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EXPLORING TELEVISION ACTING



EDITED BY TOM CANTRELL AND CHRISTOPHER HOGG

EXPLORING TELEVISION ACTING

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Acting on Television: A Craft Book for Screen Actors

Genre and Performance: Film and Television

Television: Critical Methods and Applications

EXPLORING TELEVISION ACTING

Edited by

**TOM CANTRELL AND
CHRISTOPHER HOGG**

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For Anna and Billy
— Tom

For Patricia
— Christopher

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INTRODUCTION

Tom Cantrell and Christopher Hogg

This collection brings together the work of twelve researchers in order to respond to a growing interest within television studies: the identification of the actor as being of significant conceptual and critical interest and crucial to the ways in which we understand television storytelling. In the actor, the interests within this discipline – textual, industrial, historical, technological and cultural – are made manifest. The actor therefore becomes a site at which the different (distinct or interconnected) strands of investigation within television studies collide and combine. For example, the actor's work has a significant role to play in questions of genre and its relationship to style and tone. Similarly, it is the actor's individual work on rhythm – of line delivery, movement, gesture, as well as rhythm of thought – with which the editor and director work to construct and manipulate meaning in the final production. Likewise an actor's previous work and their own celebrity status (or what Jordan has called a 'background resonance' [1981: 197–8]) combined with their interpretation of the current role, has a significant bearing on the creation of meaning in audience reception. It is the actor's position as a site of convergence which has led Caughie to argue that acting is 'very difficult to nail down analytically' (2000: 162) and 'tests the limits of critical language' (2000: 170). Acting, and the role of the actor, thus run across critical frameworks, theoretical models and modes of analysis. For all of these complexities, this book aims to celebrate actors as being central to the discipline. The collection sets out to demonstrate that analysing the histories, contexts, careers, working methods and approaches of television actors enriches our understanding of television, and to ignore these areas leaves us with only a partial view of our object of study.

This collection is a sibling to *Acting in British Television*, which was published by Palgrave in 2017. *Acting in British Television* features interviews with sixteen television actors. Across case-study chapters in four central television genres: soap opera, police and medical drama, comedy, and period drama, the book examines how actors create their celebrated portrayals. In our analysis of the actors' work in these genres, we identify television as a specific medium which

prompts actors to work in particular ways. Rather than seen as a poor relation to the time and space afforded to acting processes in theatre and film, we analyse the innovative and previously hidden acting approaches and identify the uniquely televisual properties of this work. Our aim in our two books is simple: to bring together new material, both from actors working in television and from researchers investigating acting on television. As we will go on to explore, this area has been neglected in scholarship within television studies and as such acting, as an area of enquiry in its own right, sits at the margins of current critical discourse (and is frequently similarly side-lined in many television or media studies courses within universities and colleges). We want this to change and for analysis of the work of television actors to be as prominent in research and teaching as the far more well-established critical engagement with the work of writers and directors.

Acting in British Television focused primarily on acting process and how actors work on television roles. By contrast, in the eleven chapters that comprise this collection, the authors take a more holistic view of the actor. The collection not only explores case-study programmes, celebrated performances by leading actors, and the actors' creative approaches to developing their television work, it also analyses the work of the actor in the context of other key roles in the production of television work, such as the 'performance' of camera operators. In addition, this collection investigates the actor's wider career, such as via emerging trends in casting processes, trans-Atlantic work and actor well-being. Bringing together cultural theorists, actor trainers, theatre and performance scholars, management experts and television researchers and historians, this collection provides a rounded view of the work and career of the television actor.

Acting on television

This work is part of a growing appreciation of acting on television. Until relatively recently, the actor has received significantly less attention for their work on television than they have for their work on film or stage. Both film and theatre studies have a long critical tradition of analysing acting. An appreciation of these as distinct disciplines can be found not only in scholarly literature but also in pedagogies for actor training, suggesting that both academics and actor trainers acknowledge that these media call on specific skills and for the actor to modulate their work in particular ways. The same, however, cannot be said of acting on television which does not have this lineage and only recently has attention been drawn to acting on television by the industry and training institutions.

Eighteen years ago, John Caughie asked 'What Do Actors Do When They Act?' in his seminal chapter on the subject of television acting (2000). In the chapter, Caughie stressed the conspicuous 'absence of theoretically informed critical writing about [television] acting', noting that whilst there is 'a considerable body of writing about film stardom, and some about television personalities ... there

is very little attention to reading the actor' (2000: 162). Our present collection, like *Acting in British Television*, can be seen as a response to Caughie's question, and should be viewed within the context of other responses to his appeal for action in this research area. There have been a number of valuable chapters and articles that begin to address this absence since the initial publication of Caughie's chapter. For example, Roberta Pearson's 'The Multiple Determinants of Television Acting' (2010) offers a valuable examination of the force-field of production elements and concerns that impact upon television acting, focusing primarily upon the US production context. Her work can be seen as an antecedent to the focus of two chapters in this collection in which Simone Knox and Christine Becker tighten the focus to analyse the precise relationship between British performers and American casting practices. Lucy Fife Donaldson's article 'Camera and Performer: Energetic Engagement with *The Shield*' (2012) provides further insight into the creative conditions of television acting, investigating the relationship between actor and camera in US cop drama, an aspect which will be considered in a historical UK context in this collection by Douglas McNaughton. Donaldson's work on the creative conditions of television acting has also been extended to consider the significance of studio and location environments for the television actor via McNaughton's article "'Constipated, studio-bound, wall-confined, rigid": British Actors' Equity and BBC Television Drama, 1948–1972' (2014) and via a trio of articles by Richard Hewett (2013, 2014 and 2015). Hewett's forthcoming monograph, *The Changing Spaces of Television Acting* (Manchester University Press), also promises to be a valuable addition to this emergent body of actor-focused research into the relationship between television acting and the creative conditions and working processes of British television, and we are delighted to include his most recent research in this collection.

In addition to these recent publications, there have been two illuminating UK-based symposia investigating television acting specifically; the first, organized by the authors, *Playing the Small Screen* (University of York, July 2012), and the second, organized by Simone Knox and Stephen Lacey, *Acting on Television* (University of Reading, April 2016). In addition, since 2015, Knox has co-authored a blog strand for *CSTOnline.tv*, titled 'What Actors Do', with Gary Cassidy. As evidenced by such recent activity, and as we argue elsewhere (Cantrell and Hogg 2016), over the past few years, researchers have been energetically pursuing answers to Caughie's question. This book aims to make a significant contribution to arriving at those answers.

Television acting/television performance

As noted above, the position of the actor as a site of convergence, not only in critical trends within television studies but also within the creative context of

television production, means that there are significant complexities when analysing their work. We would also suggest that the very term ‘television acting’ resists easy definition. In our previous research into this area (Cantrell and Hogg 2016, 2017) we have distinguished television acting from television performance. We have used ‘acting’ to refer specifically to the actor’s portrayal of a character within a dramatic context, and identified ‘performance’ as a term that extends more broadly to other forms of performative involvement within television. In this light, we identified that ‘performance’ extends to the inflection of an actor’s work by other performative elements beyond the contributions of the actor themselves, such as costume, lighting, framing and editing, for example. This distinction was a deliberate intervention designed to focus attention on the creative contribution of actors. This distinction has been important, as a broad trend within previous screen acting analysis has been to conflate the actor’s contributions with other adjacent modes of ‘performance’.¹ Elisions of this kind appear regularly in journalistic appraisals of television acting. For instance, in an article for *The Guardian* titled ‘Happy Valley TV Review – Sarah Lancashire Gives Her Best Performance’ (2014), Mark Lawson frames his review of Lancashire’s ‘performance’ almost entirely through noting the repeated use of close shots of her ‘bloodied face’ and discussing the merits of the script provided by writer Sally Wainwright, as opposed to reflecting upon what Lancashire actually offers up as an actor portraying a character within that story.

Across the chapters that comprise this collection, the actor’s work will be analysed from a wide range of viewpoints and using different critical frameworks. However, throughout the collection, the key focus of the contributors has been on the actor, not other performative elements. We have been careful to avoid treading a familiar path of writing about editing or directing as if these are the primary determinants of television acting. Rather, when contributors consider adjacent modes of performance, such as those of the editor, director or camera operator, the analysis will return to the question of how these impact on the work of the actor. We recognize that such adjacent performative elements undoubtedly inflect the work of the television actor considerably and therefore certainly merit recognition in the analysis of television acting. Our contention, rather, is that these elements should not conceal the work of the television actor, but can be used as ways to illuminate the actor’s contribution.

As suggested above, this collection is also interested in the training of actors for television and the appreciation of television as a form that involves specific challenges and opportunities for the actor. At the *Playing the Small Screen* symposium mentioned above, the authors brought together television actors, actor trainers and academics (and those who combine these roles) to discuss this very question. A number of high-profile British drama schools were represented by staff who lead or contribute to the screen training components of their programmes, including the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA), the

London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (LAMDA), the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, Guilford School of Acting and Bristol Old Vic Theatre School. It became clear through round-table discussions, presentations and subsequent conversations that all of these institutions have recently or are currently redesigning their training approaches for television, reflecting the fact that the specific demands of television acting and how training institutions should best prepare their students for this work are presently high on the agenda.

The actor trainers who spoke at the symposium were continuing to design innovative new programmes of training. Moreover, it was evident that such programmes were being constructed with an aim to move beyond the more well established technical acting classes for television, in place in various forms at RADA, for example, since the 1950s, in an attempt to meet the needs of a then relatively new performance medium.² These traditional technical classes, with their focus on becoming familiar with a studio environment and the industrial processes of making television, may have prepared actors for the day-to-day practicalities of working in the medium but left most of the more fundamental questions of character construction and narrative development, as well as those concerning the practical logistics of a career in television, largely untouched. One of the intentions of this book is to provide a resource which might assist the theoretical underpinning of these developments in actor training for television drama. When designing courses on acting for the stage, actor trainers can choose from a rich range of potential models of character construction and development. By contrast, the relative lack of research noted above means that designing new syllabuses to prepare actors for the specific challenges of television acting is a difficult undertaking. This book aims to assist in tackling these challenges.

The chapters

Television acting: Histories and inheritances

This collection is organized into three sections, each with a particular angle on the actor's work on television. The first section includes three chapters which explore the ways in which historical, industrial, organizational and technological developments have shaped television acting. The first chapter, 'Performing Sherlock: A Study in Studio and Location Realism' by Richard Hewett, analyses three televisual treatments of one of the most famous Sherlock Holmes stories, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Hewett places three versions of the same scene – the initial consultation between Holmes, Watson and their client – side by side. Hewett examines the 1968 BBC version, the 1988 Granada television film, and the 2012 *Sherlock* episode and discusses the key role that production processes play in the shaping of television performances. In particular, Hewett considers what he has termed 'studio realism' and 'location realism' and

explores how the different approaches to rehearsals, blocking, and the material context of performance have influenced the actor's work. Hewett uses this historical span to consider the evolution of acting style, scale and gestural range in relation to these celebrated versions of Conan Doyle's novella. Alongside Hewett's chapter is Douglas McNaughton's chapter, "'Visible" and "Invisible" Performance: Framing Performance in 1970s Television Drama'. McNaughton explores the relationship between 'visible' performance by actors and 'invisible' performance by camera operators. With reference to Jacobs' identification of television as an 'intimate screen' (2000) in which the focus on the nuances of the actor's facial expression is so central, McNaughton considers the collaborative process between actors and camera operators, highlighting the contribution of camera operators to the generation of onscreen television performance. McNaughton uses archival resources, institutional and textual analysis, and new practitioner interviews to consider the interaction between the actor's performance and camerawork in the 1970s multi-camera television studio. He focuses his analysis on the BBC's *I, Claudius* (1976) to consider the proxemics of performance both in front of and behind the camera. Like Hewett, McNaughton charts these dynamics in relation to the development of camera mobility across the history of television drama. The final chapter that comprises this section is Stephen Lacey's "'No-Nonsense Rozzer": Philip Glenister/Gene Hunt, *Life on Mars* and the Particularity of Television Acting'. Lacey analyses one of the most iconic television performances in recent years. He identifies the range of 'acting' on television and notes the 'particularity' of this medium. Lacey's chapter focuses on the specificities of the drama format and questions of method. Through his analysis of Glenister's work on *Life on Mars* (BBC 2006–7), which he defines as a hybrid of cop show and sci-fi drama, Lacey identifies the micro and the macro influences on the actor's work: the specifics of the studio environment and the technology used, and also the wider ecology of broadcasting. By using this as a context for his detailed textual analysis of a scene from *Life on Mars*, Lacey demonstrates that it is the particularity of the contexts in which television actors work that makes acting on television distinctive.

Television acting: Approaches and perspectives

The second section comprises four chapters that focus on particular performances. Tom Cantrell's chapter, "'The Organic and the Technical": A Psychophysical Approach to Television Acting', considers Stanislavski's writings on psychophysical acting (which were designed for stage work) and how this term might be understood in the context of the actor's work on television. Focusing on Jason Watkins's BAFTA-award-winning portrayal of the title character in *The Lost Honour of Christopher Jefferies* (ITV 2014), Cantrell uses new interview material with Watkins to scrutinize how the two constituent parts of the

term, the psychological and the physical, functioned in the service of character development for television. Watkins met Christopher Jefferies in his preparation to portray him in this docudrama, and the challenges of playing a real person formed the focus of Watkins's process. By analysing Watkins's private work, away from formalized rehearsal time, Cantrell explores the innovative and previously uncharted work that goes into creating a television performance. Cynthia Baron's chapter, 'Viola Davis: A Context for Her Craft and Her Success in Series Television', explores the work on US television of the three-time Emmy Award winning actor. Davis became the first black artist to win an Emmy for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series for her portrayal of law professor Annalise Keating in *How to Get Away with Murder* (ABC 2014). Baron's chapter charts American television's troubled history of representation of black characters and contextualizes Davis's work by considering significant milestones in portrayals by black actors. Including interview material from Davis on her role in *The Help* (2011) as well as a detailed analysis of her training at Julliard, Baron explores Davis's contribution to new representations in American television. Baron offers an examination of Davis's performance on *How to Get Away with Murder* and draws on Stanislavski's 'Active Analysis' and 'Events' to consider specific moments in her portrayal. Louise Cope's chapter looks at a very different form of performance. In her chapter, '"I'm Going in There GC Style": Performance and Performative Contracts within a Crossover of Reality Television Environments', Cope examines the rapid rise in popularity of constructed reality television over the past few years and analyses what constitutes 'performance' and 'acting' within it. Cope charts the range of hybrid and convergent forms which have come to dominate some channels' schedules. She analyses the complex negotiation with viewers around performative credibility, and unpicks the interweaving of role and self which lies at the heart of programmes such as *The Only Way is Essex* (ITV 2010–). Cope questions how the participants master the 'performance of the self' and what 'authenticity' means within performance in these contexts. Using the example of Gemma Collins, who launched her television career in *The Only Way is Essex*, Cope examines questions of agency, acting skills and the notion of a 'marketable self' within these negotiated contexts. The final chapter in the 'Approaches and Perspectives' section is Derek Paget's 'Truth and "Truthiness" in Acting the Real'. Paget was the Principal Investigator on the AHRC project 'Actors Performing the Real in British Theatre and Television since 1990' (2007–10) and here he reflects on the findings of the project and re-evaluates them in the context of the contemporary televisual landscape. Drawing on a wide range of interviews with celebrated actors such as Hugh Bonneville and Maxine Peake, Paget explores how actors experienced their training for television, the industrial context of their work, and also their view of the cultural currency of television acting. In particular, Paget considers the different vocabularies that actors and academics use to talk about acting. He probes terms such as 'truth' and 'essence' in the context