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# Playing for real in Max Stafford-Clark's *Talking to Terrorists*

**ABSTRACT**

*This article explores acting processes in Max Stafford-Clark's production of Robin Soans' verbatim play Talking to Terrorists (2005). With reference to new interview material with cast, writer and director, I interrogate the particular demands of playing a real person in a production in which the cast were involved in the play's research. In two research periods and in rehearsals, many of the actors interviewed the individual they played, and these meetings provided material for the script. Following the cast's focus, this article investigates preparatory and rehearsal processes. Using Jean Benedetti's re-translation of Stanislavski's work (An Actor's Work (2008) and An Actor's Work on a Role (2010)), I put the actor's Stanislavski-inspired vocabulary under the microscope to establish whether his work provides an appropriate terminology to illuminate these processes. This article highlights some of the challenges of portraying a real person and also identifies the negotiations and tensions between the actors' preparation and the director's own working methods. My analysis of the actors' testimony also suggests why acting processes have been overlooked despite the surge of research into verbatim theatre.*

**KEYWORDS**

verbatim theatre  
Max Stafford-Clark  
hotseating  
Konstantin Stanislavski  
Michael Chekhov  
rehearsal processes

**INTRODUCTION: VERBATIM THEATRE – A SPECIAL CASE?**

Despite the current public appetite for portrayals of real people onstage and on-screen, at present there is no analytical vocabulary for describing the process of

- 1 The book *Playing for Real*, which I co-authored with Mary Luckhurst, was published in the summer of 2010. It is the first book-length study to draw together testimony from actors on playing real people in theatre, film and television. See also this special edition's 'Editorial' for further commentary on the burgeoning interest in this new and neglected area of research, and for some general conclusions in which research both for *Playing for Real* and the 'Acting with Facts' project concur. All quotations from the cast and creative team of *Talking to Terrorists*, unless stated otherwise, are from the interviews listed at the end of this article.
- 2 In this article I quote from Jean Benedetti's *An Actor's Work* (2008), which realizes Stanislavski's conception of *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character* as a single work, and from *An Actor's Work on a Role* (2010), a retranslation of the material in *Creating a Role*.
- 3 Moscow Art Theatre director Nikolai Gorchakov includes a chapter on 'Biographical Drama' in his book *Stanislavsky Directs*, in which he focuses on Stanislavski's supervision of his direction of Bulgakov's play, *Moliere* (1936). Once again, little reference is made to the facts of the play.

playing them. Yet the majority of actors I have interviewed argue that playing a real person is qualitatively different from portraying a fictional character. General conclusions from my research indicate that actors feel special challenges to their skills and also special responsibilities in this work, all of which need to be taken into account in preparation and performance. The study of acting in verbatim theatre raises issues particular to the form. It is evident that the additional challenges of playing a real person *using their own words* are profound and it is the acting processes in verbatim theatre on which this article will focus. My case-study production is Robin Soans' *Talking to Terrorists* (2005), directed by Max Stafford-Clark.<sup>1</sup>

I have found that most actors trained in Britain describe their work using a vocabulary indebted to Stanislavski, having been taught in what Derek Paget has called 'the Stanislavski-based, stage-focused approach of British actor training' (Paget 2007: 169). However, the cast of *Talking to Terrorists* were not thoroughgoing Stanislavskians (see note 7). My research aimed to determine to what degree an actor was acquainted with or relied on Stanislavski's techniques, and to establish whether their use of certain terms was informed or approximate. In this article I interrogate the ways in which Stanislavskian terminology is limited or limiting to actors' practice.<sup>2</sup>

Stanislavski did not, of course, base his theories on the playing of real people. He did, however, write briefly on his 1915 portrayal of Antonio Salieri in Pushkin's 1831 play *Mozart and Salieri*. In his short note, Stanislavski makes very little adaptation to his techniques in the light of playing a real person. Although he mentions the use of historical data, he emphasizes the actor's imagination. For example, writing about researching the facts of Salieri's life, he states:

He must know what Salieri's childhood was like, who his family, his brothers, sisters, friends were. He should see in his mind's eye the church where the young Salieri first heard music and wept for joy. He must recall on which pew, on which sunlit or cloudy day, in which atmosphere, this first encounter with art took place [...] He creates using his own feelings, memories, his own body.

(Stanislavski 2010: 96)

Later, he again foregrounds the actor's imagination: 'First he has to create Salieri's childhood. The actor's own memory should provide the necessary material for that' (Stanislavski 2010: 97). Research information is thus deemed less important than the actor's ability to invent. Although Stanislavski makes little reformulation of his theories for playing a real person, his comment that he found the role 'one of the most difficult tasks for an actor' is illuminating, suggesting an inherent tension in the use of his techniques when approaching the portrayal of a real-life figure (Stanislavski 2010: 95).<sup>3</sup> In the absence of any Stanislavskian theories specific to portraying a real person, the actors' deployment of his techniques necessitated some degree of adaptation for their own purposes.

Amongst actors, Bella Merlin is, to date, the only one to have analysed her processes in verbatim plays.<sup>4</sup> She has written extensively on Stanislavski following her training at the State Institute of Cinematography, Moscow. She has explored how she applied her training and subsequent Stanislavski scholarship in Stafford-Clark's production of David Hare's documentary play *The Permanent*

Way (2003),<sup>5</sup> a play that featured similar working methods to those employed in *Talking to Terrorists*. Merlin discovered that Stanislavski's techniques did not equip her for some of the experiences of working on the production. She was fundamentally challenged, to the extent that she had to rethink her technique: 'I realised that a particular style of performance was developing, one that seemed to straddle the perspectives of Stanislavsky and Brecht' (Merlin 2007b: 48). Although, in her search for alternative vocabularies, Merlin unhelpfully polarizes Stanislavski and Brecht, the very fact that her experiences prompted her to search for a more appropriate vocabulary is noteworthy.

## RESEARCH AND REHEARSAL FOR TALKING TO TERRORISTS

The importance of actors' research in Max Stafford-Clark's fact-based plays is particularly pronounced as the cast are responsible not only for investigating the plays' topics but also for generating material through the interviews they conduct.<sup>6</sup> Despite rich historical precedents (Paget 1987), the involvement of actors in the creation of material is unusual in contemporary verbatim theatre. *Talking to Terrorists* opened at the Theatre Royal, Bury St Edmunds, on 21 April 2005, and toured nationally for nine weeks, before playing at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs for five weeks. The play is a compilation of material from interviews with the perpetrators and victims of terrorist attacks. Also included is testimony from politicians, diplomats and civil servants, and a psychologist who explores possible motivations for these acts. Interviews took place in two fortnight-long research phases in April and November/December 2004, and during rehearsals. The production featured a cast of eight, between them playing 29 individuals. Only three members of the final cast took part in the production's research stages and were called 'actor-researchers', although the whole cast conducted research, and all but two actors met at least one of the individuals they played before the production opened.<sup>7</sup>

Whereas other verbatim plays use recorded testimony exclusively, *Talking to Terrorists* was only loosely based on the words of the interviewee. Although some interviews were recorded, on the whole Robin Soans' favoured approach was to send the actors out equipped with only paper and pens:

I only use a notepad and pencil. If someone comes to us, I think it is acceptable for there to be a microphone on the table, but if I go to talk to someone like Mo Mowlam in her house, I'm not going to start messing around with finding a plug [...] and also, it takes people ages to relax if you're pointing a microphone at them.

Of course this approach also allowed him a certain creative freedom. If verbatim theatre is defined as 'a theatre whose practitioners, if called to account, could provide interviewed sources for its dialogue', as Mary Luckhurst argues, this raises interesting questions (Luckhurst 2008: 201). Whilst interviewees could be identified, there was no official interview transcript. Evidently, there is an ethical problem with the issue of transparency here, but this suited Stafford-Clark and Soans, permitting them a greater degree of imaginative freedom.

The actor-interviewee meetings should be understood as the first half of a bipartite process in which the actors then returned to the rehearsal room to be 'hotseated' as the individual. Stafford-Clark has used this technique extensively

- 4 Merlin has analysed her processes in her chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to David Hare* (2007a) and in an article in *Contemporary Theatre Review* (2007b).
- 5 Merlin's publications include *Beyond Stanislavsky* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2001), *Konstantin Stanislavsky* (London: Routledge, 2003) and *The Complete Stanislavsky Toolkit* (London: Nick Hern, 2007). She has also co-edited a book on Michael Chekhov with Andrei Kirillov, *The Path of the Actor* (London: Routledge, 2005). It was Stanislavski's techniques Merlin employed in *The Permanent Way*.
- 6 Productions in which the actors generated material include *Yesterday's News* (Joint Stock, 1976), *Falkland Sound/Voces de Malvinas* (Royal Court, 1983), *A State Affair* (Out of Joint, 2000), *The Permanent Way* (Out of Joint, 2003) and *Mixed Up North* (Out of Joint/LAMDA, 2009).
- 7 Twelve 'actor-researchers' worked on *Talking to Terrorists* (including Bella Merlin), of whom only Chipo Chung, Chris Ryman and Lloyd Hutchinson appeared in the final production. They were joined by Jonathan Cullen, Christopher Ettridge, Alexander Hanson, Catherine Russell and June Watson. Of the actors quoted in this article, Chipo Chung and Lloyd Hutchinson trained at RADA; Jonathan Cullen, Chris Ryman and Alexander Hanson at Guildhall School of Music and Drama; and Catherine Russell at Central School of Music and Drama.

None of these schools has a commitment to a single theorist, but all introduce actors to aspects of Stanislavski's work.

- 8 I have been unable to locate the origin of hotseating.

However, it certainly predates Stafford-Clark's use, and appears to have strong associations with the work of Lee Strasberg.

- 9 The individuals in *Talking to Terrorists* are not named, but some are given aliases. In this article the aliases are denoted by single inverted commas.

to gather material for new plays: 'In this kind of work I normally use hotseating. They are able then to improvise from their notes.'<sup>8</sup> The actors drew from the notes they took during the interview and recreated the interviewee's responses, whilst Stafford-Clark, Soans and the other cast members repeated the original questions the actor had asked the interviewee. In the hotseating exercise, Stafford-Clark asked the actors to render 'as accurate a recreation as possible', by which he hoped for a detailed and precise portrayal of the interviewee. Like many documentary practitioners, Stafford-Clark places a heavy insistence on the authenticity of the process. He does, however, concede that 'it makes you dependent on the actors' imagination'. The hotseating was based on the actors' notes, memory and improvised interpretation of what they had heard and observed. Thus, arguing that the portrayals are 'accurate' is misleading.

However, Stafford-Clark did not rely exclusively on the actors to provide material for the play. Rather, Soans himself met all but one of the 29 people who finally appeared in his script. The actors' hotseating sessions thus provided additional viewpoints, rather than being the primary method to gather material. In this way, Soans' material was privileged over the actors' memories. This is in contrast to *The Permanent Way*, in which Hare was much more reliant on the actors for generating material. Lloyd Hutchinson, who appeared in both, stated that 'David Hare didn't see the Squadron Leader who I played [...] so he used the material I'd gathered and fashioned the play out of that.' In *Talking to Terrorists*, the actors did not function as independent researchers, as the questions they asked were pre-determined by Stafford-Clark and Soans. Prior to their meeting, the actors were given precise instruction; as Hutchinson stated, 'everybody's briefed before we go away'. Chipo Chung was emphatic that she was 'asking very particular questions', and that the actors did not work to their own open brief.

Since the hotseating exercise repeatedly proved to be a pivotal point in these actors' processes, I will analyse their preparation prior to the sessions, before exploring the challenges they faced following them. All the cast focused on rehearsal rather than performance processes in my interviews, and thus their preparation for performance will be the focus here.

## PRE-HOTSEATING AND 'EMOTION MEMORY'

Actor Chris Ryman played an ex-head of the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, Bethlehem, whom he met with Soans and Stafford-Clark in the first research phase, about a year before the play opened.<sup>9</sup> As Soans documented the content of the interview, Ryman was free to observe the individual:

I would be picking up the character aspects [...] because I had met him, and knowing the kind of person he was, it was easy for me to know which emotions to act [...] for example, in performance when I talked about his kids I would have a real empathy.

Here Ryman links his rendering of emotions in performance to the fact that he experienced an empathetic response when he witnessed the man recount the same story. However, we must question how much credibility can be given to the assertion that he knew 'the kind of person he was'. This was a formal interview during which the individual recounted his story in front of a group of strangers with the express purpose of making a play from his words, which clearly constituted a performance from the interviewee. Thus, any claim to

'knowing' him is dubious, but suggests that Ryman needed to believe he had an emotional connection with the individual. Whether the formal protocol of the interview did indeed engender empathy in the actor towards the subject is less important than the fact that Ryman believed it did.

The way in which Ryman described employing the empathy he experienced can be understood through a particular (though often overlooked) formulation of emotion memory by Stanislavski. In his early to mid-career writings, emotion memory was Stanislavski's preferred technique to summon an emotion in performance. The term is almost exclusively understood as it is described in the chapter 'Emotion Memory' in *An Actor's Work*:

Just as your visual memory resurrects long forgotten things, a landscape or the image of a person, before your inner eye, so feelings you once experienced are resurrected in your Emotion Memory.

(Stanislavski 2008: 199)

However, this was not Ryman's emphasis. Later in my interview, he stated: 'I wouldn't have to imagine the emotions, because I was there and saw him. It was about my memory of what he was doing.' It appears that Ryman did not utilize his own personal experiences and associated emotions in the way Stanislavski describes, as he experienced an empathetic response to the man's story. Bella Merlin also avoided this particular formulation of emotion memory in *The Permanent Way*:

I am not a great advocate of 'emotion memory'. While I acknowledge that it is a profound and important tool in Stanislavsky's toolkit, I am aware that it is far too easy for actors to misinterpret its use [...] and overlay the playwright's script onto their own personal history.

(Merlin 2007b: 46)

In contrast to playing a fictional character, when the script is based on the words of real people the possibility of 'overlaying' evidently was too great a risk for Merlin, who was anxious to distance this work from her own experiential recall. However, Ryman did use a form of emotional memory as he utilized the memory of the empathetic connection he identified in his observation of the man's story, a technique that can be found elsewhere in Stanislavski's work.

Although generally overlooked in favour of his chapter in *An Actor's Work*, Stanislavski also explored emotion memory in *Creating a Role*. In this work Stanislavski suggested for the first time that emotion memory can be 'acquired through study and preserved in his intellectual memory' (Stanislavski 1981: 9). Thus, Stanislavski argues that actors can utilize the emotional responses they have experienced in study or research rather than through personally experienced emotion. In other words, they can draw on their emotional responses to other people's stories.<sup>10</sup> Although Stanislavski does not predicate this acquisition on first-hand observation of the subject, it is clear that his lesser-acknowledged formulation is closer to the way in which Ryman worked. Ryman stated: 'It is a blessing to have a template to work from, a grounding.' He was able to ground his performance of emotion in the behaviour he had observed. At no point did Ryman recall using his own personal experiences; instead he foregrounded his powers of active observation.

<sup>10</sup> This particular sentence, however, does not appear in Jean Benedetti's recent retranslation, *An Actor's Work on a Role* (2010).

## 'GIVEN' AND 'FOUND CIRCUMSTANCES'

A specific Stanislavskian technique used by two of the cast was establishing the given circumstances of the role. Comparing the experiences of cast members Jonathan Cullen (who did not meet the people he played) and Catherine Russell (who met both her subjects) will illustrate how formative these meetings were, but also suggest some of the difficulties associated with Stafford-Clark's working processes.

Because Cullen did not meet either of his characters (an ex-Ambassador and an ex-member of the Ulster Volunteer Force) before the play opened, only Russell was hotseated. Both actors were cast once the play had been written (at least in draft form), and so both could analyse Soans' script to establish certain circumstances of their subjects' life. Cullen commented that this was an important feature of his work:

For every part I sit down and I note what I say about myself, what others say about me and what I say about other people [...] then I list what I know about the character – the circumstances [...] that can be revelatory.

As Cullen did not meet either of the individuals he played in *Talking to Terrorists*, he chose to employ this recognizable Stanislavskian technique:

I decided very early on, if I was going to do this [play] I had to accept I hadn't met him and you have to do it on the basis of what is there on the page.

By contrast, although Russell did not take part in the research stages (and so, like Cullen, was not considered an 'actor-researcher'), she met both the people she played: 'Rima', a journalist, and 'Phoebe', an aid worker for Save the Children, during rehearsals. Both had previously been interviewed by Soans and a draft script had been created. Russell noted that she used her meetings to establish the 'given circumstances' and 'backstory' of her subjects.

In *An Actor's Work*, Stanislavski provides an almost exhaustive list of what can constitute the given circumstances of a role:

They mean the plot, the facts, the incidents, the period, the time and place of action, the way of life, how we as actors and directors understand the play, the contributions we ourselves make, the *mise-en-scène*, the sets and costumes, the props, the stage dressing, the sound effects etc., etc., everything which is given for the actors as they rehearse.

(Stanislavski 2008: 52–53)

Given the limited access to her subject, in her interview Russell only approached some of the areas that Stanislavski identified:

I didn't just speak to them about their work, I spoke to them about their marriages, children, their lives and childhood, upbringing – all the things in Chekhov you would create for yourself, all of those things I found out for real.

A meeting between strangers for the purposes of a theatrical presentation evidently compromised the scope of the given circumstances that Stanislavski laid

down. The research that Stanislavski lists could take weeks, and would have been impossible to encompass in the interview, given both time constraints and the fact that the interviewee would be unlikely to share personal information. We can see from Russell's comment that she found out the facts that were useful to her. These were more associated with her own agenda as an interviewer than achieving the sort of wide-ranging background that Stanislavski lists. Finding out these facts was critical in creating a character for Russell:

You do get a character from the interview, as long as you don't just go for what is in the play, as long as you make sure your interview goes outside of that, otherwise you are in the normal situation of having to make it up, which is a waste – if the person is there in front of you, you can find out the real backstory.

As the aim of the interview doubtless affected what the interviewee shared, we must problematize notions of a 'real backstory', and acknowledge the highly constructed nature of their meeting. It is clear, though, that Russell had a far greater access to her subjects' lives than Cullen. She was able to find circumstances *not* given in the play, and also start to explore the circumstances that *were* given. However, the way in which Russell utilized this information departs from Stanislavski's application of the given circumstances. Stanislavski saw the given circumstances as being inseparably combined with the actor's imagination through their symbiotic bond with 'if':

One is a hypothesis ('if'), the other is a corollary to it (the Given Circumstances). 'If' always launches the creative act and the Given Circumstances develop it further. One can't exist without the other, or acquire the strength they need. But their functions are somewhat different. 'If' is a spur to the dormant imagination, and the Given Circumstances provide the substance for it.

(Stanislavski 2008: 53)

'If', therefore, works within the structure created by the given circumstances and transports the dry circumstances onto the actors' imaginative plane. This requires the actors to locate themselves in these circumstances, so as to start to imagine how they might be affected by them. Benedetti cites Stanislavski's illustration: 'if everything around me on stage were true, this is what I would do, this is how I would respond to this or that event' (Benedetti 1989: 35). Stanislavski's deployment of the given circumstances with 'if' consequently calls upon the actor's own experiences to provoke inner feeling. According to Stanislavski, this personalizes the given circumstances through 'his own impressions, genuine feeling and life experiences' (Stanislavski 2010: 119). We could call this feature of the 'if' the 'if . . . I'.

By contrast, Russell's account of her process foregrounded how, like Ryman, she remained rooted in utilizing her observational (rather than imaginative) skills. She said: 'I'm just looking at my rehearsal notebook here and my notes go on for pages. It all sinks in at some level, even if you don't consciously use it.' She used a similarly passive osmotic analogy when she said: 'it probably did seep through [. . .] certainly her sense of absolute commitment, I hope that came through'. Again, like Ryman, Russell departed from Stanislavski in her rejection of employing her own experiences in the role: the 'if . . . I'. One reason

for this focus can be found in Shomit Mitter's comment that: 'Stanislavsky's "magic if" obliterates the claims of actuality in order to allow the actor a more compelling release into the imagined truths of character' (Mitter 1992: 49). In light of Mitter's comment, the way in which Russell foregrounded observation over imagination appears largely attributable to the fact that the 'claims of actuality' were central to the production. Stanislavski formulated his techniques in relation to playing fictional roles; here, by contrast, the 'compelling release' that might result from using 'imagined truths' may not have been deemed appropriate when portraying a real person in the play.

As a result of her access to the individuals she portrayed, Russell was able to learn a lot more about them than Cullen, and could take this information into her hotseating sessions. Although, in comparison to Cullen's experiences, this may have benefited Russell's understanding of the people she played, as we shall see, it severely hampered her later processes.

### EXPERIMENTS WITH SELF-ANALYSIS: ALEXANDER HANSON

Alexander Hanson, who played a British Army Colonel in *Talking to Terrorists*, was the only actor to recall that he actively looked for similarities between himself and his subject. Like Russell, Hanson met the Colonel during the rehearsal process. He said, 'It was great for me to watch him and see what he was like as a person, because obviously you are aiming to find the essence of him in yourself.' Hanson's comment prompts the question as to whether these links were indeed there, or whether, like Ryman, he needed to believe the connections existed in order to play the Colonel. Whilst this is an important question, the very fact that he saw his preparation in those terms is interesting, and unique among his fellow cast members.

One mode of interrogation into these four divergent pre-hotseating approaches is to view them according to Stanislavski's notes on 'Analysis'. Hanson's description follows this process to a greater extent than Russell's, and yet, arguably, does not follow it to the logical conclusion Stanislavski sets out. Stanislavski identifies a five-stage system of script and role analysis, but it is the first three stages that are particularly relevant here:

1. Studying the writer's work.
2. Searching for the inner and other kinds of material for creative purposes to be found within the play and the role.

(Stanislavski 2010: 103)

Ryman, Russell and Cullen followed the first two stages, albeit on divergent paths from Stanislavski. In their search for 'material for creative purposes' Ryman summoned his empathy from the interview, Russell used her knowledge of the circumstances to guide her, and Cullen listed both the circumstances and what was said about his subject. However, in his approach, Hanson experimented with the next stage: '3: Searching for the same material in ourselves as actors (self-analysis)' (Stanislavski 2010: 103)

Of all the cast, Hanson was the only actor to report that he actively used 'self analysis' to prepare himself for hotseating. Stanislavski subsequently expanded on this technique, stating: 'the actor's imagination has the ability to get close to someone else's life, transform it into his own, discover exciting qualities

and traits they have in common' (Stanislavski 2010: 114). Hanson was indeed drawn to the Colonel and sought common features. However, Stanislavski's third stage of analysis goes further than merely finding similarities in the actor:

3. The material under discussion consists of living, personal memories drawn from our five senses, contained in an actor's affective memory [...] these memories must always be similar to the feelings in the play and the role.

(Stanislavski 2010: 103)

Hanson, therefore, sought out similarities between himself and the Colonel, but he did not recall consciously employing his own 'personal memories' to assist him. This is a critical distinction. By identifying these similarities, Hanson was able to base his portrayal on the elements of the Colonel's personality that he found reflected his own. However, like Ryman and Russell before him, Hanson made no reference to using his own specific experiences to do this. Although he based his portrayal on his own personality to a greater extent than Russell or Ryman, this was predicated on the shared features he observed in the meeting, rather than actively translating these through his own emotion memory.

Where the processes above were not shared, in their hotseating sessions the actors' early work was subject to scrutiny from all involved. Hotseating took place as soon as possible after the actor-subject meetings, often the following day, meaning that the actors' processes started by, rather than culminated in, performing as the individual. The actors portrayed their interviewee in front of the cast and creative team back in the rehearsal room. I will analyse two qualitatively different experiences of the hotseating process, which further complicate the actors' use of a Stanislavski-inspired vocabulary.

### ***Alexander Hanson: From a 'false' portrayal to a 'half-way house' and Chekhov's 'imaginary body'***

Alexander Hanson, then, looked for similarities between himself and the Colonel. He found the hotseating process a positive experience, partly because the Colonel was an inherently theatrical individual:

The next day I went in the hotseat, I did a very bold version of him. Particularly his way of speaking. It feels false if you try to do it, but eventually you begin to own the actions.

It is informative to consider what Hanson means by 'a bold version' of 'his way of speaking'. Hanson implies that he exaggerated his portrayal – an enlargement that meant his performance felt 'false'. However, Hanson's comment that 'eventually you begin to own the actions' suggests that his journey post-hotseat was predicated on using the shared features he established in the meeting to psychologically justify and thereby 'own' his portrayal.

Hanson stated that a critical stage in this journey was creating a 'half-way house' between himself and the Colonel. This was based on a combination of his observation in the meeting and his awareness of what was theatrically viable:

You bring what you have as an individual [...] and you create that half-way house. You want to maintain the integrity of the person you are playing, but you also know what works – what interests an audience – what keeps attention, which is your craft.

In contrast to the actors' descriptions of their preparation for the hotseat, here Hanson more readily acknowledges his own creative agency and interpretive interventions in constructing the role. His description of a 'half-way house' does not find a particular resonance in Stanislavski's writings, but has many similarities with Michael Chekhov's description of the 'imaginary body'.

Michael Chekhov, who worked extensively with Stanislavski as an actor at the Moscow Art Theatre (1912–28) before developing and reformulating Stanislavski's work in his own teaching, defined a character by the way in which it is distinct from the actor: 'That which constitutes their *difference* makes them *characters*' (Chekhov 2002: 78, original emphasis). The actor, Chekhov contends, should therefore ask: 'What is the *difference* – however subtle or slight this difference may be – between myself and the character?' (Chekhov 2002: 78, original emphasis) It is clear that although this was not the first question that Hanson asked, his performance in the hotseat certainly provoked him to become aware of the differences between himself and the individual. Chekhov called this creation an 'imaginary body':

You are going to imagine that in the same space you occupy with your own, real body, there exists another body – the imaginary body of your character, which you have just created in your mind.

(Chekhov 2002: 78)

This imaginary body 'influences your psychology [...] your *whole being, psychologically and physically*, will be changed' (Chekhov 2002: 79, original emphasis). The imaginary body, in contrast to Stanislavski's teaching, does not use the actor's own emotional memory directly in performance. Instead, Chekhov's theory of the actor – imaginary body – character is mirrored in his tripartite understanding of the 'self' (a term that he uses interchangeably with the *I*). This comprises three different levels of consciousness, which he terms the 'everyday *I*', the 'higher *I*' and the 'character's *I*'. On the most basic level is the 'everyday *I*', which is the actor's own 'emotions, voice and mobile body' (Chekhov 2002: 87). The 'everyday *I*' provides the material with which the 'higher *I*' can work. Chekhov explains that the 'higher *I*' is the 'expanded self', which the actor experiences in the moment of creation. Thus, when an actor is performing, 'you are two selves'. It is the relationship between these two selves that allows inspiration to occur, by 'putting you into a *creative state*' (Chekhov 2002: 87, original emphasis). Chekhov identifies the 'everyday *I*' as a solid base on which to build; it is the 'common-sense regulator', which 'controls the canvas upon which the creative individuality [the higher *I*] draws its designs' (Chekhov 2002: 88). This higher self is distinct from the actor's everyday personality, as it is present only when onstage in the moment of creation. The third consciousness is the 'character's *I*', which is created by the 'everyday *I*' and the 'higher *I*'. This third entity 'becomes the focal point of the higher self's creative impulses'. To apply this directly to Hanson's comments above, he was able to bring 'what you have as an individual' (the 'everyday *I*'), but also

'your craft' (the creative, 'higher *I*'), which together Hanson used to construct 'a half-way house' between himself and the Colonel.

The crucial departure from Stanislavski (and one which aligns Hanson's process more closely with Chekhov) is in the way in which the actor's emotion memory is deployed within the 'character's *I*'. As examined above, Stanislavski used 'if' to draw on the actor's own experiences in relation to the circumstances of a role. Although Chekhov acknowledges that the material for character creation stems from the actor, he states that the emotions engendered by the 'higher *I*' are 'as "unreal" as the "soul" of the character itself' (Chekhov 2002: 90). As they are so strongly linked to the moment of inspiration, they are not part of the actor's 'everyday *I*'. Rather, they are a product of imagination and creative individuality, which 'purifies and transforms' them to such an extent that they become 'impersonal', and thus at an emotional distance from the actor (Chekhov 2002: 89).

Viewed through Chekhov's writings, therefore, we can understand Hanson's 'bold' performance in the hotseat 'which felt false' as an exercise that set the parameters in which his 'half-way house' or 'imaginary body' could be located. Despite involving his own personality to create a character, he did not recall using his own analogous experiences as the source of emotion, which departs from Stanislavski's teaching, and presents a process much closer to Chekhov's work.

### ***Catherine Russell: Adaptation/re-invention***

Hanson was fortunate that the Colonel transferred relatively easily to the stage. Less fortunate was Catherine Russell. She used her meetings with her two characters to establish the circumstances of their lives and careers that were outside the testimony Soans had already drafted. Her comments regarding her post-hotseating experiences provoke interesting questions about this production's depiction of real people and the function of Stafford-Clark's working processes.

Russell found that her hotseating session as the journalist, 'Rima', was very helpful as a result of the inherent theatricality of her subject: 'she is an extremely theatrical character and her personality transfers very well to the stage as she is very entertaining.' However, her portrayal of 'Phoebe', the aid worker, was a very different experience. She recalled that in the hotseat

Max was saying, 'well that is not very entertaining'. Poor woman! So actually that really set me back a few weeks meeting her, as I had her very firmly in my mind but that is not what the director and the writer wanted, it didn't fit in. So I had to create somebody who wasn't her.

The care Russell had taken to find out more of 'Phoebe's' circumstances in her pre-hotseating work was evidently of very little use to her. The changes demanded by Stafford-Clark severely hampered her approach:

It made it really, really difficult [...] once you've learnt or got your head around something, it is very difficult then to change. I found it an incredibly difficult rehearsal process from that point of view.

Russell had to completely reimagine a character; one unrelated to the 'not very entertaining' (yet more accurate) portrayal she gave in the hotseat based on her observation. The contrast between her pre-hotseat preparation and what

was imposed on her by Stafford-Clark was enough to make her ask: 'Was it useful meeting her? Not really [...] what I wanted to do was to play her.' This evidently was not the agenda shared by the director.

To return to the comparison between Catherine Russell's and Jonathan Cullen's experiences: as Cullen did not meet anyone he played before the production opened, he was wholly reliant on Stafford-Clark and Soans for guidance. Despite the fact that this vested power in the director and writer, it also meant that he was spared the problems that Russell experienced. Cullen said: 'they [the actors who took part in the research phases] were coming from a very different place as they had done the interviews themselves and knew the people they were talking about.' However, he did not consider himself to be at a disadvantage:

I think there are two big dangers [...] one is that you get too attached to the person you have interviewed, and you don't want to betray them, so you want all of their words in, and the other one is that you know too much about them, and you forget to represent that, to make it dramatic for the audience, who don't know that person. But I was spared these problems, I was in the same situation as the audience, I was coming to it fresh.

Here Cullen alludes to some of the problems that were evidently informing Stafford-Clark's advice to Russell. For Cullen, bypassing the hotseating session avoided this very delicate negotiation, which, in the example of Russell, was detrimental to her preparation.

## CONCLUSION

It is evident from my interviews with the cast of *Talking to Terrorists* that playing a real person in verbatim theatre makes specific demands on the actor. This article has looked at working processes on only one production, and even within this structured environment, the actors' approaches have been fascinatingly diverse. Preoccupations with responsibility, psychological and emotional understanding, and the gap between actor and subject all practically affected these actors' processes in ways that would not have happened had they been playing a fictional role.

However, actors involved in the research periods were not necessarily placed in a more advantageous position than those who conducted no research at all. In fact, in her portrayal of 'Phoebe', Catherine Russell was at a distinct disadvantage having conducted her own research. For her, the hotseating process was detrimental to her preparation, but benefited Stafford-Clark as he was able, at the earliest possible opportunity, to change Russell's representation to suit his own plans for her portrayal.

The actors' use of a Stanislavskian vocabulary, whether explicitly stated or echoed in their comments, has provided a useful frame for consideration. However, it was not Stanislavski's project to develop techniques for playing a real person. The struggle he experienced in his portrayal of Salieri is perhaps indicative of the problematic applicability of certain areas of his teaching to these roles. These problems are exacerbated when the individual is not only real but a person the actors interviewed and from whose words the script was constructed. Whilst some Stanislavskian terms, such as given circumstances, illuminated the actors' work to some extent, it has been possible to be quite

specific about the limitations of his techniques. The primary departure from a Stanislavskian rendering of character occurs on the lack of deployment of the actor's own emotion memory and experiential recall. All the actors here distanced their work on their subject from their own emotions and experiences, or what I have called the 'if . . . I'. Bella Merlin noted a similar concern in *The Permanent Way* when she stated, 'there was no room for my own emotional response [. . .] Any emotion, any tears, had to be *her* emotions, *her* tears, and not *my* pity suffered on her behalf' (2007a: 134). It appears Merlin also felt that using her own emotional recall was not legitimate. Her description perpetuates the myth that actors can completely suppress their own emotions in the service of playing a real person. Indeed, the presumption is that not to do so is somehow inappropriate and disrespectful to the person being played.

In a play such as *Talking to Terrorists*, the actors' perception seems to be that adapting or translating the interviewee's story in order to resonate with their own experience would leave them open to accusations that they were indulging their emotions and thus betraying the individual they portrayed. A common feature of my interviews was that the actors were specific in their descriptions of richly ambitious and innovative strategies with regard to how they utilized their meeting with their subject. However, when they articulated how they used this information, their descriptions became much less precise. Although the result of any research on a role is not a simple equation in which each discovery has a specific effect on performance, the actors appeared unwilling to accept their own creative interventions. In this way, the actors are complicit in obscuring their own creativity. Arguably, one reason for the dearth of actor-focused research on playing real people is that actors also perpetuate the myth of their own passivity in the creation of roles.

From the *Talking to Terrorists* cast's testimony it is impossible, at this early stage of research, to make definitive theoretical assertions. It appears that the issue is far more sophisticated than one performance practice will allow and that other theorists, such as Michael Chekhov, can substantially enrich our understanding. Ultimately, a more complex theoretical framework is necessary to provide the nuanced terminology needed to interrogate acting processes in verbatim theatre.

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