Acting, Skill, and Artistry

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In 1984, the director Peter Gill established the National Theatre Studio in what had been the Old Vic's Annex on The Cut in London. It was intended to act as "the research and development" wing of the National Theatre, with a wide brief that included "commissioning writers, developing directors and designers, investigating non-text-based work, and producing work for the main house," but I want, here, to explore what Gill called "the practice and analysis of acting skills," which, he argued, "seemed an essential part of any program of work that was in part connected with process."[1] I want to do so mainly because this aspect of the Studio's work seems to have fallen off its agenda in the thirty years since it was established by Gill.

Today, The National Theatre's Web site advertises the Studio's activities as: "courses and training" intended to "help create a more practical and inspired generation of directors," "project development […] on projects intended for the National Theatre's main stages," "developing and supporting writers and new writing for the theatre"—all of which echo Gill's initial list—as well as the provision of Staff Directors for the National Theatre's productions.[2] Not only is "the practice and analysis of acting skills" absent from this list, it seems to have been positively excluded from it. The words "actor," "acting," "performer" and "performing" do not feature at all in the Studio's description of "what we do." The Studio offers about twenty-five "attachments" every year "to a variety of artists," who may be

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[1] . Lyn Haill, ed., *Actors Speaking* (London: Oberon, 2007), 9.

[2] . http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/discover-more/about-the-national/studio/what-we-do

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"writers, directors, choreographers and designers," but may not, apparently, be actors. Since skill and art were synonymous for centuries, it seems likely that the neglect of "acting skills" and the exclusion of actors from the realm of artistry are not unrelated. It is my purpose here to show, however, that a more thorough understanding of the nature and operation of skill may enable both practice and scholarship to resist this state of affairs and bring us to a renewed appreciation of the artistry of the actor.

Returning to Gill's statement of the NT Studio's purpose, there is evidence that appreciation and understanding of the actor's skill was already in decline. The Studio's commitment to developing the actors' skills occupies the position of an afterthought to the main thrust of its business, and it is telling that Gill feels the need to make a claim for its "essential" position in a "program of work […] connected with process," whereas he offers no justification for any of the other activities he lists. Gill certainly felt, at this time, that the ability to speak complex, poetic, and rhetorical texts was in crucially short supply, and he invited older actors to come and work with their younger colleagues at the Studio in an attempt to remedy this state of affairs. In 1986, he instigated a project to formalize and extend this aspect of the Studio, "sending a group of younger actors out to interview older ones about their attitudes to text." In 2007, these interviews, with Harry Andrews, Gabrielle Daye, Fabia Drake, Gwen Frangcon-Davies, Alec Guinness, Rex Harrison, Patricia Hayes, Michael Hordern, Athene Seyler, Robert Stephens, Madoline Thomas, and Margaret Tyzack, were published as *Actors Speaking*.

The interviewees in the book frequently cite John Gielgud as an influence, and though Gielgud himself had been unable to be interviewed for this project, he did receive the guideline questions sent out in advance. These he duly returned, completed, as though they were a questionnaire, and his brief answers are reproduced at the back of the book. They are revealing in their obscurity. Gielgud defines "good speaking," for instance, as "interpreting

the text in appreciation of the kind of play concerned." To the question of whether "good speaking" is different in "a classical and a modern role," there is "no answer given," and against a series of a enquiries about "end-stopping," "the caesura," "feminine endings," "rhyming couplets," "broken lines," we are told that "Sir John has drawn a large question mark."[3]

That question mark hovers, in fact, over almost every page of the book. Rex Harrison, for instance, offers the doubtless accurate but less than revealing advice that "phrasing of sentences and lines and punctuation is something which one learns by trial and error and being relaxed and loose in front of an audience"; Gwen Frangcon–Davies reassures that "you find your own way, and you don't find it all at once," but has nothing to offer as to how this happens; and, most openly of all, Alec Guinness admits that "how one does it, I don't know."

It is a book whose primary revelation, in other words, is that the knowledge for which it seeks is somehow unknown even by those who most surely possess it. This paradoxically unknown knowledge has been called "tacit knowledge" since the invention of that term in Michael Polanyi's 1966 book *The Tacit Dimension*. Polanyi argues that "we know more than we can tell" and that knowing is an active pursuit "guided by sensing the presence of a hidden reality toward which our clues are pointing."[4] This seems a reasonably accurate description of, for example, the resistance of the actor Harry Andrews to his interviewer's attempts to make him codify his experience of working with the director Glen Byam Shaw into an explicit attitude or set of principles:

> *Did Glen Byam Shaw have a particular attitude to the text?*
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> I wouldn't say he had a particular attitude, other than getting the sense of the poetry.

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[3] . Haill, *Actors Speaking*, 147–48.

[4] . Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 4.

And don't chop up the verse.

Are you talking about end-stopping? Do you know what is meant by that?

I think I understand that, but one's instinct is not to do that. I use the punctuation as it is written—use a full stop when it's there, or a dash or whatever. And you've got to lift to the end of the line a bit, to keep it going.

Lift to the end of the line?

Well, not obviously, but instinctively one does that in order to keep the suspense going. It's a mistake, for me personally, to do things too consciously.

Andrews is staking a claim, here, for the value of tacit as opposed to explicit knowledge. The problem for his interviewer is that interviews deal, necessarily, in the communication of explicit knowledge. But, as Polanyi makes very clear, one of the defining features of tacit knowledge is its resistance to such conversion. "Skillful performance," he argues, is communicated by "exploratory indwelling," whereby a pupil

must try to combine mentally the movements which the performer combines practically and he must combine them in a pattern similar to the performer's pattern of movements […]. He dwells in these movements by interiorizing them. By such exploratory indwelling the pupil gets the feel of a master's skill and may learn to rival him.[5]

Andrews offers an example of such a process of "exploratory indwelling" in his response to the question "*What do you look for when you're studying one of those great speeches?*":

Well first of all the meaning, and the emotion, what the scene is about, but you look for the climaxes […] because you've got to have light and shade […], you can't keep it sustained at the same temperature; you've got to find ways of dealing with it, it can't all be on a high. But that is an instinctive thing, and when you've got good actors to play with, who respond to what you're doing, then it all comes together. And

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[5] . Ibid., 29–30.

if you've got a good director who will say, "Well, I think it would be better if you

withdrew that a little bit, and leant on that a bit more."[6]

It is notable here that neither Andrews nor his "good director" deals in explicit knowledge.

Instead, their exchange treats speech as a material (with qualities of "light and shade" and

"temperature"), which the actor must deal with, a process, which they describe through

metaphors of interaction or manipulation (it can be withdrawn or "leant on"). The actor's

tacit knowledge, then, is also a form of embodied knowledge, which is not reducible to

explicit rules or abstract, conceptual principles, but experienced as an exploration of the

possibilities of physical engagement with the material of a play.

So how can we understand this process? Polanyi suggests that it entails the

development of "a personal judgment in relating evidence to an external reality," which

might be understood to mean, in this instance, that the actor relates the evidence of the text to

the "external reality" of speech.[7] But speech is, by its nature, both external and internal, and

the process that Andrews describes also includes a reflective phase (instigated by the

director), in which the evidence of speech is related back to the "external reality" of the text.

Consequently, for the actor, the play must be both "external" and "internal" to varying

degrees at various times, and it may therefore be more useful to see him in two distinct

positions in relation to his work. This is the approach taken by the philosopher John Dewey

in his conception of the development of artistry by experience:

the artist embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver while he works . . . As we

manipulate, we touch and feel, as we look, we see; as we listen, we hear. The hand

moves with etching needle or with brush. The eye attends and reports the consequence

of what is done. Because of this intimate connection, subsequent doing is cumulative

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[6] . Haill, *Actors Speaking*, 33–34.

[7] . Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension,* 4, 25.

> and not a matter of caprice, nor yet of routine. In an emphatic artistic-esthetic
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> experience, the relation is so close that it controls simultaneously both the doing
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> and the perception.[8]

The intimacy of this process as described by Dewey is arguably, therefore, a consequence of the ways in which the conventional categories of exterior and interior are blurred by the continual movements back and forth between action and perception.

Dewey's description was echoed by a stonemason named Carl Murray Bates in an interview with Studs Terkel for his 1972 book *Working*: *People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*. Bates, like Harry Andrews, had "pursued his craft" since the early 1930s and was likewise keen to stress its absolute dependence upon a tacit, embodied knowledge in which the mason's hands both act and perceive:

> The architect draws the picture and the plans, and the draftsman and the engineer,
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> they help him. They figure the strength and so on. But when it actually comes to
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> makin' the curves and doin' the work, you've got to do it with your hands. It comes
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> right back to your hands.[9]

Bates's emphasis on the intimate relationship between the skilled worker's body and his materials is echoed by Len Greenham, a leatherworker from Northampton who began his working life in 1928, and was interviewed for Trevor Blackwell and Jeremy Seabrook's collection *Talking Work: An Oral History*. Greenham was a morocco-grainer, finishing the leather of Morocco goats for luxury goods. It was a process he learned as though it were choreography:

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[8] . John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 50–51.

[9]   . Studs Terkel, *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (New York: The New Press, 1972), xlviii.

I'd spent my life in a rhythm which I had had to learn, and which was a rhythm of the body: you went one shank, two shank, across the belly of the skin, from the neck to the butt and from the butt to the neck. Then you hooked these things up, and after you'd done it, you looked at it and you thought, well, isn't that lovely.[10]

There is a brief and revealing phase in Greenham's account of his work where his body and the goat's hide seem almost to merge—or perhaps more accurately, where they are stitched together by his actions before he extricates himself and stands back to admire the completed "things," now stripped of the anatomical features which related them to his own body.

This intimate interaction between practitioner and material reflects John Gielgud's description of speaking Shakespeare in his essay about acting, "Art or Craft," in which he uses the parallel of swimming:

If you surrender to the water, it keeps you up, but if you fight, you drown. The phrasing and rhythm and pace should support the speaker just as water does a swimmer, and should be handled with the same skill, ease and pace . . . In Shakespeare, provided you can control your breath and rhythm, the flow of the verse will help to sustain you, though you must be careful to keep control of the shape and not put in too much expression.[11]

Like Greenham's account of leatherwork, Gielgud's description of stage speech hinges upon the practitioner's capacity to learn and sustain a rhythm. This is not a metronomic tempo, but what Greenham calls "a rhythm of the body," which cannot be meaningfully extracted from

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[10] . Trevor Blackwell and Jeremy Seabrook, *Talking Work: An Oral History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 29.

[11] . John Gielgud, *Stage Directions* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963), 4.

the material processes of its labor, because this rhythm is defined by the interactions that constitute those processes.

The importance of rhythm is echoed by Alec Guinness in his contribution to *Actors Speaking*:

> I'm sure everything in life really only makes sense if it's got a kind of rhythm, if there's a rhythm to what you do, and how you speak, and how you cope with things. I think if I had a funny little drama school that's what I would do, that's what I would settle for, to make sure all the pupils dance, move, speak, do something on a rhythm.[12]

But how would Guinness's imagined pupils learn to do this? Like Gielgud and Greenham, the rhythm he espouses is part of these activities, and can therefore only be learned, as Gielgud said all of his generation had developed their skills, "by imitation."[13]

Gielgud recalled elsewhere that he had begun by imitating Claude Rains, his teacher at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, and the precise imitation of a template is the foundation of any apprenticeship, in which training provided by the master is exchanged for labor offered by the apprentice. This exchange is efficient because the act of copying can simultaneously fulfill both productive and pedagogical demands: it does not only generate precise reproductions, it also generates the capacity to create with precision. This is because, contrary to widely held assumptions about imitative learning, it is neither slavish nor mindless. On the contrary, if the apprentice is to imitate with precision he must both master himself and train his powers of concentration and attention to detail, as we can see from the account of a steelworker named Stanley Bullock, of his apprenticeship in the art of blowing.

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[12] . Haill, *Actors Speaking*, 72.

[13] . Ibid., 149.

The blower's job is to watch the flame in the blast furnace and judge and adjust the temperature of the molten metal within, thereby altering its chemical composition through a complex series of reactions. A chemist would analyze these reactions—and their interactions with each other—to provide an account of the contents of the furnace, but the blower does the opposite: he synthesizes them into a single process, which he judges by simply watching the flame very carefully. This is the skill Bullock had to learn by imitation:

> A blower will not tell you what you're looking for. He can't tell you. You've got to learn it yourself. You've got to look at that flame, know what you're looking for and find it. Once you start finding it, it's a piece of cake. But you've got to know what you're looking for.[14]

Later, Bullock moved to the works laboratories, where, again, an informed eye was his essential tool: "I was able eventually to put a grinding wheel on a piece of metal and to read the sparks, to judge the manganese or carbon content of that metal," he recalled. Thus, the process of imitation serves to train the relationship between action and perception upon which skill depends. Therefore, although Gielgud suggests that "mimicry led me into some rather mannered habits," it would be equally true to say that mimicry also taught him to recognize them.[15]

We can see this process echoed in the recollections of Gielgud's younger colleagues who began, in their turn, by imitating him. While, on the one hand, Harry Andrews remembered that "sometimes [Gielgud's] voice did sing a little too much. And I would think, 'Ah ha ha! I'm never going to do that,'" on the other hand, Gielgud offered an example which it was pointless to resist. This is Andrews's description of Gielgud as Richard II:

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[14]   . Ibid., 38.

[15]   . Gielgud, *Stage Directions*, 2.

>Alec Guinness and I were both playing small parts and we listened. Then when it came to Alec playing Richard II and me playing Bolingbroke at the New Theatre in 1947, both of us remembered vividly how John had said, "Down I come . . ." or any of the speeches. Alec was so terrified of copying that he went against it and wasn't really very good.[16]

The process of imitation, therefore, seems to depend upon absorbing influence into the process of finding one's own way. Gielgud puts it well: "tradition is not a god that should be worshipped in the theatre. […] It is a warning as well as an example, a danger as well as an ideal." [17]

It was precisely this process of imitation and variation that Gill seems to have intended his interview project to replicate: "I thought [the interviewees] made a template of all that I admired in speaking by older colleagues," he writes.[18] And his entire Studio project had begun as a result of what he saw as the lack of opportunities for this kind of ongoing collaborative learning, caused by the "discontinuous working situations" which characterised then—as they do today—a career in the British theater.[19] It is therefore a fundamental irony of Gill's project that it depends upon a methodology—the interview—, which is predicated upon the need to bridge the gaps in knowledge created by these "discontinuous working situations." There is, therefore, a constant risk that the project will merely reproduce the assumptions of the culture that it seeks to resist, namely that tacit knowledge may be converted into and communicated as explicit knowledge.

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[16]   . Haill, *Actors Speaking*, 31.

[17]   . Gielgud, *Stage Directions*, 112.

[18]   . Haill, *Actors Speaking*, 18.

[19]   . Ibid.

That ontological claim, as the anthropologist Tim Ingold has shown, lies at the heart of the wider project of technology "to capture the skills of craftsmen or artisans, and to reconfigure their practice as the application of rational principles."[20] There are potentially disastrous consequences for the skilled worker in this process, which are plainly visible in Len Greenham's account of the progression of his career from craftsmanship to what he calls "standing on the end of a machine." In other words, as Harry Braverman argued in his 1972 book *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, the growth of technology spelled "the progressive elimination of the control functions of the worker" and therefore the end of skill.[21] However, more recent accounts of, for example, the craftsmanship of computer programmers by Richard Sennett, suggest that technology and skill are not, in fact, mutually exclusive and that, as Herbert Read had written as early as 1934, there is no meaningful distinction to be made between a machine and a tool:

> The real distinction is between one man using a tool with his hands and producing an object which shows at every stage the direction of his will and the impression of his personality; and a machine which is producing, without the intervention of a particular man, objects of a uniformity and precision which show no individual variation and personal charm.[22]

But the accounts of skill that I have gathered here suggest that this is only half of the story. They show that if the practitioner's will and personality can be seen to make an "impression" upon their material, so too does the material upon them. The two exist in a state of mutual

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[20]   . Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 61.

[21]   . Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998), 146.

[22]   . Herbert Read. *Art and Industry*, 12.

dependency. It is as meaningless to think about the leatherworker without leather, the speaker without words or the stonemason without stone as it is—to borrow Gielgud's simile—to think of swimming without water.

As the mason Carl Murray Bates describes, the skilled practitioner cannot help but become bound up in the life of the materials with which he works: "Stone's my life. I daydream all the time, most times it's on stone. . . . All my dreams, it seems like it's got to have a piece of rock mixed up in it."[23]
This mingling of the practitioner and his material is intrinsic to Ingold's depiction of the perception of the environment, where the aim is "not to look back on the things to be found in it, or to discern their congealed shapes and layouts, but to join with them in material flows and movements contributing to their—and our—ongoing formation."[24] If perception is an act of joining with the world, then, for Ingold, so too is action: "the role of the artist—as that of any skilled practitioner—is not to give effect to a preconceived idea, novel or not, but to join with and follow the forces and flows of material that bring the form of the work into being."[25]

I would argue that it is Ingold's description of skilled practice that holds the key for both scholars and practitioners to resist the crisis of understanding and developing the actor's skills, which Gill identified but did not successfully address through his interview project. Rather than advocating a study *of* Shakespearean performance, which seeks to identify, define or classify its products, Ingold's approach demands that we study *with* Shakespearean performance, that we join "the forces and flows of material that bring [it] into being." And we

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[23]   . Terkel, *Working*, xlvii.

[24]   . Ingold, *Being Alive*, 88.

[25]   . Ibid., 216.

find an example of just such an approach in the following account of the acting of Laurence

Olivier by his colleague Michael Redgrave:

> If we did not know Olivier to be a great actor by other tests, we would know it from
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> the manner of his deaths. Each one is in character. His Macbeth died violently,
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> convulsively, as he had lived, but in spite of his last words we knew that he had lost
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> heart. His Richard III had no heart to lose and fought on and on, his muscles still
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> twitching when all sense had left them.[26]

Thus, just as masons dream in stone, actors think through acting. It is notable here that

Redgrave, by joining with the forces and flows of Olivier's performances at these crucial

moments, is able to experience them both as artistic creations in their own right, and in

dialogue with the plays from which they emerge. He goes immeasurably further than an

attempt to codify or define the "acting skills" upon which these performances depend; he

generates an account which enables the reader, after him, to join with the flows of their

material and to think not only about them, but *with them*. In short, Redgrave offers an

example of how a deep understanding of skill can lead us to artistry.

Notes

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[26] . Toby Cole, *Actors on Acting: The Theories, Techniques and Practices of t he Great*

Actors of All Times as Told in Their Own Words (New York: Crown Publishers, 1957), 389.