

Acting, Not Acting and the Failure of Drama

On a very long drive last summer I found myself listening to a drama on BBC Radio 4. As I listened, I noticed that the first thing I thought of when hearing a clinking glass or the sound of someone traipsing across gravel was not the character or the world of the play, but the foley artist sitting in a sound studio wearing headphones and a look of focused concentration. This image was immediately followed by one of actors at microphones, ready to emote and live truthfully in a given circumstance.

The drive and the drama wore on. I failed to make any associations with the characters or scenarios in the play. Instead, I pictured soundproof rooms full of old hands holding polystyrene coffee cups and tattered scripts. (An image that, no doubt, has little grounding in the reality of a busy radio studio.) There was, of course, a good deal of idiosyncrasy in my response to the production, but my daydreaming allowed me to put a finger on why I find it so difficult to engage with a form that often involves the work of both good writers and good actors.

It struck me that there is frequently something alienating about acting on the radio. Knowing that they cannot be seen, actors tasked with creating a scene in the listener's imagination seem to work too hard to relay a particular emotional state or dramatic crescendo. Line readings by well-known and excellent performers can seem false and overstated as they endeavour to fill in the gaps left by the listener's blindness.

Cumbria whipped past and my patience with the radio play dissolved. I struggled to find music that I wanted to listen to with 200 miles still to go, so I scrolled through my ipod and settled on a short story from the *New Yorker Fiction Podcast* series: the author Junot Diaz reading Edwidge Danticat's *Water Child*.¹ The contrast between the two forms was marked; however, I couldn't help but notice significant differences where one might expect similarity. Most evident of these was Diaz's reluctance to imbue the story's dialogue with the explicitly representational emotion we might associate with acting.

When relaying verbal encounters between characters, Diaz's tone stayed measured and authorial. There was not a lack of empathy with the protagonists, but the distance between speaker and narrator was marked. At first the choice struck me as odd. It would surely have been easier for Diaz to imbue the characters' speech with specific emotions. However, as the strange quality of the reading grew familiar, I began to note the value of his decision. There was a curious openness within his reading of the text. Words were presented in such a way as to leave them devoid of obvious affect, enabling me to question the motives and feelings of the characters.

Each moment of dialogue contained a kind of dialectical potential.

Characters' words were not packaged as part of a particular emotion - they were pregnant with possibility. Diaz seemed to set himself the task of reading

¹ http://www.newyorker.com/online/2009/12/14/091214on_audio_diaz

the words on the page, leaving it to the listener to judge moments of ambiguity and clarity. Accordingly, his performance had an un-manipulative spirit of democracy, contrasting sharply with the disingenuous emotional sincerity of the acted dialogue within the radio play I had been listening to. There was something in Diaz's tone that allowed the narrative to live in the present moment – to live in the listener's ear rather than the performer's mouth. The simplicity and effectiveness of his reading underlined the value of letting the complexity of a character's choices unfold in the audience's imagination, not in the explicitness (and resulting banality) of an acted gesture.

Diaz's reading of Danticat's story speaks to issues that have been burning in discussions of acting for many years. Issues that are, perhaps, most clearly articulated in Michael Kirby's seminal 1972 essay 'On Acting and Not Acting' (published in *TDR*). In the essay, Kirby reflects on post-war American performance practice, as well as on certain traditional Eastern theatre forms. He attempts to assimilate and taxonomize the variety of practices that might be considered acting. One of his key concerns was the question of how a performer's engagement with tasks that don't require him to do anything other than be himself might be understood by both actor and audience as part of a process of acting.

Kirby developed a framework for understanding the ways in which carrying out simple tasks on stage could be part of the actor's work, even if they did not involve acts of characterization or imagination. He created a continuum that spanned from non-matrixed performance (where the performer is not

framed as part of an imagined/fictional world) to Complex Acting, which he defined (perhaps somewhat problematically) as a kind of representational pretence - where the actor represents and embodies something or someone that he is not in everyday life.

The essay raises a number of profound questions about what it means to act, and even more about how the audience conceptualizes the process of watching (to borrow from Peter Brook) an actor walking across an empty space. It opens up the vital question of how, in some performances, the majority of the actor's work can take place in the imagination of the spectator. Such a question is vital for both performer and spectator, and it highlights the nature of the problems with the radio play I abandoned, as well as the success of Diaz's reading of Danticat's short story.

I once talked to an actress who had to portray a character who had been gang raped within the context of a civil war. The event happened outside of the action presented on stage; however, the performance demanded that, following her character's brutal attack, she walked slowly across the stage. On the face of things, this demands a highly complex piece of acting from the actor, representing a moment of severe physical and mental trauma. During rehearsal, however, the actress realised that she had no meaningful frame of reference to draw on when attempting to represent her character's state of mind or behaviour. There was nothing she could draw upon in her imagination that she felt would honour the reality of her character's situation.

The actress told me that she struggled for some time to develop an appropriate way to act the scene, until she finally decided that there was no way to act or imagine her character's behaviour. Instead of engaging in a piece of 'complex' acting, she decided to rely on the audience's knowledge of the character's situation, choosing to walk across the stage at a slow and constant pace, with a fixed point of visual focus. She reported that some members of the audience found this scene unbearably moving.

The actress explained to me that she thought her performance in that scene was effective not because she had cut to the core of the character's reality, but because her focus on a simple task had enabled the audience to rely on their own empathetic response to the character's situation. The spectators were not being encouraged to feel a certain way by the actor's choices. They were free to respond to the dramatic impact of the narrative.

I would argue that the montage of simple physical tasks within performance has been underreported and undervalued within discussions of acting - perhaps because it seems difficult to associate it with conventional notions of the actor's art. However, the kind of task-based performance that Kirby defined as existing outside the process of complex acting seems to be becoming increasingly prevalent within contemporary performance practice and drama. Reality television dredges through our everyday lives to find relatable protagonists, film dramas are made without professional actors, and verbatim content competes with fiction on stage. Artists in a search for

authenticity and truth seem to be abandoning the conventional modes of their artistry.

Perhaps because audiences are becoming increasingly inundated with stories, images and sounds from across the globe, the conceit of representing the emotional and cognitive state of another individual within performance seems to be less and less effective at providing insight. The baffling stream of information, opinion and comment has undermined our faith in the actor's ability to convey reality's complexity. A golden age of documentary has emerged, but it has trampled the imagined world of the actor, so often defined by the neatness of given circumstances.

The 24/7 mediatization of the world has led us to a point where art falters in the face of the real – where we can only fail to comprehend the motivations of the 6.5 billion subjects walking the globe. The complicity needed for an audience to engage with the conceit associated with what Kirby defined as complex acting falters as it becomes impossible to believe that actors can condense the world of a character into a series of gestures, tropes and emotional states.

Stanislavsky's work with actors was rooted in a belief that we can understand and rationalise the motivations of individuals and the choices they make. Although he created an extraordinary body of work, heaping insight upon insight, we should also recognise the limitation of his worldview and understanding as we reflect across the temporal distance of a century. After

that long drive, when I read in the newspaper about a family shot by a roadside in France, a four-year-old child hiding, physically unharmed, under the dead bodies of her relatives, I was reminded of the fundamental problems associated with attempting to understand the motivations of others.

Some actions are beyond the distance available to our empathy. Actions like murder and rape teach us that that the motivational approach to acting, with its constant attempt to rationalise choice, can be profoundly reductive, even if it is satisfying in the detail of its craft and artistry. Such actions teach us that the conceit of the method (in both its Russian and American forms) can obscure reality as much as it can illuminate it. I read about the horrors faced by that unfortunate family and knew that art's role cannot and should not be one of explication.

Ultimately task-based performance – the focussed walk across a stage, or clear enunciation of words on the page – encourages the audience to take responsibility for their engagement with a work of art. It encourages the audience to question what their role is in making sense of the performer's actions and his/her relationship to the world at large. Such an approach to art provides the proof that less can be more, undermining the value of complexity in the actor's work. It is an approach that encourages the actor to trust the audience's conscience and understanding, engaging in a true process of empathy that is not necessarily rooted in rationalisation or explanation. It is acting for a world in which we cannot know all the answers.

The dialectic proposed within Diaz's measured and non-committal reading of Danticat's dialogue might not constitute complexity within performance in the way that Kirby defined; however, it forced me to think and take responsibility for my imaginative engagement with the characters' actions. Listening became morally active in a way that seems apt when accounting for the necessary complexity of our engagement with a networked, globalized society, where performance and self-presentation have become inescapable aspects of social engagement, and where acting is a conceit that can obscure truth in a way not conceived of by masters such as Stanislavsky.

For Stanislavsky, effective acting was a means to bring reality to the imaginative and fantastical world of great art. The simplicity of task-based performance is a means to navigate the fantastical and incomprehensible nature of reality, something that can be missed in the manipulative artistry of traditional dramatic forms. To counteract the failure of drama in a world groaning under the weight of seemingly contradictory information, artists must begin to trust in the audience's imagination and conscience. Take note Radio 4.