

ARTICLE

Screen Acting and Performance Choices.

TREVOR RAWLINS, *University of Reading*

ABSTRACT.

This paper starts from the premise that screen acting has taken a dominant place in the working life of the professional actor at the beginning of the 21st century. With the implications for the training of professional actors for the commercial sector in mind, I want to use close analysis of two scenes from one television drama series, *Burn Up* (Global Television/BBC 2008), to examine actors' performance choices and the ways in which some key concepts of Stanislavskian actor training operate specifically in screen performance. In doing so I will make comparison between British and American styles and traditions of acting, again with reference to the work of Stanislavsky, the dominant theorist underpinning much British and American actor training.

KEYWORDS.

Screen Acting, Actor Training, Method Acting, Stanislavsky.

Introduction.

“You don’t own a television? What’s all your furniture pointed at?”
Friends, Season 9, Episode 23, NBC

Here the character Joey from the long running US sitcom *Friends* sums up the central position that television now occupies, both literally, in the living room and figuratively, in the daily lives, of the majority of people in the western world. Put another way, and into a British context by John Caughie, “television drama is a central component of post-war British culture” (Caughie 2000a: 2), but little work has been done on the effect that the increased dominance of television as a cultural force has had on the working life of the actors who play characters like Joey in television sitcoms, or in the television dramas to which Caughie refers. The question “What do actors do when they act?” has been posed by Caughie (Caughie 2000b: 162) but there has not been much further work done on how the processes of acting are affected by the production methods of television. Dorothy Hobson has explored how the nature of working in the high volume world of Soap Opera, with its tight schedules and tighter budgets, can affect the quality of the resulting show (Hobson 1982), but those conclusions relate to the way the audience receives and reads the programme, not the effects on the working processes of the actors involved.

This article is based around an extract from my PhD thesis, “Professional Actor Training in the Age of Uncertainty”, due for submission in summer 2011. My research has been based on my own career as an actor over the last twenty years, and on my experience as an actor trainer over the last thirteen. It focuses on Western acting, specifically British and American, and, broadly, on the naturalistic and realistic forms most prevalent in acting for the screen today, specifically television. The term “actor” is an unstable one. I am working towards a definition of an “actor” that will satisfy both those who call themselves professional actors, and those who watch and listen to those actors as they perform across all media currently available. I use the terms “actor” and “acting” here to denote the business of performing in the mainstream Western entertainment industry, specifically again, British and American. I use a Stanislavskian approach in the analysis of performance, limiting myself to this cultural and philosophical position. The wider purpose of both my PhD research and this article is to analyse acting, in the terms that I have just set out, to inform the training of contemporary actors in a working environment dominated by the demands of the screen.

In the UK the 1990 Broadcasting Act led to an explosion of television channels and signalled a

cultural shift towards an even greater dominance of television in the working life of the professional actor, yet British actor training has historically concentrated on theatre performance. As drama schools developed out of the British theatrical tradition they naturally assumed the position that they were training actors to work in the theatre. When first film and later television emerged as new media, they were seen as subservient to the theatre. Now they are, particularly in the case of television, the major areas of employment and income for most professional actors. Indeed in many cases professional actors today rarely, if ever, work in theatre.¹

Television and film are not rehearsed, in a professional setting, to the same extent as theatre; much television today is not rehearsed at all, meaning that the process of preparation for the professional actor is entirely different to that for the theatre.² I have picked a piece of television to be the focus of this study, but as the process of working for the camera is essentially the same for the actor, whether that be a film or television camera, I will often employ the term “screen” to cover both. There are sometimes differences between the experiences of working in film and television that can impact on the working process of the actor. These differences tend to relate to the amount of time and budget available, and the same distinctions may well exist between high and low budget television. However, the actor’s relationship to the camera is not materially different in any screen media. It is the preparation process that differs greatly between stage and screen, with the performance aspects of an actor’s job differing to a lesser extent.

UK actor training has responded to the cultural shift towards the screen to an extent, and now actor training courses in this country almost invariably offer some form of screen acting component. However most training still happens in a theatre setting; most performance work during training is live; most teaching occurs through rehearsal based on a theatre model; and most voice and movement work focuses on theatrical performance. This is essentially the traditional way of doing things based on the experience of previous generations. The recorded media are still relatively young and the dominance of television in the working life of the professional actor an even more recent fact of life, within a single generation. The difference in working practices is, however, great,

¹ As an example, the actor Keeley Hawes, who has had lead roles in major television series including *Spooks* and *Ashes to Ashes* in recent years, recently said in an interview that her great ambition was to work on stage for the first time (Hawes 2010). American actor Cameron Diaz makes a similar statement in her interview on *Inside the Actors Studio* (Diaz 2005).

² Some situation comedy is rehearsed and performed before a studio audience, *Friends* being a case in point in the USA or *My Family* in the UK, but much, increasingly, is shot on location with a single camera, for example, *The Office* or *Peep Show*.

with serious implications for the working processes of the actor. It is also true to say that it is far more practical to replicate professional theatrical working conditions and practices than it is those of film and television. Where replication of, for example, television studio conditions has been attempted, as it was by RADA as early as 1962, it has been found to be not helpful enough to justify the expense (Sanderson 1984: 282).

From the point of view of the actor, performance in film and television differs from theatre in two major respects; repetition and feedback. In the theatre a performance has to be repeated many times in the same sequence and yet remain spontaneous; for the screen, a performance happens out of sequence and need only be “perfect” once. In theatre there is a live audience occupying the same space as the actor; for the screen the audience is remote and removed.³ As will be explored later, British actors are traditionally seen as more at home in the theatre, with American actors more at home on screen. I want to compare the British theatre based tradition of acting with the American approach. The dominant theoretician in professional actor training in both countries is Stanislavsky, so first I want to compare British and American approaches to his writings.

Stanislavsky and the development of Actor Training.

Constantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938) was the founding co-director of the Moscow Art Theatre. His books on actor training, *An Actor Prepares* (1936), *Building a Character* (1950) and *Creating a Role* (1963) have formed the basis of, or been the counterpoint to, most acting theory and practice from the mid-twentieth century. His ideas, theories and exercises, which evolved throughout his career, began to be disseminated internationally in the 1920s in America by émigré Russian actors, most famously Richard Boleslavsky (1889-1937). The Moscow Art Theatre also toured the USA in 1922 and 1923, meaning that many American actors saw Stanislavsky and his company at work. These two points of contact led first to the founding of the Group Theatre, then to the founding of the Actors Studio and the creation of the now famous “Method” school of acting, based on Stanislavsky’s early work.⁴

³ There is some slippage here as pointed out in the previous footnote. Multi camera studio based techniques do blur the boundaries between theatre and television performance in some ways.

⁴ For more on Group Theatre, see Clurman (1957).

From the 1930s arguments have raged about Stanislavsky's real intentions, as the three training manuals appeared in translation gradually (over a twenty seven year period) in both the USA and the UK. There have also been longstanding concerns about the accuracy of the translations as Stanislavsky spoke no English and the second and third volumes were translated and published posthumously. On both sides of the Atlantic, this has led to furious disagreement between both Stanislavskians and non-Stanislavskians, and between Stanislavskians themselves. As Jerzy Grotowski has put it:

Stanislavsky has disciples for each of his periods and each disciple is limited to his particular period; from that come discussions like those of theology. (Grotowski 1968: 206)

The spread of his theories in the UK happened more gradually as there was no direct contact with Stanislavsky and much more limited contact with his followers. The American offshoot can be seen as a distinct and discrete entity, although it is important to acknowledge that there is no consensus between Stanislavsky's American "disciples" either and, subsequently, much confusion in the UK (and USA) about the difference between the "Method", the American "version" of Stanislavsky, and Stanislavsky's "System".

Most professional actor training in the UK today is based on Stanislavsky, or Stanislavsky-derived, training methodologies. In many ways Stanislavskian training fits well with the largely naturalistic or realistic approach of the majority of television and film drama. But Stanislavsky's "System" was devised for theatrical processes and even though derivatives, most famously "The Method", have appropriated Stanislavsky, or have been themselves appropriated, with the needs of the screen in mind, their roots are all in theatrical production methods. At the time he was writing, moving pictures were in their infancy and mass television was non-existent. Because the "Method" concentrated on the personal and emotional sides of acting, it lent itself to the newly emergent media. As Virginia Wright-Wexman has put it:

Because of the tendency to substitute their personal feelings for those of the characters they were playing, Actors Studio performers were well suited to become Hollywood stars. (Wright-Wexman 2004: 131)

The British attitude to actor training in the late 20th and early 21st century might best be

characterised as a mix of Stanislavskian theory with a longstanding theatrical tradition. As the dominance of the needs of the screen has grown in the working life of the actor, it is useful to compare how acting has developed in both countries with their differing relationships to Stanislavsky.

British and American Acting.

Much has been written about the differing styles and approaches of British and American acting. As Wexman has pointed out, the British tradition is often seen as concentrating on external technique and craft, whereas the American tradition has emphasised an internal truth (Wexman 2004: 128). Ian Watson proposes the widely held view that British actors tend to be seen as more at home on stage, American actors on screen (Watson 2001: 79). American actors are often seen as more spontaneous with British actors more polished and rehearsed, a view expressed by the American actor Lindsay Crouse in interview with Carole Zucker, in which Crouse describes the American style as “shoot from the hip (Zucker 1995: 17). As the American actor John Lithgow, who trained and has worked in Britain, puts it:

The American actors tend to think that the Brits are the great stage actors, and the Brits tend to think the Americans are the ones who act truly from the guts. (Zucker 1995: 152)

The importance of this self-perceived failing in British actors is summed up by Irish/British actor Daniel Day-Lewis, in an interview with Richard Brown, in which he cites the films of the American director Martin Scorsese and the performances contained in them as something to which he aspired when he was training in the 1970s (Day-Lewis 2005). Day-Lewis’s comments are echoed by Anthony Hopkins who cites Marlon Brando’s performance in Elia Kazan’s *On the Waterfront* (1954) as a major influence (Hopkins 1998). The personal attitudes of these particular actors are representative of a more general attitude among British actors that, when it comes to screen performance, American actors are historically more accomplished.

It is the general implications of this that I want to explore through the analysis of two specific scenes from one television drama that employed both British and American actors. In so doing I will employ some specific Stanislavskian terms. Firstly, “objective”, which is the character’s

intention within the scene; the reason they say and do what the script demands.⁵ Secondly, “given circumstances”, which refers to the background information that the actor can reasonably deduce from the script. I will also refer to “correct” and “incorrect” choices, by which I mean here the way text is spoken and stressed that makes, or does not make, clear, naturalistic meaning. I am limiting myself to “realistic” and “naturalistic” forms and a broadly Stanislavskian approach to acting.

Actor’s performance choices in *Burn Up* (2008).

The two part Global Television/BBC series *Burn Up* (2008) is a useful example of the difference in the two approaches as it has both British and American actors in the cast. British actors Rupert Penry-Jones and Claire Skinner play Tom and Clare McConnell. Tom McConnell is the soon-to-be chief executive of a fictitious major oil company, Arrow Oil. Clare is his wife and the daughter of the current chief executive. North American actors Bradley Whitford and Neve Campbell play oil company executives James “Mack” Mackintosh and Holly Dernay. A comparison of some moments between these four actors shows some of the differences in acting style. No published script exists and even if it did it would probably be based on what appears on screen and may well differ from the original shooting script. This is far from unusual as much can change during the production, and indeed post production, phases of making a piece of film or television.

This is one example of the unstable nature of analysing actor’s performance choices and reflects the nature of my research, which is based on many things that are unfixed, unstable and ephemeral. My speculation is informed speculation. When it comes to the close analysis of two scenes from *Burn Up* (2008), I use my own professional experience as an actor over the last twenty years to make some assumptions based both on what can be seen on screen and what the shooting script may have originally said. The cultural frame of reference of the analysis is limited to Western approaches, specifically British and American.

The British actors.

⁵ This is the term as translated by Elizabeth Reynolds-Hapgood. There are many disputes about the accuracy of this translation, see Benedetti (1990) and Carnicke (1984).

There is an early scene to establish the relationship of the McConnells. They are at breakfast with their children. Tom McConnell (Penry-Jones) is late and hunting for his car keys whilst Clare McConnell (Skinner) eats at a large breakfast bar with the children, including their daughter, Lily (Rosalind Bailey).

Tom

Where are my keys? *(Clare looks at Lily, Lily giggles)* Lily, where are my keys?

Lily

(Shrug) – it's walk to work day

Tom

What, what?

Clare

It's environment week at school.

Tom

Come on, I'm late. *(Lily shakes her head)* Clare!

Clare

You've got a perfectly good bike in the garage, set an example.

Tom

Coming from the queen of the 4x4, that's pretty hard to take. *(Takes set of keys off a hook)* Fine, I'll cycle. *(Waving keys at them)* Good luck getting to lunch with your coven.

Clare

(Calls across room) You are so...petty.

Tom

Yes, I know. *(Grabs paper from table and waves keys over his shoulder)* Walk to work week!

Clare

(Tom cycles past window waving keys. Clare looks out of window at him) Ha bloody ha, Tom.

This is all played at pace by Penry-Jones and Skinner. There is urgency as Tom has to get to work but the choices are routinely the obvious. Tom becomes irritated with his daughter straight away. He has no variety or unique character choices for playing his objective. The line "What, what?" is

played with equal weight on both words and no pausing. It is simply a question. It is evident that he is in a hurry. The line is a question. But the repetition could allow for some variance on the obvious choice to allow some subtler character traits to come through. In Penry-Jones's interpretation, Tom is simply irritated and nonplussed by his daughter's behaviour. There is no sense of his specific attitude to her. He could be impressed by her forthrightness. He could be amused by her cleverness. He could still be in a rush and have time for these thoughts or other choices that would add layers to the scene.

When Tom appeals to his wife with "Clare", Penry-Jones plays it emphatically and with a high level of frustration. He is almost shouting. This is not an unreasonable choice. Tom is late and in a hurry. But we know that already from the rest of the scene. There could be other choices that would add more to the scene. The actor could ask himself, "What other tactics could I use?" Could he flirt with Clare? Could he appeal to her having seen the funny side of being bested by his six-year old daughter? Tom is a powerful and capable man. He is about to be made chief executive of Arrow Oil at a very young age. Choices like these would add to his status and give him gravitas. Simply raising the level of his frustration is not an "incorrect" choice as it stays true to the character's objective of getting to work, but it is not the most interesting or nuanced choice.

Skinner then picks up on this mood as Clare in her response that he should ride his bike. She plays the line with the following emphasis: "You've got a perfectly good bike in the garage. Set an example." She has her teeth clenched as she says the first sentence and practically spits the line out. Again it is not an "incorrect" choice as it makes sense of the text, but it sets Clare up as a rather stereotypical nagging wife. A choice that acknowledged the irony of the situation or allowed some empathy with her husband's dilemma would add nuance whilst still allowing the meaning of the line to be "correct" and the character's "objective" to be played. This could also add an important layer of characterisation. Clare is the daughter of the current chief executive of Arrow Oil. Environment week at her daughter's school must have a very specific meaning to her. She comes from an oil family and is married to an oil executive. She must have an opinion on global warming. If she truly means that Tom should set a good example to their daughter, then there is clearly some hypocrisy in the character, although Clare may not be aware of it. If not then there is some irony in what she is saying. A more careful analysis of the "given circumstances" by the actor might give rise to a more specific and interesting choice that would produce a more subtle and interesting

performance. It would flesh out the character of Clare and could be used by the actor to set up her journey through the story.

These two British actors tend towards the more obvious choices, playing straight along the lines of the writing. Looking at Tom's dialogue in response to his daughter he does appear on the page to become frustrated quickly. Television dialogue tends to be sparse and economical when compared to dialogue in a play written for the theatre. The British tradition has grown on theatre texts with complex dialogue; the American tradition, based much more on film acting, equips actors to flesh out sparse dialogue. The British tradition has much more reverence for the text. In the spare text world of the modern television script this can lead to an over eagerness to play the dialogue faithfully as written, both in terms of saying the exact words and in terms of playing the obvious choices. This spare dialogue often needs an actor's greater involvement to flesh it out and make it appear real, what William Gillette termed "The Illusion of the First Time" (Gillette (1915),⁶ and to add layers of complexity and tie up the story arc of the character. This work has to happen around the lines, which is what the American acting teacher Sanford Meisner means by his saying, "The text is your greatest enemy" (Meisner 1987: 136),⁷ and is demonstrated in a scene between Neve Campbell and Bradley Whitford.

The American Actors.

The scene is the first meeting of Campbell and Whitford's characters and takes place at a party at the McConnell's. The dialogue, as they play it, is fractured and punctuated by looks both to and away from each other. The characters are opposites. She is Vice President of Renewable Energy and committed to Green issues, he is a ruthless lobbyist willing to do almost anything to further the interests of oil production. Played straight the dialogue would simply show this conflict. But with the layers of nuance added by the choices of the actors, a more subtle and interesting relationship is revealed.

⁶ William Gillette (1853-1937) was a well-known American actor and playwright in the late 19th and early 20th century. His book on acting was contemporaneous to Stanislavsky's early work of which he can have known nothing at the time of writing.

⁷ Sanford Meisner (1905-1997) was an influential American acting teacher sometimes referred to as a "Method" teacher. He was an original member of the Group Theatre.

Holly is sitting at a table. As the scene begins Mack is standing by the table. Holly is new in the company, so she introduces herself. The opening line is:

Holly
Mack, isn't it? I'm Holly Dernay.

The most obvious choice would be for Holly to use the question, "Mack, isn't it?" to gain Mack's attention as he is not looking at her and then to use the second sentence, "I'm Holly Dernay", to introduce herself, perhaps with an extended hand.

Campbell chooses to run both sentences together which risks losing the sense of what is being said and is therefore technically an "incorrect" stress choice. There is a slight pause after "Mack", which may fulfil the function of gaining his attention, but the rest of the line is said as one. There is a rising inflection at the end of the line much as if it were a question. This gives the feeling that she is intending to carry on. It is their first meeting and she may well be intending to give him her job title too, even though that is not in the script. By running the two sentences together there is a sense of momentum. Holly needs to get on with the greeting in case Mack walks away. She knows his reputation. He is a busy, ruthless and driven man. She knows he is unlikely to have a sympathetic attitude to her.

However Mack interrupts her with the line.

Mack
I know who you are.

Campbell knows the script. She knows that Mack interrupts. Her risky choice of running her two sentences together provides the momentum that makes it easier for Whitford to play his interruption.

Whitford and Campbell must both consider that the given circumstances dictate that the characters are polar opposites, each standing for what the other despises. The obvious choice would be to demonstrate their antipathy with these opening lines. Neither chooses to do this. Rather they acknowledge that there is awkwardness between them but, as this is a first meeting, the characters are trying to come to an assessment of each other. Whitford chooses to play his first line with a

slightly awkward smile. Instead of baring his teeth fully, as may be the obvious choice for the ruthless and aggressive Mack, he allows there to be a hint, a possibility, of a veiled threat, whilst he converses on an apparently civil level with someone whose role he should despise.

In the next moment they both laugh. Holly laughs slightly nervously as Mack finishes his line with a smile. Mack joins in with the slightest of laughs as they add these lines to the script in a moment of improvisation:

Mack
Hi

Holly
Hi

This improvisation can only occur if the actors are operating live in the moment and truly listening to one another. The scene has been shot using long lenses (probably with two cameras) and radio microphones. The actors have used the freedom that this gives to create a real intimacy. This set up allows for a certain amount of freedom to improvise that has allowed for moments like this one and still left options for editing. Even if other takes did not exist it would probably be possible to edit out the improvised lines and return the scene to the original text. Not all film and television productions will allow actors to improvise, which will often limit them from making these kinds of choices. The moment is useful for the scene as it establishes a rapport between these two characters, who are such opposites, but it also starts the arc of their relationship through the story. Towards the end of the final episode Mack rescues Holly as he has a change of heart. This moment, and the other choices the two actors make during the scene, set up the start of that relationship. Whitford's choices also sow the seeds for the reversal his character will make at the end of the story. This is backed up by a choice towards the end of the scene that I will explore later.

Having allowed the moment to happen, Whitford then pulls the scene back on track by moving swiftly into the next line.

Mack
You're Arrow's shiny new renewables girl.

Here he places a pause between "Arrow's" and "shiny". As he says "You're Arrow's," he is clearly

thinking about something else. Played this way by Whitford, Mack is seen to be coming up with that description on the spur of the moment; Gillette's "Illusion of the First Time" again. Mack considers how he wants to say it, pauses, and then comes out with this distinctly patronising line. However, Whitford does not lean heavily on the obvious condescension. He plays the phrase straight as if he were simply saying Holly's job title. There is no need for him to "act" patronising for the audience to see what Mack is doing. The words the character chooses to use do that job for him. The character reads as much more subtle and intelligent because of Whitford's choice.

The response is:

Holly

And you're the sexist, dinosaur oil lobbyist, right?

Campbell chooses to play this as sarcasm. She clearly means it to be true, but plays it with a smile on her face and laughs flirtatiously after the line. Mack does not rise to the bait. Whitford chooses to play the first part of his next line very straight and matter of fact:

Mack

You don't have to lobby when you're running the global economy. You advise, you assist, you pour soothing oil on troubled waters.

There is obvious hyperbole here in Mack stating that big oil, and by extension he, runs the global economy, but by saying it simply and without any hint of doubt or need to have it confirmed by anyone, Whitford allows Mack to know this to be true rather than be a character who is simply trying to inflate his own ego. Whitford also uses it as a bridging thought that brings him round to what Mack actually wants to do, try and provoke Holly.

There is a tiny pause between "soothing oil" and "troubled waters" as Mack starts to think about the next thing he wants to say. The obvious choice would be to simply wait until the end of the sentence, but Whitford places the beginning of his thought change in the previous phrase.⁸ There is

⁸ This is a technique taught by the American film director Elia Kazan (1909-2003) known as the early thought transition. Kazan co-founded the Actors Studio in New York, is often termed a "Method" director and started the career of Marlon Brando. He was, however, always opposed to the work of Lee Strasberg (1901-1982) who ran the Actors Studio from 1951 to 1982 and is most associated with the early Stanislavskian aspects of the "Method". For more on Kazan, see Young (1999).

then a short pause before:

Mack

But I must be getting behind the times when a windy is getting paid good oil money. How the hell'd that happen?

As he says “But I must be,” Whitford tenses his jaw so that his teeth do not move. It is a subtle indication of the aggression that he really feels towards the green lobby, the true feelings of the oil lobbyist creeping through the *bon homme* of the party. He carries on with a tiny pause between “times” and “when” as the character constructs this next thought. As he finishes the line he allows a hint of humour to colour the veiled insult, only looking at Campbell from “windy” onwards.

Campbell picks up on that and makes a joke out of correcting him.

Holly

It's not wind. It's solar power actually.

Campbell adds some improvisation here. She puts “Oh, well” before “It's not wind.” At the end of the line she laughs and adds “Yeah”. Whitford joins in so the line as played is:

Holly

Oh, well. It's not wind. It's solar power actually. (Laughs).

Mack

Um

Holly

Yeah.

Mack

Uh huh.

Holly has taken Mack's challenge to provoke a response from her; the text as written demands that Campbell do so, but she chooses to play it as humour. This raises Holly's status as a character by showing the audience she is not intimidated by Mack.

The next piece of dialogue demands that Mack re-assert himself. The improvisation on Whitford's side sets this up. If Holly is not intimidated then Mack certainly is not. He is several moves ahead

of her, and he knows it. When she decides to bat his joke back at him, Whitford plays Mack immediately recognising that he has the trump card as he says the improvised “Uh huh”. Mack knows what he is going to say before he comes to the next line. This early thought transition is a technique that Whitford, along with other actors, uses often. It denotes a thought process that allows for the character to be moving on to their next thought mentally whilst still finishing the last one vocally. In this case it demonstrates Mack’s fast thinking. The next line is:

Mack

Who do you think started Arrow’s renewable programme?

Holly

You?

In the previous improvised moment Mack turns to face Holly directly for the first time in the scene. He then plays his next line straight with a tiny pause before “renewable programme.”

Mack

Yes

Holly

You’re kidding me

Mack

I am Mr. Green.

This is played through quite quickly and simply. The words do the work. Mack is way ahead of Holly as he denoted with the improvised “Uh huh”, and this exchange proves it. He has clearly known this all along. He has also clearly known all along that Holly did not know this.

Before Holly has time to query the apparent contradiction of Mack being “Mr Green” he explains it with the final speech of the scene.

Mack

You know what you are to them? You’re a tax deductible way to get the governments off our backs so we can keep doing business as usual and pump more oil than we have ever pumped in our lives. You’re greenwash to them. Just pure greenwash. Anyway, enjoy the party.

Whitford again plays this speech clearly and simply. He does not choose to have Mack push any

emphasis but rather lets the weight of the words do the job. However he plays the penultimate line like this:

Mack

You're greenwash to them, just (turning away and looking around the party) pure greenwash. (Looks back to her) Anyway, enjoy the party. (Pats the table and walks away)

As he plays this final line his tone changes. It appears to be entirely dismissive of Holly and her role. But again he does not push the point with any aggression. This works on two levels. It makes Mack a high status character as he is clearly in a different league to Holly, and it also sets up a world-weariness in Mack that will eventually link up with his decision to turn against the oil business at the end of the story. This choice is supported in the writing. Mack refers to "them" not "us". He clearly does not see himself as part of the oil establishment, yet everything that he does right up to the turning point, almost at the end of the story, would appear to suggest that he is. In this way the performance sets up the character arc that the writer has envisaged, but that is otherwise not signified in the text; a highly intelligent interpretation of the given circumstances.

Actor's Performance Choices.

Not all choices can be made coldly before a scene is played. A crucial part of a successful performance (by which I mean one that will read well when viewed from a naturalistic or realistic perspective) is that the actors listen to each other fully, respond to each other in the moment and play their intention or objective. These are concepts that are encountered all the time by actors.⁹ An understanding of them and how they operate is crucial in the preparing of a scene and there is an obvious difference in what will be required from that preparation for a theatre performance and a screen one.

Most traditional Western theatre performance relies on the actor being able to give roughly the same performance in the same sequence night after night over an extended period. A screen performance relies on being able to play each scene, section of a scene or single moment out of sequence for a number of takes. Once it is recorded there is usually no need for the actor to play the

⁹ There is no real common vocabulary or terminology that covers these concepts. This is due in part to the translation issues around Stanislavsky in English explored in Benedetti (1990), Carnicke (1984) and Whyman (2008). It is also due in part to the oral tradition of actor training; see Carnicke (1998).

scene again, although a scene will usually have been played multiple times by the time that recording has been achieved, and several different versions may be recorded. A theatre scene will be played over and over again by a pair or group of actors who will inevitably get used to how they and their partner(s) are playing that scene. The skill of the theatre actor is in making the scene appear real and new even though it has happened many times, the skill of the screen actor is to make it appear real even though it may be happening out of sequence, repeated for the camera to record different angles or repeated to attempt a different nuance.

So Gillette's "illusion of the first time" operates differently in theatre and television work. Where the theatre actor will have benefited from a rehearsal period and worked closely with his or her fellow actors for an extended time, the television actor may not even know the other person or people in the scene before meeting to record it, has probably had no prior rehearsal with them and may even be playing the scene for the first time as it is being recorded. The skill is in creating a realistic performance under the microscope conditions of the camera. The audience are simply much closer to the performance. Any projection of the performance or obvious "acting" will immediately read as "fake" in a naturalistic or realistic setting.

Skills that are always necessary for the actor, when working in a naturalistic or realistic form, become more of a priority when acting for the camera. In order to achieve a realistic performance certain things can and must be planned by the actor and certain things can and must be left to choose live in the moment. The distinction between the two is unstable and can vary from actor to actor and from scene to scene. In the Holly/Mack scene from *Burn Up* I discussed in depth some choices that appear to have been made by the actors involved regarding, for instance, which particular word or words to stress in a line and where to leave a pause. It is highly unlikely that these accomplished screen actors arrived at those choices by pre-planning where to place pauses and stresses. What they are much more likely to have planned is what their character's objective is and where their tactics for pursuing that objective change (although they may well not use those terms or have planned in any systematic or recorded way). It is their choices in these areas that inform the specific stress and pause choices that they will then make live, in the moment, as they play the scene. These in the moment choices will vary depending on what the other actor does, and will be different, sometimes subtly and sometimes radically, each time the scene is repeated.

As an example, there is this exchange from the Holly/Mack scene:

Mack

You're Arrow's shiny new renewables girl.

Holly

And you're the sexist dinosaur oil lobbyist, right?

Campbell cannot know before the scene is played how to play her line as it depends entirely on Whitford's choices for his. Even if they have rehearsed the scene, or played it for other takes, one or both actors may vary how they play specific moments, meaning that any response can only be played in light of how the other actor played the previous moment, on the specific occasion for each new take. Based on the given circumstance of the scene, Whitford could, for instance, reasonably choose to attack Holly with this line, as she stands for everything that he opposes. If he did so, Campbell might well follow the obvious intent of Holly's line and return in kind. But Whitford chooses irony and humour. If Campbell sticks to the obvious choice for her character, she risks weakening the character by rising to the bait. If Campbell is not listening fully she may not actually realise what Whitford is doing. Whitford in turn has been propelled towards this lighter choice by the previous exchange that has been almost flirtatious.

The next exchange shows this set of choices developing:

Mack

But I must be getting behind the times...when a windy is getting paid good oil money...how the hell'd that happen?

Holly

Oh well, it's not wind...it's, er, solar power actually. Yeah
(laughs).

Mack is more provocative this time but Whitford sticks to the basic ironic choice that he has set up previously. Campbell develops her theme by making some quite extreme stress choices involving some improvisation.¹⁰

The original line was probably:

¹⁰ Improvisation within the script is a complex area. In some productions any variation from the text as written is not allowed. In others a great deal of freedom is given to the actor.

Holly

It's not wind it's solar power actually.

Campbell sticks to returning Mack's irony in kind. The improvised addition of the words "Oh well," allows her time to settle herself. If she plays the line straight as written it could come across as petulant. Keeping things light and almost flirtatious increases Holly's status and creates a more intelligent and interesting foil for Mack. The addition of the pause and the "er" set up the punch line of "solar power" acknowledging that Holly knows she is trumping Mack's ace. The "Yeah" and the laugh seal the joke and make the line non-confrontational. Campbell knows the script. She knows that Mack has crucial information that Holly does not and will come out on top at the end of the scene. But by following the line of not allowing Mack to provoke her, she allows Holly to be as intelligent as possible within the confines of the scene.

In preparing for the scene, Whitford and Campbell have made an assessment of what their character intends; the objective. The scene is written as an accidental meeting, so the characters have not had time to specifically plan what they will say to each other. An assessment must be made of what the characters know of each other and what their attitude should be to the other; the given circumstances. Based on what the script has them say to each other, they can work out an objective for the scene once the characters have in fact met. Based on the evidence of the finished performance, Campbell might have selected something along the lines of "to impress Mack by showing I am not intimidated by him without getting into any confrontation if possible". Whitford might have selected "to put Holly in her place". Again, the actors might not do this in any formal, recorded way.

Without playing against the intention of the character in this early scene, Whitford's choices set up the full dimensions of the character. He stops Mack becoming a stereotypical villain, makes him a rounded human being with a sense of humour and a sense of his own hypocrisy, whilst still allowing him to come across as powerful, driven and, on the surface, amoral. He also sets up the beginning of the character's journey through the piece by signalling that Mack may be tiring of the oil business. He does all this whilst still remaining natural and believable in the role and making clear sense of the text.¹¹

¹¹ This is only true up to a point as some of the dialogue is hard to hear. This is a sound recording problem and should not be attributed to the actor.

In the traditional mainstream Western theatre, such choices would have to be repeated night after night and “the illusion of the first time” would rely on the theatre actor’s skill. For screen work the performance as recorded may not be the actual “first time”, but it will not have been preceded as many times as for the theatre. For the theatre the actors will know each other and the scenes well by the time they are in performance, for the screen they will not. The difference in preparation and performance is in knowing how to adapt to the relative situations. The theatre actor must prepare to consciously give “the illusion of the first time”, whereas the screen actor must be pre-prepared to play the scene without much rehearsal, and be able to respond to the way things develop in performance. In response to a question from a student actor, the American screen actor Tom Cruise makes this point strongly. He explains how, when a scene is not going well, he focuses his mind on what is happening now, “today”, and uses that, whatever it may be, as his springboard into the scene.

You’re not using effort to try to fulfil your preconceived idea...I know the worst thing I can do is kind of...lock down on it [and] try to push it somewhere. (Cruise 2004).

This is one example of a highly accomplished American screen actor’s technique for giving his work “the illusion of the first time” under the specific conditions of acting for the screen. It is also a description of what actors mean by the phrase “in the moment.”

Conclusions on the different approaches of the British and American actors in *Burn Up* (2008).

One way of explaining the different tendencies of the British and American actors in these scenes is the difference in tradition; what Sharon Carnicke calls “lore” (Carnicke 1998: 56). The British actors come from a long theatre tradition with a less rigid attitude to Stanislavsky, whilst the American actors come from a greater tradition of screen acting and a relationship to Stanislavsky mediated through the various “Method” teachers.¹²

¹² Other prominent “Method” teachers not referred to in this article include Stella Adler (1901-1992), Robert Lewis (1909-1997) and Harold Clurman (1901-1980), all of whom were members of Group Theatre, and Uta Hagan (1919-2004) who was not but still made use of Stanislavsky’s theories.

Stephen Garrett, Executive Producer for *Burn Up*, said in a press release in the run up to the first broadcast in the UK:

For me, Bradley (Whitford) is a spine-tingling piece of casting. As a long-standing fan of *The West Wing* I have been an admirer of his from afar for a long time. He has a huge fan base, but what thrilled us about casting Bradley is he usually plays the good guy.

We wanted someone who was both Machiavellian and a person of integrity. Mack is not an evil man. We needed someone who could portray that sincere belief system that this powerful man possesses and in Bradley Whitford we have an actor who brought that to the table. His performance is stunning. (Garrett 2008)

Leaving aside the hyperbole of a press release, this quote demonstrates the complexity of the implications of choices for the actor. Whitford has a reputation, largely based on his role as Josh Lyman in *The West Wing* (1999-2006), for playing characters of integrity. In *Burn Up* the producers use this as a signifier for the audience that there is going to be more to the character of Mack than a ruthless villain. Whitford uses his specific choices as his signifiers. The “character” is in the intention, or objective, choices. There is little to physically distinguish Mack from Josh Lyman. His voice sounds the same. His vocal rhythms are very similar. His movement and physicality is the same. Even his clothing is similar. All that differs is the way the two different characters go about pursuing their objectives.

The choices are more straightforward and consequently less interesting in the scene between Rupert Penry-Jones and Claire Skinner. This is an unfair comparison in some ways. The two scenes are not a like for like comparison. There is a time imperative in the Penry-Jones/Skinner scene that leads naturally to more straightforward choices. Tom is in a hurry. He has a strong and definite objective so the tendency for the actor is to play that strongly. As Clare, Skinner picks up on this strong drive and plays equally strong responses. The Campbell/Whitford scene has a much more relaxed setting and lends itself more naturally to a relaxed playing style. The Penry-Jones/Skinner scene is complicated by the inclusion of other (child) actors and is shot with one camera that does not allow them the ease of intimacy that the two handed, two camera and long lensed Whitford/Campbell scene does.

With these caveats, it still remains noteworthy that the two American actors manage to find layers of subtlety in their scene that the two British actors do not in theirs. In interview Penry Jones seems to acknowledge this gulf when speaking about Whitford.

I'm learning stuff from him which is a great bonus. He's a great actor! (Penry Jones 2008)

British actor Marc Warren, who also appears in *Burn Up*, reports something similar.

Bradley ... has a real freedom and it's great when you get challenged like that, it's a real learning process. (Warren 2008)

Penry-Jones, Skinner and Warren are accomplished actors in their own right, but here both Penry-Jones and Warren acknowledge that they learnt from Whitford whilst working on *Burn Up*. Warren goes on to compare his quite extensive British television acting experience unfavourably to Whitford's American experience. Both Warren and Penry Jones acknowledge *The West Wing* as an important series to them as actors.

This is just one small snapshot of a group of actors working on one television production. It would be erroneous to draw the conclusion that American actors are simply more accomplished than British actors when it comes to working for the camera. Rather it is the background of American actors and American acting culture that has furnished the American actor with the techniques to explore screen performance in ways that can put them ahead of their British counterparts. The culture of television demands this more American style approach from the actor.

Warren speaks of being challenged by Whitford. Here he is referring to Whitford's choices and how they challenge the actor in the live moment of playing the scene. As can be seen from the analysis of the Campbell/Whitford scene in *Burn Up*, one actor's choices have an impact on the other's. When Whitford chooses humour for a line that on the page reads as a straight attack, Campbell has to make a choice live in the moment as she is playing the scene. That may inspire her to pick a new intention for her response. As she has to find that response live in the moment it naturally gains an immediate quality. In turn her response, as even she did not know beforehand what it would be, must be a surprise to Whitford as he makes his next choice. The resulting realistic and nuanced

performance is what most screen actors hope to achieve, hence the admiration for Whitford displayed by Penry-Jones and Warren.

In contrast the scene between Penry-Jones and Skinner lacks any such choices. As the choices tend towards the obvious the scene does not build the same kind of momentum. There is less to inspire interesting choices in the moment. The result is a competent but less complex scene. Were this a play by, for instance, Shakespeare then the complexity and nuance would be present in the writing. Great fidelity to the text and a lack of embellishment may then be highly effective techniques. This is the perceived difference in British and American acting to which Lyndsey Crouse and John Lithgow referred.

Although an understanding of how a spoken text works and the techniques for lifting words off a page and making them appear as realistic thought communications remain important, an overly reverential attitude to the text can, particularly with a sparsely worded television script, be a handicap. The British training tradition still relies heavily on classical theatre texts as the material for student actors. Television acting often requires a much freer attitude. It is not to be understood from this that a television script is simply to be used as a guide for improvisation. The text must still, in most productions, be played exactly as written. The examples of improvisation given from *Burn Up* are relatively minor alterations to the written text (and are speculative as there is no published version of the original script). In some productions even they would not be tolerated. The actors would have to find the same freshness of response without changing the actual text as written.

The freedom is in how the words are said. Traditional ideas of “correct” and “incorrect” stressing, as might be discussed particularly in relation to Shakespeare (the staple diet of British theatre training) have become much less relevant in television where meaning may well be communicated in ways other than via the text. Notions of realism are constantly challenged both by the proximity of the camera and by the ever expanding areas of documentary and reality television.

By gaining a full understanding of performance choices and how to make them, an actor can still play a range of characters in a way that fulfils the needs of modern television production. Training in the UK may not yet fully reflect this radical change in working practices and engage with the

shift in culture. Comparison with American actors from a more screen-based tradition highlights that shift.

References.

Benedetti, Jean (1990) "A history of Stanislavski in translation" in *New Theatre Quarterly* 6:23, p.266-78

Carnicke, Sharon Marie (1984) "An Actor Prepares/Rabota Aktera Nad Soboi, Chast I: a comparison of the English with the Russian Stanislavsky" in *Theatre Journal*, 36:4, p.481-494

Carnicke, Sharon Marie (1998) *Stanislavsky in focus*, Los Angeles: Harwood

Caughie, John, (2000a) *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism and British Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Caughie, John (2000b) "What do Actors do when they Act?" in Bignell, Jonathan, Stephen Lacey and Madeline MacMurrough-Kavanagh , Eds. (2000) *British Television Drama: Past Present and Future*. London: Palgrave, p.162-174

Clurman, Harold (1957) *The Fervent Years*, New York: De Capo

Cruise, Tom, interviewed by James Lipton, *Inside the Actors Studio*, Bravo TV, Season 10, Episode 7, 11 January 2004

Day-Lewis, Daniel, interviewed by Richard Brown, *Movies 101*, NYU, 2005

Diaz, Cameron, interviewed by James Lipton, *Inside the Actors Studio*, Bravo TV, Season 11, Episode 11, 9 January 2005

Garrett, Stephen. Available from:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2008/06_june/03/burnup_trojan.shtml
[accessed 29.04.09]

Gillette, William (1915) *The Illusion of the First Time in Acting*, New York: Dramatic Museum of

Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2010)

Columbia University

Grotowski, Jerzy (1968) *Towards a Poor Theatre*, London: Methuen

Hawes, Keeley, interviewed by Martyn Palmer, *Radio Times*, 3-9 July 2010, p.26

Hobson, Dorothy (1982) *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera*. London: Methuen

Anthony Hopkins, interviewed by James Lipton, *Inside the Actors Studio*, Bravo TV, Season 4, Episode 7, 4 October 1998

Penry Jones, Rupert. Available from:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2008/06_june/03/burnup_trojan.shtml

[accessed 29.04.09]

Meisner, Sanford, (1987) *On Acting*, New York: Vintage

Sanderson, Michael (1984) *From Irving to Olivier: a social history of the acting profession 1880-1983*. London: The Athlone Press

Warren, Marc. Available from:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2008/06_june/03/burnup_trojan.shtml

[accessed 29.04.09]

Watson, Ian, Ed. (2001) *Performer Training: Developments Across Cultures*. Newark: Harewood

Wexman, Virginia Wright (2004) "Masculinity in Crisis: Method Acting in Hollywood" in Wojcik, Pamela Roberston, (ed.) *Movie Acting: The Film Reader*, London: Routledge, 2004 pp. 127-144

Whyman, Rose, (2008) *The Stanislavsky System of Acting: Legacy and Influence in Modern Performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2010)

Young, Jeff, Ed. (1999) *Kazan on Kazan*, London: Faber and Faber

Zucker, Carole (1995) *Figures of Light: Actors and Directors illuminate the art of Film Acting*.
London: The Scarecrow Press

Films and Television Series

Burn Up, (2008), Global Television/BBC Broadcast in the UK in July 2008

The West Wing, (1999-2006) NBC