, Madeley noted:

I didn’t meet them before. They were told how it was all working though. But there was a funny moment when we were sitting in the car afterwards, just the two of us [Madeley and a policewoman], no cameras, waiting to go to The Haven [...] I wanted to talk to her about what I’d said in the interview, but I had to maintain that distance, and not break character [...] As an actor you are always in the picture as to what is going on, whereas in this situation she said ‘right in ten minutes I’ll take you in, and you just sit in the chair until someone comes to get you’. So it was very unusual this sense of walking into the complete unknown.

Madeley evidently experienced a sense of immersion in the process in a way that was unfamiliar to her. Her lack of control over narrative development was clearly at odds with the stronger sense of empowerment usually afforded to the actor.

The courtroom scenes followed the etiquette and formalities of a real court. The only moment of contact outside the official court was when the whole project had been completed, and Madeley’s reaction to the meeting again powerfully suggests the complex blending of fiction and reality that she experienced working on the project:

We had a drink when we finished and that was it. The prosecution lawyer came for a drink with us when we finished filming, but the defence lawyer didn’t, which I thought was interesting. [...] By that point it wasn’t pleasant. I didn’t really want to talk to the people on the jury. It was funny, because I knew it wasn’t real, but that’s how I felt. They are the people who might do this for real, and I thought I wouldn’t want you representing or judging me.

The working processes of the actors thus directly mirrored the conceit of the film which sought to convince the viewer that the actors followed the judicial process meticulously, was indeed reflected in the project’s schedule and working processes. Filming in sequence, and closely following the path of a real victim of rape through the judicial apparatus, had specific effects on Madeley’s acting process, and prompted her to question her work and how she negotiated these challenges.

Problematising recollection: the rape scene as physical and emotional memory

It became clear in interview with Anna Madeley that the physical and emotional act of recording the rape scene at the beginning of the project was a crucial part of her process. The scene was recorded on location in a hotel room with only the two actors, director and Roger Chapman (the Director of Photography) present. Madeley noted that although there was not a fully-written script, particular moments had been agreed:

Though we didn’t have a script, we had definite points that we had to hit – certain things that had to happen. For example, there were certain things about what happened to my dress, or at what point my underwear came off [...] that we could be specific about. So whilst the scene was essentially improvised, we could be clear on the storytelling because we had these markers to hit. We mapped it very carefully, and I trusted Brian [Hill] and Roger [Chapman]; I felt safe with them.

From a narrative point of view, the rationale behind recording this scene was to be able to use it as a reveal at the end of the drama and by doing so call into question the legal process. However, for Madeley, it was much more than a mere storytelling device. She stated that ‘Acting it out, and having that memory was useful’; she went on:

We filmed it in sequence. So the rape scene was filmed before we went to the courtroom. Daniel and I knew what had happened in that room. That was fascinating, as the film crew and the people doing their real jobs, police and lawyers etc, had no idea who was telling the truth or what had happened.

The scene thus provided Madeley with a physical and emotional memory of the event. In a way that would have been difficult to achieve merely through discussion of past circumstances and backstory, or via her interpretation of a written account provided by the writer, Madeley had a tangible series of actions to reflect upon and to recall in her process. Though the recorded scene was not a real rape, facts that later were raised in the cross-examination, such as the exact order of events in the attack, and exactly what was said, did occur in the semi-improvised scene.

Here we encounter a complex example of an emotional and physical memory that provided a context for Madeley’s work and prompted a strong emotional response from the actor. We can also be quite specific with regard to the ways in which Madeley’s process problematises notions of emotional memory and prompts us to remodel our understanding of the term in the context of this project. Ostensibly, we might be able to align Madeley’s use of the rape scene as a memory to inform her performance with Stanislavski’s writing on the subject. Stanislavski explained emotion memory in the following terms:

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. (2008: 199)

Madeley was constantly prompted to remember the moment in the courtroom scene and, as she states above, she was evidently able to use the memory to inform her emotional performance. However, the particular way in which memory functioned for Madeley can also allow us to defamiliarise ourselves with this term and to see it afresh. The purposes of the legal process are to question, provoke, and undermine memory in order to establish the facts of an event beyond the point of reasonable doubt. Thus, where Stanislavski sees past experiences as being fixed events which an actor can use to provoke a fitting emotional state in performance, here, through the lens of the legal process, memory is seen to be much less stable – something to be questioned, manipulated and deconstructed. Madeley was very aware of this fact:

After shooting the scene in the hotel room, Daniel and I both went home and felt weird; that felt quite odd [...] So having filmed the scene we both as actors went away and had our own memory of how the scene played out which is then affected by our character’s journey. The journey of your memory of events begins. And then the lawyers get involved... We never talked about it [...] the more conversations you have, the more confusing you can make it and the more muddled it becomes.

Thus, Madeley’s use of memory, as deployed on this project, represents a nuanced variation from Stanislavski’s formulation, in that memory provided the necessary tangibility for the court case, but was also called into question by the process. A further departure from Stanislavski’s formulation of emotion memory is that Madeley’s focus tended to be on the specific nature of the physical act rather than her subsequent emotional response to the memory of it. Her focus was consistent with the function of the judicial process, which is based on ascertaining the facts of an event.

Madeley’s articulation of the use of the rape scene in her process speaks to a particular feature of this project. In the vast majority of acting jobs, be they projects on stage or screen, the actor knows the events of the narrative (as this is the content of the script) and invents the background (be this via formal rehearsal, or in the actor’s own, private work). Traditional, Stanislavski-based, actor-training and rehearsal pedagogies are predicated on how the past informs the action of the play. In *Consent,* by contrast, this relationship was reversed. Here the background was mapped out in detail by the actors and the writer, and the main events of the narrative were out of any of their control.

The ‘lived experience’ gained by recording the rape scene at the start of the process allowed Madeley the kind of preparation which has come to define the private, preparatory approaches of actors in docudrama. In *Playing for Real* (2010) I interviewed several actors who have played real people on stage and screen (in both factual and fictional projects, and most of the gradations in between). A recurring motif through these interviews was the actors’ need to conduct research into the lives of their subject and to seek out analogous experiences (see Cantrell and Luckhurst 2010). Derek Paget, too, has written on this theme. After citing examples such as Colin Firth who, in his preparation for playing John McCarthy in *Hostages* (1992), was ‘*actually...*wound with packing tape like a mummy and...coffined under a lorry’ (2011: 51), Paget notes that:

 Not so much wishing to ‘claim the real’ as ‘assert connection with the real’, actors make such hardship the kind of ‘Rite-of-Given-Circumstance-Passage’ that seems to generate a quasi-religious belief. [...] Actors hope to get closer to public-domain subjects through replicating something of that real world protagonist’s suffering, thinking, being. In this important sense, I believe that they can be seen as ‘bearing witness’ on behalf of the real world subject. (2011: 52)

Madeley was able, through the experience of enacting the rape scene, to access ‘something of the real world protagonist’s suffering’. In many ways, the whole project was designed to submit the actor to the ‘Rite-of-Given-Circumstance-Passage’ to which Paget refers, as Madeley followed the process of a real rape case. The working methods on the project are certainly testament to this. Although Madeley was not playing a real person, the sense of bearing witness was central to her work. In fact, it was precisely because she wasn’t playing a real person that based the process even more powerfully on ‘her’ experiences. This became an important factor in her experience of the project, as the following sections shall examine in greater detail.

Improvisation and agency

The fact that the rape scene was physically enacted by the actors also prompts us to consider the use of improvisation on this project. As noted above, the trial scenes were not scripted. However, in her cross-examination, Madeley did not invent her responses, but, rather, desperately tried to remember the exact events of the attack. Thus, her improvisatory challenge was not, as we might assume, to use her skills of imagination to invent a set of circumstances or backstory, but to effectively articulate her memory of the event. Thus, though the scene was improvised, it was based on the unreliability of memory and how Madeley articulated past events, rather than on her skills as an inventor.

A crucial determinant in Madeley’s experience of the courtroom was her lack of agency. It was this element that prompted her to note that: ‘The biggest challenge was the improvisations in the courtroom’. She explained: ‘I went into that courtroom and had no control over what was discussed. You can’t steer the conversation. The lawyers had complete power in that respect. It was their agenda.’ This gives rise to an interesting paradox: Madeley was simultaneously powerless, and at the same time (with Daniel Mays’ character) one of the only holders of the information which formed the focus of the trial. As noted above, aside from the director and D.O.P, no one else in the court knew what had happened in the hotel room. In almost all acting projects the whole creative team, including cast members, have access to the script (or at least the plot), and one of the main focuses in rehearsal and performance is on how all members of the team can contribute to tell the story of the piece. Here, by contrast, the actors held all of the plot information. What was therefore surprising, and so challenging for Madeley, was the fact that she had almost no control at all over how the drama played out.

Madeley found that this element of the process prompted her to consider what performance in this context might mean, as well as to question the link between the character, her acting skills, and her own personality:

It felt like a very different thing from a scripted work because as an actor the processes of text work and character creation have a convention to them when you have time to prepare and you have lines - and you can develop a conviction behind what you say, but when you are thinking on your feet it comes down to personality types. It is less about performance and acting and more about how good you are at answering these questions, and how dramatic you are as a person, not as an actor or as a character.

Therefore, although Madeley was the holder of information, the direction of the narrative was completely controlled by the lawyers. Madeley found herself submitting to a system in which she had had no training. Faced, like a real victim of a rape, with a professional barrister who was able to draw on years of training and experience, Madeley found it was her own personal response to the situation, rather than her technique as an actor, which was under scrutiny:

With scripted drama, you can analyse a script and know what you’re pushing in this scene, what your agenda is and what you are playing, so you can work from that, but here you don’t have words at your disposal in the way in which you do with a script. That was quite revealing [...] You couldn’t come in and do this or that technique or think about inner and outer processes. It was a totally different way of working.

The cross-examination scenes stand in stark contrast to the scripted scenes. It was clear that when working on Maloney’s script, Madeley could call on her training and experience. Such strategies were rendered redundant by the unpredictable nature of the court scenes. This evidently made her consider further the blurred line between the character and herself, and between fact and fiction. She stated that:

It is revealing about what your natural skills are in terms of rising to those occasions. With a script you can think on the line and it gives you power and the scene a shape, but without the script you can feel a bit lost.

It is thus of little surprise that Madeley revealed that:

The other big thing was the intensity of the nerves. I have never been that nervous. I remember walking in to the court and seeing a chair, and I didn’t know whether I should stand or sit. It felt overwhelming. And so I sat and I felt a bit too low, and then I stood and I felt sick and thought I was going to fall over. I’ve never felt that nervous about doing anything!

Through my interview with Madeley, it became clear that she had a dual view of the project. She reflected on it not only as an interesting performance challenge from the point of view of an actor, but also as someone who has experienced the apparatus of justice from the inside, and was thus very aware of its fallibilities. The blur between these two views became evident when she reflected on her experience in the witness stand:

I just felt so angry with the defence barrister after my cross examination. What she did was extraordinary. She would pick up on the minutiae of what you said, and I would think that it isn’t relevant, but she would pick on tiny things to the extent that you would find yourself lost for words [...] She had this expression – this way of talking and looking at me – I think she wanted me to lose it. She was goading me. The self-doubt that her questioning prompted was very powerful. It was just my word against someone else’s. The fact that the lawyers can decide what information is brought up is also really interesting. I went into that courtroom and had no control over what was discussed.

Both through Madeley’s experiences, and through the manner in which she reflected them, we can start to identify the way in which, though an experienced professional actor paid for her work on the project, she was also a subject of the experiment that lay at the heart of *Consent*. Her experiences of the court case were aligned with those of people who are the victims of rape and take their case to court. Thus, the precise function of her role on the project was designed to inhabit both the fictional and real world and for her to traverse these different contexts throughout.

Conclusion

Madeley’s experience of the double-role that she took, in which she was both subject of the experiment and also a key creative force behind it, is replicated in the viewer’s dual awareness. At no point was Madeley’s role as an actor and subject obscured from the viewer. From the opening voiceover (cited above) Madeley was framed both as an actor playing a character and as a woman subjected to this process. In this way, Madeley *stands in* for the real person. The precise way in which her work was framed within the docudrama complicates Nichols’ binary in documentary representation of a ‘body too few’ (when the real person is deceased or absent) and a ‘body too many’ (when the real person is portrayed by an actor) (1992: 177). Through the dual role of the actor-subject, *Consent* provides a third way. Paget states that ‘fiction enacts a kind of *excess*, non-fiction a kind of *dearth*’ (2011: 56). In the dual image of actor-subject in *Consent*, arguably we have an *apt* presence in which the status of the actor is carefully codified and framed within the programme.

Madeley’s experiences of *Consent* raise searching questions not only about the nature of ‘performance’ from the point of view of an actor, but also, moreover, about what we expect of witnesses in such cases. She was fully aware that convincing the jury was her central aim, and that ‘performance’ was central to this: ‘It seemed the facts were secondary to how I looked and spoke. It was more on my performance in the witness box than what actually happened’. It is clear from these comments that ‘performance’, for Madeley, was predicated not on the need to offer a virtuosic display for the cameras (and the subsequent television audience), but rather to convince the live audience – the judge and jury – that her story was the true account.[[5]](#endnote-5) In light of this, the usual measures that we might use to notate and evaluate an actor’s performance, which may include emotional scale, intensity, variation of line delivery, nuance and precision in physical and vocal characterisation, are problematised and in large part replaced by Madeley’s much more pragmatic need to be believed by the jury. Though these skills might equip a witness to succeed in this, it is clear that Madeley did not associate this with her training or previous performance experience. Rather, this process called upon Madeley’s own instinctive response as an individual, and thus affected her in a much more personal way than the scripted scenes in which she could rely on her acting experience.

Suggestive of the issues of performance in docudrama, Derek Paget writes: ‘The “body too many” of the actor is an ever-present in the docudrama, and will tend to flit in and out of the viewer’s consciousness...Every time you think, “What a good actor!”, you are negotiating between the historical and the acted.’ (1998: 57) The framing of *Consent*, and the double role of the actor, both mitigates against this tension, and also avoids some of the performance challenges noted above with regard to the use of non-actors in docudrama. The double role gives an audience a bi-focal view of the piece and allows them to compare ‘performance’ within the experiment without fear of contradiction or aesthetic incongruity. For example, the localised differences in performance conventions between the confidence of the lawyers and the difficulties of the actors in the witness stand, or the slight self-awareness and nerves of the medical staff and police, and the free-flowing discussions of the jury members in their deliberations, all become crucial elements in the project. These different performance styles function as moments of distanciation, in which the viewer is reminded of the nature and function of the experiment. Like Brecht’s writing on the subject, this distanciation also has a socio-political basis: it prompts the viewer to evaluate the rules that govern our social interactions, and the way in which these are modulated and tailored for the different environments (here, the courtroom, the police station, the work party) in which we find ourselves. The actor’s dual role, in which the two parts of the project (from scripted scenes using actors to improvised scenes using real people) required very different skills, became part of a rich texture of performative modes in the piece. These, cumulatively, complicate any notion of the simple actor/non-actor distinction.

The double role also allowed Madeley to comment on the project from the perspective of someone who has experienced this mode of (in)justice. In interview, she constantly moved between discussing the piece as an acting challenge and articulating her attitude towards the legal process. In this light, it was a much more profound and felt experience than a fictional role, both from an empathetic point of view towards those who have also gone through it, but also a sense that the process (if not the event) happened to her. She powerfully experienced that although the case was not real, the process mirrored reality, and thus there was no easy distance for her (or indeed the viewer) to take solace in. The project vividly demonstrates the fallibility of the law, and at the centre of this was Madeley’s experience: ‘You get this overwhelming sense that we have a system that does not actually serve to protect people...This project doesn’t let you off the hook’. In her concluding comments, the impact of the project on her was very apparent:

It was one of the projects I really loved. It is wonderful to have a project that is not just about entertaining, but it really sparks a debate in people. It makes them think about something. I find it more fulfilling. Particularly with this project it really makes you think – society has not come up with a better way of working these things out [...] So as an actor it really feels like you are involved in something that matters.

Madeley did not play a real person, but through this particular project, she bore witness to the plight of *many* women, and stands in for them. The project called upon Madeley to employ an array of strategies as an actor. These ranged from familiar skills associated with scripted drama to an entirely alien and intimidating form of improvised response. We can see from her insightful reflection on her work that this particular form of docudrama, and the actor-subject double role that it required, challenged her as an actor. Through this process, however, Madeley was able to bear witness to the plight of those who take such cases to court, and to comment on the legal process as one who has had direct personal experience of it.

 Anna Madeley’s experiences of working on *Consent* demonstrate the value of using direct interviews with actors within the analysis of docudrama and television drama more widely. At the heart of Hill’s project was an innovative experiment which submitted both the role of acting in docudrama, and the processes of the court, to scrutiny. I suggest that when we look at innovative figures in television-making (which have tended to be writers and directors), the actors within these projects are also crucial. Their processes, as well as their performance, are illuminating and provoke us to reassess how we understand, articulate, and codify acting.

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1. Brian Hill is a celebrated documentary maker, who explores his subjects through unusual, provocative and innovative storytelling devices. His most celebrated programmes include collaborations with poet Simon Armitage on *Feltham Sings* (2002)*,* in which inmates at Feltham Young Offenders Institution sing about their experiences using Armitage’s crafting of their words and the music of Dextrous, and *The Not Dead* (2007), in which features intimate accounts from injured servicemen in which they perform their own stories through Armitage’s poetry. Hill has also worked with Anna Maloney on a number of occasions. She crafted the 2002 Century Films documentary, *Falling Apart*, which, like *Consent*, in its investigation of domestic violence, used scripted and improvised scenes. More recently, Maloney has worked on *Leicester Sings* (2005) and *You and Me* (2008) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. All quotations, unless otherwise stated, are from this interview. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The scripted scenes comprise the first 22 minutes of the docudrama. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. It is worth noting, however, that unlike a real rape case, which could take months between reporting and the court case, the entire project was filmed over a three-week period.

 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Madeley recalled a comment by a juror which typifies the way in which this performance was framed in court: ‘In the bar after we’d finished filming, one of jurors asked me why I didn’t wear a suit. She said that I just didn’t come across seriously if I didn’t wear a suit in court. Again, it is the automatic prejudice that someone has got about how seriously you take yourself depending on what you wear.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-5)