Directing actors in continuing drama: Meaning-making and creative labour

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**Abstract**

This article examines how three directors approach working with actors in one of the most exacting creative contexts – long-running television. Via new interviews with three directors of the flagship BBC continuing drama, *EastEnders* (1985–), this article explores their approaches in the context of the time constraints in production which preclude rehearsal and where directors and actors alike must work with great speed and precision. The three directors interviewed, Sophie Lifschutz, Kate Saxon and Rebecca Gatward, all trained in and have significant experience of theatre. This article thus explores the elements of their theatre training and experience that translated to their television work with actors, elements that required remodelling, and what was completely new to them and thus can be classified as medium specific. ‘Emotional action’ and ‘physical action’ emerge as key terms in the directors’ work, and the article explores how these directors worked to afford the actor creative space within such a formidable shooting schedule. With reference to Stanislavski’s writing on the ‘Method of Physical Action’ and the theatre technique of ‘actioning’, this article brings to light the hidden processes of television direction and locates the directors’ approach to working with actors as a creative labour which is a significant meaning-making component in continuing drama.

**Keywords**

Television directing, television acting, soap opera, continuing drama, *EastEnders*, Method of Physical Action, actioning, emotional action, Constantin Stanislavski, Richard Boleslavsky, acting processes

**Introduction**

This article examines how three directors approach working with actors in one of the most exacting creative contexts – long-running television. These directors preferred the term ‘continuing drama’ to ‘soap opera’ and as such, this is the term I will use here. Acting and directing processes in continuing drama have rarely been deemed worthy of study; Geraghty rightly identifies continuing drama as a ‘neglected’ form (2010: 82). This neglect within the academy might be due to the low cultural currency of continuing drama, the quantity and speed of output, the lack of rehearsal time or Baron and Carnicke’s identification that ‘When audiences encounter naturalistic performances... [they] tend to overlook the crafted dimension of acting’ (2008: 182), which leads to an ‘invisibility’ of performance (Baron and Carnicke, 2008: 31; Butler, 1995: 151). My recent research with Christopher Hogg into the work of actors in continuing drama (Cantrell and Hogg, 2017) was designed to counter the received wisdom that, of all televisual forms, it deprivileges the actor’s work to the greatest extent. Across four interviews with actors who have played characters over the course of many years (Julie Hesmondhalgh and Graeme Hawley from *Coronation Street* (ITV, 1960–), and Gary Beadle and Rachel Bright from *EastEnders* (BBC, 1985–)), it became clear that, though the speed of production limited the scope for rehearsal or on-set preparation, there were tangible and unique strengths of the continuing drama form for the cast members. The lack of rehearsal time was much less of an issue than we had expected and the actors’ main challenges were a result of their lack of control over their long-term involvement (their length of contract and control over the direction of storylines), rather than the immediate performance context in which they found themselves. For example, Gary Beadle, who played Paul Trueman in *EastEnders*, stated that

When storylines for Paul started to move towards drug dealing in a negative way, I was dissatisfied with how it was handled ...It was beyond my control, and so the only thing I could do to take back control was to go upstairs and tell them that I wanted to leave ... As far as I was concerned it had become a simplistic drug dealer narrative and the only way that could end for me was to kill him. (2015: 56)

His only option was thus to leave the show, as he had no control over the storyline.

In fact, the actors we interviewed identified aspects of continuing drama which supported their work and allowed them a relationship with their character which is denied in other roles. For example, Julie Hesmondhalgh (2014) and Rachel Bright (2015) described the feeling that they ‘lived with’ their characters and while most actors had little information about their characters’ futures, this was offset by the fact that the actors had physically enacted many of their characters’ significant life experiences. The 6-daya-week, 12-hour filming schedule meant that the actors we interviewed were on set, in costume, for the vast majority of their time. Graeme Hawley remarked, ‘you’re spending twelve or thirteen hours a day together. [ ... ] In the first couple of years of my marriage, I spent more time with Jennie McAlpine [his wife on *Coronation Street*] than I did with my real wife!’ (2015: 37). A prolonged engagement with the role meant that many of the events that are referenced in continuing drama, such as marriages, separations and children growing up, are also lived experiences for the actors. Stories with discrete narrative forms (with a clear beginning and end), such as those that dominate theatre and film, place emphasis upon the actor’s ability to imagine the history and background of their character. Indeed, a significant body of actor training techniques is based on developing this imaginative capacity in actors. In continuing drama, however, the actors have often physically enacted these events and work alongside their character’s family members and community for long periods of time. In this sense, the belief that the quick turnaround of continuing drama deprivileges the actor to an extent not found in other forms is called into question. The formidable filming schedule and lack of knowledge of the long-term character arc might be a challenge of the form, but it was clear from the actors we interviewed that the experience of playing these characters over years, and of spending hours working with fictional family members, proves to be of real value in performative terms. In addition, these actors found that they had a close (if indirect) relationship with the writers. The writers would begin to respond to their performances, as Rachel Bright recalls:

Myself and Ricky Norwood found ourselves next to each other at a wedding and we were messing about a bit and having a good time ... and the writers must have picked up on us doing this because the more we did it, the more they wrote scenes in which we’d mess around and have fun. (2015: 42)

The actors were thus aided in the quick turnaround of production by the fact that the script was crafted with their rendition of the character in mind; as Julie Hesmondhalgh stated, she received ‘scripts which feel tailored for you and your character’ (2014: 23– 24). These actors did, though, recognise that continuing drama is a neglected form and that snobbery exists about working within it (Julie Hesmondhalgh spoke of ‘a well-respected actor coming in to work on the show and he was talking to me about the process, and he clearly thought that he was above it’ (2014: 25) and yet, as these actors’ experiences testify, continuing drama offers unique opportunities for those who appear in them. However, the strengths of the form these actors identified do not appear to relate specifically to their work with the director, but rather are predicated on the actor’s personal (often private) sense of ownership. Where actors identified collaboration as being central to their work, this was in the direct relationship with other cast members and via an indirect relationship with the writers.

This article will thus address a critical and yet hitherto elusive component of meaning-making in continuing drama: how directors approach working with actors. To analyse this area, I interviewed three directors who have recently worked on *EastEnders* and who continue to direct the drama: Sophie Lifschutz (who has directed 41 episodes since 2013), Kate Saxon (24 episodes since 2014) and Rebecca Gatward (40 episodes from 2010 to 2016). (All quotations from these directors are taken from the interviews listed in the bibliography.) The composition of this group is atypical: all three directors are female and all trained in the theatre and continue to work across stage and screen. Lifschutz trained at Drama Studio on their postgraduate directing course and has worked as resident director and later staff director at the National Theatre, as well as directing plays with the Bush Theatre and Finborough Theatre. Her other television work includes *Doctors* (2000) BBC. Saxon was an associate director of Shared Experience Theatre Company for 12 years (2000–2012) and has also directed plays for the West Yorkshire Playhouse, Soho Theatre and English Touring Theatre. On television, she has worked for the BBC on *Doctors* and *Silent Witness* (1996–). She also works extensively as a cinematic performance director for video games, including on the BAFTA winning Everybody’s Gone to the Rapture (2016) Sony and Alien: Isolation (2014) Sega. Gatward has a similarly illustrious career directing stage and screen work. She trained as a theatre director at the University of East Anglia, gaining an MA in Theatre Direction. Her theatre projects include work with the RSC, the Globe and Edinburgh’s Traverse Theatre. Her television work includes *Shetland* (2013) BBC and *Grantchester* (2014) ITV. This article does not assume that Lifschutz, Saxon and Gatward’s work is representative of directors working on continuing drama more broadly. Indeed, a theme that ran through the 16 interviews with actors in Acting in British Television was the actors’ identification of a divide between directors who were particularly interested in performance and those who paid less attention to the actors than to the technical elements of their work. As this article will make clear, these three directors firmly fall in the former category. Their engagement with actors and the considered approach to their work with them will allow us to view the hidden work that goes on in the television studio. My choice of directors was based on the interdisciplinary aims of this article as their training and significant industry experience in theatre prompt searching questions such as whether there were elements of their theatre training and experience that were useful in their television work with actors; whether there were elements that required remodelling; and what was completely new to them and thus can be classified as medium specific. This article will identify that the directors’ work with actors is a significant meaning-making component in continuing drama. I will argue that, despite what might appear to be an industrial process of line run, blocking, camera-rehearsal, record, in the experience of these three directors, continuing drama direction is a creative labour which is intimately concerned with the actor’s work and that it is through the directors’ work with actors that meaning is made. These directors were very clear about the importance of this aspect of their work. Expressing a sentiment shared by all three, Rebecca Gatward stated that

I think that a lot of actors on television feel that they are there just to fulfil the director’s vision. That they are just there to make a nice shot. That the acting isn’t the primary focus. Whereas for me it’s completely the opposite – I’m trying to get a performance out of the actors, because it’s the actors that we are watching. The actors are telling the story (2017).

Thus, following Gatward’s lead, and without underestimating the importance of other meaning-making components that fall within the director’s remit such as shot selection, composition and editing, this article will focus on the approaches they took to their work with actors.

As this article focuses on process analysis, exploring the work that takes place before and during recording rather than basing this study on the end-text product of those processes, the methodology of conducting detailed interviews with directors to gain new, professional insights is key. This article responds to Richard Hewett’s warning of the ‘analytical trap’ (2015: 74) of prioritising end texts over production contexts and processes, and by doing so overlooking important conditioning factors on what we see on our screens. This new interview data allow us to go behind the scenes and bring to light the processes that have previously been hidden from view, and to explore these directors’ approaches within the particular industrial context of continuing drama. As noted earlier, I have previously analysed performance on continuing drama from the point of view of the actor. While this article will refer to some of these insights, it aims to subject the director’s work with actors to the same level of scrutiny.

**Training in television direction: The BBC Academy**

The route from theatre to television directing for all of these directors was via the BBC Academy’s multi-camera training course. The BBC Academy is the BBC’s in-house training provision and these directors worked on the 3- or 4-week course at the BBC training facility at Wood Norton or at Elstree Studios. The fact that they all had experience in theatre was no coincidence; Kate Saxon suggests that the BBC specifically appealed to theatre directors to take their training courses, ‘I knew that the BBC did these courses and that they were keen on moving theatre directors into television for... their interest in performance’. This ‘interest in performance’ raises new questions about the use of theatre techniques for continuing drama.

The focus of the training course was on working in a multi-camera studio environment and developing the directors’ awareness of how to compose shots, draft shooting plans and efficiently orchestrate and capture the action on set, as Rebecca Gatward recalled:

Academy training was very much about how to capture performance in a multi-camera studio setting and how to capture group scenes with lots of people in, such as those in the Queen Vic, for example. So the course was about staging and how to stage scenes with the cameras... We would be given sample scenes to direct and we’d have to produce a camera script so that it could be live vision mixed. So it was all about how to direct in a studio setting (2017).

Similarly, Sophie Lifschutz remembered that the focus was on camera work:

On the first day of training, we were given homework which was camera scripting a scene. We arrived on day two and were ushered into the studio to film it. Mine was a complete mess – I hadn’t understood the space from the floor plan and my camera plan didn’t work at all. Over the course of the four weeks we built up from that scene and grew in confidence. The course ended with a half-day exterior shoot, and interior shoots in the Queen Vic and the cafe (2014).

As the experiences of these directors suggest, the course did not focus on working with actors (over and above the technical logistics of capturing their performances in the studio). Indeed, there appears to have been a tacit understanding that their ‘interest in performance’ and the associated skills of working with actors was an element that these directors had learnt through their experiences within theatre. Rebecca Gatward remembers: ‘It wasn’t necessarily about how to work with actors – there may have been a little bit of that – but that was the thing that I already knew from my theatre work’. Like Gatward, all three directors referenced their theatre experience in relation to their work with the actors, but the allusion was not a simple one-size-fits-all approach to working with actors; rather they were very clear about which elements were transferable between theatre and television and about how they approached remodelling particular theatre methods for a very different working environment.

**Preparing to direct: Production process on *EastEnders***

Directors on *EastEnders* are freelancers and are contracted to direct a certain number of ‘blocks’, with each block constituting a week of four 30-minute episodes. This aspect of the organisational structure is noteworthy in relation to the context of the actor–director relationship. Often, on continuing drama, the ‘continuing’ creative labour resides with the actor. Though many actors are engaged on short contracts and appear only in a limited number of episodes, the core ensemble can appear for many years (e.g. Adam Woodyatt has played Ian Beale in over 3500 episodes during the last 22 years). Writers, directors and executives might come and go, but the actors are the mainstay of the programme. The resulting power dynamic was not lost on these directors. Sophie Lifschutz stated ‘The status and function of the director is very different from theatre. The way I see it is that I’m a visiting director and they are continuing actors’. The effect of this power dynamic will be considered below.

Ahead of filming a block of episodes, directors are employed for 4 weeks, as Kate Saxon explains:

The first two weeks of that is script prep, and a lot of that is meetings with producers, the editor, discussing the storylines, discussing your block and the context of it, and then the next two weeks is planning your shoot and having the necessary planning meetings with the relevant departments (2017).

As this article will go on to analyse, this pre-shoot period was not merely a project management and technical planning exercise for the directors, but rather, despite having no direct contact with the actors, it was a vital period in which they began to consider performance. The preparatory period is followed by the shoot. Lifschutz explains that: ‘Sometimes you get longer for location shoots for really big storylines, but the standard schedule is a nine or ten-day shoot for four episodes, which is called a block’. This is the process from a director’s point of view, but we shouldn’t assume that the actors also work on four episodes for 9 or 10 days. Rather, as Lifschutz went on to outline, ‘They usually shoot two blocks at the same time. I’m currently working on a triple-bank, which means that I’m shooting at the same time as two other units’. Actors, therefore, constantly move from director to director and across multiple episodes. Aside from the formidable scheduling task inherent within this structure, this also presents challenges for actors who are filming out-of-sequence and across 3 weeks’ worth of episodes. These challenges were in the forefront of the minds of the directors I interviewed.

**Directing processes: Specificity and action**

Given the working processes above, it is of little surprise that one of the main aims of these directors was to gain specificity in their work with actors. As the actors were often juggling several episodes and working out-of-sequence across potentially complex emotional storylines, this specificity informed their work in a variety of ways. Gaining clarity about the basic storytelling components such as the logic of the plot, the sequence of events, the facts the characters know and the immediate context of the scenes was crucial, but so too was the need for specificity with regard to more complex notions such as clarity of intention, precision in the emotional rendering of the scene and nuanced changes in personal relationships. Such a focus might appear to be a truism of directing, but these directors went on to analyse precise ways in which they aimed to achieve this specificity, and identified how these processes grew out of the particular industrial processes of continuing drama.

For these directors, the notion of ‘action’ was central to their work and gaining this specificity. In my interviews, ‘action’ emerged as a complex and multifaceted term which related not only to the more familiar concept of physical action but also to emotional action: precise changes in the emotional life of the role and the impact of the words on the other characters. By way of introduction to the directors’ understanding of emotional action, Kate Saxon stated:

One of the most fundamental things is talking to actors about the intentions that they are playing in a scene. On a continuing drama like *EastEnders* they know their character far better than we can ever know them as freelance directors. They have lived with them and breathe with them over many years. But what we can do is talk very clearly about the script and the intentions of the writers and the story team in terms of their character and the actions that they might play in the scene. How they then choose to play those actions is a negotiation between the actor and the director. It would be foolish to say to an actor that you want something which is tonal: ‘Please be angry here’ or ‘We’d like you to cry here’. But what you can talk about is what they want and what the obstacles to getting this are. These are basic Stanislavskian theatre techniques which I think actors always respond to very well on television. It doesn’t dictate to them how they interpret that action ... but it helps them to find specificity in the scene that they might not have come to the scene with (2017).

For Saxon, ‘action’ was a central means by which she could collaborate with the actors and provide them with a creative space within such a tight production schedule. Saxon’s comments about her process highlight particular techniques that were designed for the theatre and which she has employed in her work on television. These Stanislavskian techniques will form the focus of the following section. Saxon points to the importance of context and the need for an absolute clarity on the part of the director with regard to the script; she identifies intentions, objectives and actions as useful approaches to working with the actors. Crucially, she states that the way in which she worked on ‘action’ enabled the actors to be highly specific in their work, but allowed the final choices to be found by the actors rather than dictated by the director.

**Emotional action: Context, intentions and actioning**

Across my interviews, discussions between the actor and director about context functioned as a precursor for action. Gatward states that

although actors may have been playing their role for a long time, each scene that they are in is a slightly different situation, and therefore quite often your job as a director is to bring them back to the precise situation that they are in (2017).

Like Gatward, Lifschutz also identified the context of the scenes within the episode as one of her main focuses:

There is a department for each aspect of the shoot, from wigs, hair and make-up to lighting. On set, they each watch their area of expertise like hawks, especially when it comes to continuity. But it often feels like nobody is looking for story apart from me. We shoot out of order, so I need to follow the thread of people’s emotions, plot points – I’m looking for story from an acting and performance perspective (2017).

But how does this contextual knowledge manifest itself in their work with actors, and how does it provide a springboard for action? For Kate Saxon, ‘actioning’ was the primary means of bringing this context to life and to ensure that the scene pushes the plot forward and that the actors are creatively involved in the storytelling. She states that:

With whatever storyline I am working on with various characters, I obviously need to know what has gone before and what is coming after. Without the information, I might find that the actor says ‘I feel that I have already played that beat’. If you know the context then you can explain that although it is a similar beat to the one in the block last week, this week you are confirming your opinion or you’re planning to follow through with it so you can find an ‘action’ that will make it distinct from what they’ve played before. That’s critically important, otherwise the actors can get very stuck (2017).

Saxon’s understanding of the context of the episode thus allowed her to suggest specific actions for a beat (a particular moment, often a moment of change) in the scene. This is an example of a technique designed for the theatre which Saxon has put effectively to use in her work on *EastEnders*. Related to the ‘Stanislavskian theatre techniques’, she references earlier in her interview, actioning is a post-Stanislavskian reformulation of his writing on ‘objectives’. The use of objectives was one of Stanislavski’s favoured approaches to script analysis, designed to train the actor to identify and define specific aims moment by moment in a scene. He wrote ‘the objective must always be a verb’ (1980: 123) and thus the objective should be active, and have the ‘quality of attracting and moving you’ (1980: 119). However, Stanislavski urged actors not to use objectives for the ‘multitude of details’ (1980: 114) in a scene, but rather the actor should define an objective to mark major shifts in their character’s aims. The development of ‘objectives’ into ‘actions’ was first proposed by Stanislavski’s Moscow Art Theatre actor and later celebrated acting teacher Richard Boleslavsky, who advised ‘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”’ (1933: 67). This use of transitive verbs as a way to articulate what the character is doing (often to another person) is a popular and widely taught aspect of contemporary actor training (see Caldarone and Lloyd-Williams, 2017; Moseley, 2016). Saxon’s approach to actions thus closely follows Boleslavsky’s original instructions. In the short, fragmented scenes in continuing drama, which are punctuated by interruptions as the next filming sequence is arranged, or the actor moves to a new set to film a scene from a different episode, broad objectives across blocks of text are perhaps less useful than tangible actions relating to specific beats. Therefore, unlike Stanislavski’s advice for theatre, in continuing television there is a benefit in focusing on the ‘multitude of details’ (1980: 114). Thus, Saxon’s example of ‘confirming your opinion’ as opposed to ‘planning to follow through with it’ is a nuanced distinction which avoids the actor repeating the same beat.

Part of the value of this technique in the context of the rapid turnaround of material on *EastEnders* is the brevity with which it can be employed. As Sophie Lifschutz stated, ‘In just one note, or a few words, I need to be able to convey what I would in half a day or several hours of rehearsals in the theatre’. Actioning is an ideal way of giving a quick note to an actor. The director can make a suggestion to the actor or ask the actor to redefine an action in the moments between the line run and the shoot. Kate Saxon explains how this practically functions in her work:

I normally have a couple of line runs with them, just so they can all really feel the shape of the scene ... and then I would normally talk to them in between takes or after the camera rehearsal and give them notes. You can run in in that time and whisper something to them and then run away again and put your headphones back on. That is distinctly possible and that is my job – to make sure that the scene is the best that it can be. You have to find time for that. Otherwise I don’t think, as a director, I am doing my job. The skill is knowing when to do it (2017).

The value of employing actioning, a technique originally designed for the theatre, within continuing drama is thus clear. However, in my interview, Rebecca Gatward described the ways in which the specific working processes of continuing drama opened up further opportunities for its use. In theatrical performance, part of the actor’s skill with regard to the use of actioning is to make a pre-rehearsed series of actions appear fresh and spontaneous in performance. The director may suggest new actions during the run of performances to change the tone of scenes, and an individual actor may choose to change them to keep their performance fresh, but in general these are fixed and thoroughly rehearsed. By contrast, there are different methods to capture this freshness and spontaneity available to the television director. Gatward’s comments explore how she made full use of the particular context in which she worked.

As Saxon suggests, when it comes to giving a note, ‘the skill is knowing when to do it’. The first of Gatward’s techniques is to carefully time when she gives the actor a note so that the new impetus this provides is fully captured on camera:

This freshness is also something that guides how I give actors notes. Often I will save a note for an actor until I am on the shot that I want to capture that fresh response. That’s part of the art: knowing the right moment in your shooting sequence to give an actor a note or a piece of new information (2017).

Rather than discussing actions before the shoot, Gatward weaves this technique into the process of recording, allowing the actors to try a new action in the moment of performance. Gatward’s deployment of this technique speaks to a quality of television acting that came as a surprise in my recent research. I had assumed that, given the importance of rehearsals in theatre, actors would long for more rehearsal time in their television work, so as to provide them with the chance to build towards the most satisfactory rendition of a scene. However, this wasn’t the case; Julie Hesmondhalgh observed that: ‘This is a really interesting thing, in theatre you rehearse and re-rehearse something and you hone it and develop it, but with television work, if you repeat it, you lose it. You can’t keep doing it’ (2014). As Hesmondhalgh notes, often the first take is the strongest, as it captures the freshness of performance. Thus, rather than asking the actors to ‘keep doing it’ in retakes, Gatward uses repeat takes to tweak the action that the actors play in the scene. In this way, Gatward has taken a technique designed for rehearsals in theatre and employed it in the moment of recording on television. Crucial to achieving this freshness was the ability to retain flexibility in the studio. Gatward states that

Sometimes, if the scene is particularly emotional, I might do the tighter pass first so that I can capture the emotion the first time that the actors perform it, but there may be other reasons for starting with a wider pass. Again, this is a judgement call when working with different actors (2017).

Gatward was thus guided by the individual performance patterns of the actors, and the timing of new information for them. In a similar vein, Kate Saxon pointed to the need for flexibility when she contrasted her approach with that of other directors: ‘[On] *EastEnders*... you become able to finely judge the different actors’ needs... Some directors camera-script everything, whereas those of us who are newer to television don’t tend to do that’. This flexibility allowed them to respond to the actor’s performance. In a production process in which the speed of the production machinery appears to take precedent over creative labour, it is perhaps unexpected to see the actors’ individual processes foreground in this way.

Giving the actor a fresh action to play during filming was just one form of stimulus that Gatward built into the shooting plan. The specifics of the filming schedule, and in particular the lack of rehearsal time, also gave rise to further opportunities to capture a fresh response from the actor. Gatward worked with the most experienced actor on *EastEnders*, Adam Woodyatt, on one of the most high-profile storylines of recent years, the storyline surrounding the murder of Lucy Beale (Figure 1). In her work on the episode which aired on 22 April 2014, Gatward arranged the reveal of Lucy Beale’s body so as to capture Woodyatt’s instinctive response on camera:

When I was working on the episodes surrounding the death of Lucy Beale, Adam Woodyatt asked me that when we did the scenes in the morgue, he didn’t want to see the body until we did a take. So we lined up all the shots with somebody else standing in ... and then we opened the curtains to the body and the first time that Adam saw the body was in front of the camera. That meant that his reaction was instantaneous and fresh. It was something that would have been very hard for him to repeat. This is something that I have found: quite often the first take is the most interesting and the most live and the most adrenalized; it is often the best. Sometimes it is best to save these moments to capture a fresh, unrehearsed response (2017).

We can thus identify emotional action as a useful tool within the context of the quick turnaround of material on *EastEnders*. Saxon’s use of actioning allows her to give incisive and concise notes to the actor without reducing directing to tonal instruction (to use Saxon’s example, ‘We’d like you to cry here’). Rather, emotional actions provoke the actor to consider the specifics of the psychological life of the character: their relationships, intentions and decision-making processes, but leave how this affects performance down to the actor. As Gatward demonstrates, though both actors and directors work within exacting production schedules, the industrial process of television production can be exploited by the director to provide fresh stimuli for the actor in ways that are not possible in their work on stage. Tailoring how actions and other stimuli can be mobilised to support the spontaneity of performance was a focus for these directors and is a unique response to the particular context in which they worked.

**Physical action**

Alongside emotional action, all three directors pointed to the importance of physical action in their work on *EastEnders*. Rather than merely fulfilling the physical actions stated in the script, this element of the director’s work became a significant meaning-making component in their work with actors. Rebecca Gatward stated that

a big part of my work with actors is imaginatively exploring what they might be doing. Not always what are they doing emotionally to each other, but the physical action – what are they doing in this particular room of the house? (2017)

Physical action is an intriguing contributor to meaning in *EastEnders* and other continuing dramas due to the domestic focus of the programme. Most of the scenes in *EastEnders* take place within the characters’ homes and therefore, rather than the scene being based on what someone is doing (as might be the case in a medical or police procedural drama), the relationship between content and physical action is, at first glance, more incidental. As Sophie Lifschutz states:

What actors like on *EastEnders* is realistic activity. They are never just standing and saying their lines. They always have an activity. Which is what we do in life – we sit and chat and have a cup of tea. Even in a moment of crisis you are still doing stuff. I think that is the difference between television and theatre acting. On stage often the setting is non-naturalistic and the actors end up standing with their hands by their sides but on television that is very rare. It is a kitchen sink type of naturalism (2014).

Lifschutz’s comments suggest the importance of physical activity in *EastEnders* and also indicate a connection between psychology and physical action. As she says, ‘Even in a moment of crisis you are still doing stuff’. This is certainly true of *EastEnders* and the following section will explore the relationship between the ‘stuff’ the character is doing and the ‘moment of crisis’: how physical action and psychological states are linked. I will argue that, rather than diminishing the importance of physical action, the looser link between the content of the scene and the action within it allows the actor to use physical action to carry significant emotional weight.

**Blocking and physical action**

Choice with regard to physical action tends to fall within the remit of the director and actor rather than the writer, as Rebecca Gatward explains:

[Physical action] is not always implicit in the writing ...I’m very keen for the actors to feel at home and truthful rather than them stepping into something that they are not comfortable with, otherwise you will never get the best performance from them. So you do have to investigate the circumstances of the scene – what they might be doing, what time of day it is, whether they have come from work, whether they are on their way out, is it a mealtime? (2017)

Since the writers do not always specify a particular action, like the groundwork for emotional action, the preparation for physical action starts with contextual questions about the scene. However, as Gatward’s comments suggest, a crucial aspect of these directors’ approaches is that, where possible, they decided against pre-blocking the scenes in the planning phase of the process, but rather to work with the actors to choose a sequence of physical actions which best fits the scene. For Gatward, this conversation with the actors is a feature of theatre directing that she has looked to employ on *EastEnders*: ‘If it is a simple scene, then I will involve the actors in the blocking which is something that I suppose I have brought from my theatre work’. Viewed within the context of the high volume of material that the directors had to cover in each shooting day, allowing this flexibility and room for discussion with the actor is surprising. The practical arrangements necessary to facilitate this flexibility further indicate the significance placed on it by the directors.

The decision to afford some creative freedom to the actor with regard to physical action was only possible due to foresight by the directors. In such a cramped production schedule, spontaneity had to be carefully planned. For Kate Saxon, part of her preparation before filming starts is to identify a range of possible physical actions which she could offer to the actor and to plan for these different options:

I find it’s best to have a tool box of practical actions they could be doing, but to discuss it with them. You might be setting a scene in the kitchen and you think it might be good for the character to boil the kettle or to run the tap. If you are thinking about doing anything like that then it needs to go in your shooting plan so that in the planning meeting the crew get everything ready. If you don’t, and you decide that the character will get something from the fridge, the fridge will be empty. So by planning these options it allows you to have that box of tricks (2017).

The resultant flexibility that this advance planning by the directors allowed was welcomed by the actors. For example, Rachel Bright explained that ‘we (myself, Ricky Norwood and June Brown) had a busy kitchen scene. Very domestic, little argument, making tea, pulling bits and pieces out of cupboards and fridges’ (2018). Bright spoke about the way in which this flexibility allowed the actors to choose physical actions which fitted their sense of character, ‘I like the [director] giving an actor a choice and letting them decide – they are the best people to know what would just distract and what might help. It’s just more natural’ (2018) (Figure 2).

Similarly, for Gatward, in complex group scenes which do not lend themselves to this degree of flexibility, the actors’ ‘physical impulses’ were still central to the planning process:

I’m thinking about the actors’ performances before we meet. If there are scenes that I need to plan upfront, such as big group scenes or when I know I won’t have the time on the floor to work with the actors, the first thing that I do when I think about staging is to consider what the characters want, what are their physical impulses in the scene, and what are they trying to get. These questions tell me how to plan the scene. If you approach it like that then most of the time your staging decisions chime with the action of the scene (2017).

Physical action and the physical impulses of the characters are therefore at the heart of the planning stage for these directors. In this light, we can view the pre-shoot plan as a period in which the directors focus on the performances they want to develop. But why is this focus on physical action so important to these directors? The process of line run, blocking, camera-rehearsal, record can be seen as reducing performance to another technical prerequisite of production in which the actors merely need to make an error-free pass of the material before the machine turns again and another scene is completed. At first glance, the question of physical blocking might appear to reinforce this: When Kate Saxon discusses the possibility of an actor making a cup of tea in a scene, we might view physical actions as decorative, designed to provide visual interest for the viewer while the plot is advanced through the content of the dialogue, with little link between the two. However, Rachel Bright’s comments suggest that the choice of physical action was more important than merely finding an activity for a scene.

**Physical action and meaning-making**

Kate Saxon explores the importance of physical action in her work on *EastEnders* and relates this focus to her experience in theatre:

If they are making a phone call, rather than just standing there keying the number into the phone, in real life, we often do something else at the same time, so that’s when I might suggest the box of tricks and I’d ask the actor which option they feel fits. It makes me think back to my early days in theatre. I worked with Alan Ayckbourn and he would always say that if you get the right physical action it would really help with a line ...finding the close link between physical action and the meaning or structure or action of the line is really useful in this television work. It helps make the actor feel embedded in the reality of the scene. It can help bring it to life (2017).

Key to the choice of physical action is the notion of what ‘fits’ the content of the scene. For Saxon, content and physical action are intimately linked. Physical action plays a crucial role in meaning-making. What might appear mundane domestic tasks – such as making a cup of tea – become a series of physical actions through which emotion can be expressed. Rachel Bright again explored how physical action enabled her to find fitting, ‘natural’ behaviour for her character, Poppy Meadow. She stated that ‘Having these things usually takes pressure off a line that you are struggling with, would change your emphasis, makes things more natural – which every actor wants, right? To convey the truth of a person’ (2018). She also identified the importance of physical action in other actors’ portrayals and how this emphasised elements of their characters’ emotional state, commenting

I noticed Jake Wood [who plays Max Branning] would always have a prop or food or something in most of his scenes at home/cafe. Which is true, when you are a busy businessman, you go home or to the cafe to eat, to pick something up, etc. Time is money. (2018)

Rather than operating as decoration, Bright, like Ayckbourn’s comment, found that the action would affect the line and help it to feel ‘natural’. Again, within the quick turnaround of material, allowing the actor to tailor a physical action in a scene to respond to the script’s emotional content was invaluable. In light of Bright’s experience, we can return to Lifschutz’s comment that ‘Even in a moment of crisis you are still doing stuff’. We can identify that the way in which the character carries out these actions may not only be affected by the emotional content of the scene, but, in the context of continuing drama in which ‘realistic activity’ dominates, these physical actions can become a useful means through which the emotional content is communicated.

Saxon also identifies a ‘close link between physical action and the ... action of the line’ (what I have termed ‘emotional action’ here). The ways in which this link functions provide an insight into the process of meaning-making. Saxon suggests that the right physical action helps generate an emotional response from the actor. Her comment about her use of ‘Stanislavskian theatre techniques’ provides a useful lens through which to view the importance of physical action and its strong link to emotional action. Towards the end of his career, Stanislavski began to have misgivings about techniques based on emotion and placed an increasing emphasis on physical action, developing what he called the ‘Method of Physical Action’ (1934). He wrote that ‘it is easier to lay hold of physical than psychological action, it is more accessible than elusive inner feelings’ (1981b: 47). Further demonstrating his preference for the stability and reliability of physical action over emotion, he told a group of directors ‘Do not speak to me about feeling. We cannot set feeling, we can only set physical action’ (Toporkov, 1979: 160). However, like the directors here, Stanislavski also identified the ways in which physical action and emotion are linked. Most relevant for this study of *EastEnders* is Stanislavski’s finding that physical action could prompt an emotional response in the actor. He wrote that ‘truth of our physical actions and faith in them are not needed by us for the sake of realism or naturalism but rather to affect, in a reflexive way, our inner feelings in our roles’ (1981a: 237). Specifically linking physical and emotional actions, he explained that

an actor on the stage need only sense the smallest modicum of organic physical truth in his action or general state and instantly his emotions will respond to his inner faith in the genuineness of what his body is doing. (1981a: 150)

We can compare Stanislavski’s writings to Saxon’s comment above that ‘the right physical action ... would really help with a line’ and Bright’s observation that it would ‘change your emphasis’. Physical action, rather than being decorative or incidental, can thus be central to meaning-making, not just as a physical expression of inner emotion, but also as a means to prompt those emotions. Though designed for the stage, Stanislavski’s writings are particularly relevant for a performance context in which physical action plays such a large part.

In the experiences of these three directors, physical action emerges as a central concern. Physical action functions as a meaning-making tool in a range of ways, and thus their decision to involve the actors in the physical life of the scene allows actor–director collaboration and creative labour to be at the heart of the storytelling. This decision is, at least in part, based on the identification by the directors of the actor’s custodianship of the character. Saxon stated that the choice should be down to the actors, as ‘They have lived with them [the character] and breathe with them over many years’. This sentiment was echoed by actor Graeme Hawley, who, speaking of his experience of playing John Stape in *Coronation Street*, said:

You never had to ask questions about your backstory – you’d played out your backstory over years... All that information and work is all there when you walk on set at ten in the morning. All you have to worry about is the nuts and bolts of the scene. Where do I go? What happens at this moment? When do I go into the kitchen? It’s only those sorts of details that are left to negotiate. (2015: 33–34)

As Hawley’s experience demonstrates, the actor–director negotiation with regard to the physical life of the character is built on the actors’ vast experience of playing their role and their intimate knowledge of the psychological life of the character. In light of Saxon’s comments, we can recognise that actions – both physical and emotional – are central to communicating this psychological life.

**Conclusion**

This article set out to explore the creative labour of television performance. The experiences of these three directors working on *EastEnders* have shed light on how they approach their work with actors within the exacting production process of television drama. A motif that has run through all three directors’ work is the creative space that they have afforded the actor. This took significant pre-planning and organisation, but the directors’ focus on performance from the very beginning of their involvement allowed the actor to be creatively engaged in both the emotional and physical actions of the scenes. To achieve this, the directors employed the techniques that they encountered in their theatre work and which they remodelled for use on *EastEnders*. However, despite the reduced time for discussion and the absence of rehearsal with the actors, this remodelling should not be viewed simply as a diminishment of the original aims of the techniques for the theatre rehearsal room. Rather, these directors were able to harness the particular working processes of television drama to remodel them to become fitting techniques for their work on *EastEnders*. These processes, outside formalised rehearsal time, are hidden from view. They exist in the brief conversations between the actor and the director; in the moment that Saxon was able to ‘whisper something to them’ between takes. As the studio floor is not open to researchers, meaning that first-hand access is impossible, these insights are only accessible via new interview data. The fact that these processes are hidden has, I would argue, led to an assumption that this sensitive and nuanced craft does not exist. The articulate accounts of their processes by these directors have allowed us to access this creative labour and to identify their work with actors as being central to meaning-making in this form of television drama.

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