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Actor training as violence: labour, debt, and the differential production of employability

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ABSTRACT

This article examines actor training as a site in which violence is not only encountered through spectacular acts of misconduct, abuse, or poor practice, but organised through the ordinary relations of training itself. Drawing on materialist analysis, assemblage theory, and accounts of structural, symbolic and epistemic violence, it argues that actor training is shaped by the labour conditions to which it is oriented: oversupply, precarity, unpaid work, low pay, debt, and the differential market valuation of bodies, voices, identities and dispositions. Rather than treating training and industry as separate territories, the article considers how institutional training prepares students for precarious cultural labour by normalising self-management, affective discipline, symbolic indebtedness, and the adaptation of the self to employability. It further argues that these processes do not land equally, but are mediated through class, race, gender, disability, nationality, immigration status, and other intersecting conditions of access and recognition. In doing so, the article develops the concept of actor training as an assemblage of violence: structural in its organisation, disciplinary in its everyday procedures, differential in its distribution, and sustained through pedagogical and ideological practices that fold harm into the ordinary terms of professional preparation.

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As recent reports of misconduct in drama schools and the growing body of training-focused critique make clear, there are significant incidences of violence in actor training (e.g. Hurynag 2023; Kanter 2023; Moor 2023, 86–102). But what if such incidents are only the most obvious and spectacular expressions of a much larger structural condition? Beyond single incidents of malpractice various structural conditions of the sector stand out as noteworthy. Most actors are unemployed and those who are employed won't remain so for very long (Simkins 2019). Even those who earn their living through artistic work earn comparatively little (BECS 2024). Inequalities in employment and earnings occur along gendered and racialised lines, and disabled actors face challenges even accessing a stage upon which to act, let alone finding opportunity to play a character recognisable to themselves (Arts Council England 2025; Stamatiou 2019, 50–61). Recent work on resilience and wellbeing in actor training responds to this difficult professional

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landscape by asking how students might be supported to survive the transition into the acting profession (Davidson, Maxwell, and Shergill 2022). Yet when resilience becomes the organising answer to structural precarity, training risks reproducing the very conditions it equips students to endure. Resilience isn't simply taught, it is rehearsed, and this leads students to (at best) survive structural inequality rather than question and resist it.

When a student describes being subjected to degrading acts involving bodily waste and sexualised humiliation during a training exercise, the violence is obvious and the harm difficult to dispute (Hurynag 2023). The more difficult question is what made such acts possible. A structural logic must have already been in place; one in which students became unable to refuse the activity placed in front of them. This isn't to say that abuse is the rehearsal of resilience, but that a model of resilience organised around adaptation to harmful conditions can contribute to the structures of thought through which permission for abuse can become perceived as permissible in the moment. These structures of thought extend far beyond the realm of the interpersonal into the everyday processes through which students are prepared for the world of work. Although this article features violence as its primary analytic focus, it should be acknowledged that an analysis of violence in training cannot be separated from the political economy in which that training is situated as a preparation for work. To think otherwise would be to mistake the training sector's harms for isolated failures rather than effects of relationships with larger material conditions of employment that organise and give them form.

Even while in employment, actors face conditions that differ sharply from standard labour protections. This is not to suggest that protections such as holiday pay, sick pay, union support, or conflict-resolution procedures are wholly absent, but that their practical force is often weakened by freelance employment, short production timelines, and the power imbalances of the sector. The wider arts work sector's bullying and harassment rates, identified by Anne-Marie Quigg as the highest level of workplace bullying recorded in any single employment sector as of 2010, continue to be substantiated by more recent research into abusive leadership and organisational failure in the arts (Nisbett, Walmsley, and McDowell 2025; Quigg 2011, xvi). Melissa Nisbett, Ben Walmsley, and Emma McDowell's study of cultural workers identifies more than harassment, bullying, intimidation, coercion and discrimination, but also the governance conditions that allow such behaviour to persist: such as weak reporting structures or complaint processes that frequently displace consequences onto victims while perpetrators remain in their posts (2025). Conflict-resolution mechanisms exist on paper, but in practice are constrained by compressed production timelines and the power imbalances of the sector (Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2020a; Nisbett, Walmsley, and McDowell 2025). Actors also routinely perform substantial unpaid labour outside their contracted work, including preparing self-tapes, learning sides for auditions, maintaining professional visibility online, travelling at personal expense for castings, and undertaking script study and rehearsal outside their paid hours (Jahoda, Murphy, and Woolard 2014; Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2020b). The prospects for a freshly graduated actor are bleak. Yet still a massive oversupply of acting talent enters the industry from training every year (as well as those entering the sector without training), despite the likelihood that so many will encounter these conditions.

The persistence of aspiring actors cannot be explained by labour-market conditions alone; they are simply too unfavourable. These conditions are not incidental

characteristics of acting work, but part of the organisation of labour for which training prepares students. The question, then, is not only why actors continue to enter such a precarious field, but how the field's conditions return to training as the ordinary terms of professional preparation. The pressures of acting work do not wait beyond the institution. They help organise what training asks students to accept, recognise and rehearse. In what follows, I contend that these processes rest upon an assemblage of violence; a somewhat broader conception of violence than that offered by any single theorist. I later name this 'embodied epistemic violence': the materially enforced process through which training imposes dominant forms of embodied knowledge, reducing students' capacities for realisation in their own lives and activity.

Actor training is approached here as part of a wider political economy of theatre and performance, where training is subsumed to capital and persistently organised around the interests of potential employers (Boyle 2017; OECD 2010, 52). Yet the analysis remains grounded in the real people who are subject to these harms. My engagement with actor training is both scholarly and experiential, as student, researcher, and trainer, and it is from within that entanglement that this analysis emerges.

Methodology: approach and origin

This article utilises a materialist and assemblage-based analysis, alongside a philosophy in performance orientation, to address how violence is organised, normalised, and reproduced through the political and economic structures of training (Buchanan 2021; Cull Ó Maoilearca 2020; Ginther 2023). Although I have encountered many of the practices discussed here, my experience cannot, and should not, be taken as representative of the field as a whole; it merely offered an originating entry point. This is not a move away from violence as lived experience, it is a necessary step in understanding how violence goes beyond individual encounters and becomes established/territorialised in institutional procedures, labour relations, and pedagogical norms.

In keeping with this orientation, I approach the territory of actor training as an assemblage: a multidimensional composite of relations between students, trainers, embodied dispositions, institutional procedures, and political/economic conditions that together organise labour and produce subjectivity. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and subsequent elaborations by John Protevi and Ian Buchanan, this approach understands training as a non-neutral educational environment that actively produces and establishes particular forms of relation (Buchanan 2021; Protevi 2024). Within this assemblage, violence is treated as a constitutive binding force that moves between its component parts, holding the defining relations of the assemblage in place and maintaining the territory in its most recognisable form (Pavoni and Tulumello 2024, 62–85).

Central to this analysis is the role of desire. As Buchanan argues, desire is integral to the organisation of assemblages, actively selecting and sustaining their components (2021, 55–84). This perspective enables analysis to move beyond questions of individual tolerance and instead examine how actor training is organised through desire as a productive force that attaches bodies to practices through its associated aspirations and promises of becoming. Even where conditions are precarious or harmful, desire

continues to animate participation, though never in some pure or freely unfolding form. Rather, it is captured, channelled, and territorialised through disciplinary practices, evaluative regimes, and the latent threat of sanction. Ideology and coercion are not external to desire but participate in its organisation of the actor training assemblage.

Theorising violence: threat, discipline, and the reproduction of training

Abuses in drama schools are well documented (Cavendish and Goldsbrough 2021; Fragkou 2022; Hemley 2020; Huryng 2023; Kanter 2023; Philip 2022; Treisman 2021; Walker and Heke 2022). While this article does not seek to diminish the experiences of those subject to such events, its focus is on the wider structures that permit these events to occur in the first place. To focus only on spectacular acts of misconduct risks mistaking the most overt manifestations of violence for its primary form, while overlooking the processes that organise and reproduce the conditions under which such acts occur (Galtung 1969, 168–70; Graeber 2012, 105–28; Žižek 2008, 9).

Synthesising Galtung's account of violence as the cause of the difference between actual and potential realisation with the Spinozian account of capacity developed through Deleuze and Massumi, violence can be understood here as that which influences a person or group so that their actual capacities for action and realisation are reduced to below their potential capacities (Galtung 1969, 168; Massumi in; Deleuze and Guattari 1987, xvii). Graeber intervenes to suggest that this influence cannot be treated as abstract; it is materially grounded and concrete (Graeber 2012, 105–28). Structures of violence are materially grounded in the threat of actual force: the institution's capacity to discipline and exclude.¹ Yet threat also works through interpretation. Relations founded on violence produce what Graeber calls 'lopsided structures of the imagination,' in which we are brought to perform the interpretive labour that allows institutions and authorities to function smoothly (2012, 112–13). Threat is therefore not merely epistemic, since it refers to concrete forms of force that can be enacted upon the body and its conditions of life. Its efficacy, however, depends upon knowledge and the learned recognition of consequence.

Spivak's account of epistemic violence extends this argument because the student's capacity for realisation is constrained not only by what training can materially enforce, but by the ways of knowing, valuing, and inhabiting the body that training imposes as legitimate (Peñafiel Loaiza and Spivak 2020). Drawing these perspectives together, I understand violence in actor training as embodied epistemic violence: the coercive imposition of dominant norms of knowing, feeling, valuing, and inhabiting the body through training's ordinary processes. Such violence intersects with the demands of professional employment and market forces, narrowing what students can become and, by extension, what they are willing to tolerate. These structures of violence are effective because they carry consequences that can be physically imposed, and because students must continually adjust themselves to the potential for those consequences. Violence, as conceptualised here, does not sit outside the institution as an occasional eruption of force, but helps ground the efficacy of the very structures through which training organises students' subjectivity. The epistemic dimension cannot be disregarded because threat does not only organise behaviour through fear of sanction; it also shapes what students come to accept as the terms of the work.

Training does not need to announce threat in order for threat to organise behaviour. If a comment on accent can be heard not only as technical advice but as a judgement on legitimacy, then the student is already learning how voice becomes attached to value. If a demand to alter hair, body, posture, or appearance is framed as professional preparation, then the student is learning how employability can be made to pass through embodied conformity. If an instruction to kiss or touch is treated as a demand of truth or commitment, then refusal may be felt through the possible consequences of being read as resistant to the training. The issue is not that each of these moments is identical, or that each produces the same kind of harm. It is that they take place within an apparatus where judgement and authority become difficult to separate. If disregarding a piece of feedback can lower a mark, damage a relationship with a trainer, or affect casting then an instruction that feels questionable² may carry the same pressure to comply. This is how the disciplinary apparatus contributes to the production of those conditions under which more spectacular forms of abuse can be endured as if they were ordinary demands of training, the threat of material force looms in the background.

More than just regulating behaviour, this apparatus works through processes of subjectivation and ideological interpellation, producing students as compliant subjects of their own commodification (Althusser 2001, 112, 118–19; Deleuze 2006, 81; King 2024, 269). Casting workshops position them in relation to the kind of actor, and worker, they are expected to become. Feedback shapes voice and body both on and off stage. And physical training and trainer commentary frequently directs them toward specific body types as being more desirable and professionally necessary than others (Luckett 2018). In Louis Althusser's language, they are *hailed* into political relationships between themselves, training and the employment territory, and in recognising themselves within those ties become primed for recruitment into an industry structured by oversupply, precarity, and the continual reproduction of an industrial reserve army. That is, the body of unemployed or precariously employed workers produced by capitalism who remain available as a flexible labour supply, whose very existence applies downward pressure on wages and ensures disciplinary consequences to the employed through the threat of readily available replacement (Chow 2014, 131; Marx 1976, 784).

Labour-market violence: precarity, oversupply, and employability

If actor training is understood, as it so often is, as preparation for work, then the labour conditions for which it prepares them do not remain external to an analysis of violence. Alison Hodge asserts that the purpose of actor training is 'to prepare the actor for work', while Ross Prior similarly considers training in relation to the future needs of the industry rather than the performer (Hodge 2010, 2; Prior 2012, xxii). In the case of theatre, Shane Boyle makes the case that theatrical work can, and often does, conform to the capitalist mode of production and is therefore frequently structured by the exploitation of labour power: not because performance produces a conventional material commodity, but because theatre gives a capitalist social form to performance labour (Boyle 2017).

Although this article's institutional focus remains actor training (as it has been historically shaped by conservatoire models that privilege theatre), the labour horizon toward which such training is oriented is not confined to theatre alone. Training

institutions also orient students toward the commercial worlds of film, television, and streaming. Screen production is itself marked by freelance labour, self-organisation, exploitation, and commodification, with Gillian Ursell arguing that success in UK television work involves the commodification not only of labour power but also of one's own personality and aesthetic creativity (Ursell 2000). Broderick Chow's account is useful here because it shows how actors across theatre, film, television and related creative industries, connect their labour conditions to self-management and the looming presence of the industrial reserve army (Chow 2014, 131; Marx 1976, 784). Given the obvious organisational parallels, we can say that actor training (at least within these conservatoire models) prepares students for the work of acting while also preparing them for the market demands and conditions through which the labour market operates. The economic reality of the acting profession is therefore not an external context waiting beyond graduation, but an organising future potential already present within training itself.

The world of work for which actor training prepares students is marked by a lack of employment opportunities. There are far more aspiring actors than there are opportunities for sustained employment. It's not a new condition, this imbalance has long been a defining condition of creative labour (Menger 2001; Sholette 2017). And yet, at the same time, the organisation of that imbalance has been subject to internal reconfiguration. Training provisions have continued to proliferate across higher education, private tuition, and boutique conservatoire-style programmes (such as accelerated degrees, part-time diplomas, and other modes of delivery supplied by independent providers), even as stable employment opportunities have remained scarce or declined (Hartley 2020; Wilkie 2015). The problem, then, is that training continues to feed labour into a field already structured by discontinuity, heightened competition, and the general disposability of the worker even as the visibility of the sector's labour imbalance becomes more pronounced. There is heightened demand for training and therefore the market responds to provide a heightened supply as an aspect of higher education's conformity to market logics (Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009, 277–87; Naidoo and Williams 2014, 36–52). As both Peter Zazzali and Ian Wilkie suggest in different ways, institutional actor training is increasingly misaligned with the realities of the labour market it claims to serve (Wilkie 2015; Zazzali 2016). It is a violent mismatch, in that the costs of that misalignment are borne by students and graduates through forces of constraint upon their potential (such as debt and the lack of opportunity to practice). If violence is understood in terms of the gap between the potential and the actual, then these labour conditions are violent specifically because they systematically reduce the actor's capacity to realise themselves in the very activity for which they have been trained, rendering cultivated expertise materially unusable except in those rare and precarious moments wherein rarity itself informs the perceived value of these opportunities.

Rarity of opportunity feeds back into the market logic of training as preparation for those opportunities, increasing demand for training, which increases supply of training opportunities and so on (Menger 1999, 541–74; 2006, 765–811; Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009, 277–87; Wilkie 2015, 40–41).

Labour oversupply, more than being an unfortunate imbalance between aspiration and opportunity, is a condition with clear utility for employers. As the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development notes, employer interests are not necessarily

aligned with those of students or society, and employers may actively benefit from an oversupply of skills where this places downward pressure on wages (OECD 2010, 52). Pierre-Michel Menger similarly describes a labour market characterised by discontinuous employment, repeated alternations between work and unemployment, and a heavy dependence on 'learning on the job,' such that initial training becomes more of an 'imperfect filtering device' than a secure route into stable employment (Menger 2006, 766). The Big Freelancer Survey 2024 gives contemporary UK evidence for this condition: 33.6% of respondents reported hourly earnings below the 2022–23 National Living Wage, 46.5% reported earnings below the London Living Wage, 64.4% felt quite or very insecure about their work, and 27% said they were considering leaving or planning to leave the sector (Freelancers Make Theatre Work 2024, 6–9). According to assemblage theory, we need to ask more than just what actor training contains; we need to ask what it brings into being, and what kinds of subject are formed through its relations. Training participates in the formation of subjects who learn to experience the pressures of the looming labour market as part of becoming professional. The investment demanded by training is formative as well as financial. It shapes how far responsibility for survival amidst unfavourable conditions is made to belong to them.

Key is that these conditions don't suddenly kick in after graduation. They are already rehearsed within training itself. Students are taught technique; but training also increasingly places value on forms of self-management and emotional resilience that align closely with the demands of contemporary creative labour (Chow 2014, 131–43; Taylor 2016, 114–32). Students learn how to remain legible and desirable to potential employers. In my own practice as an actor trainer, this is often made problematically explicit through discussions of professional expectations and the perceived value of being 'easy to work with,' a formulation that condenses broader demands for compliance in ways that make self-regulation appear as a kind of professional virtue. Training doesn't just prepare students for labour-market violence in the abstract; it asks them to practise living with it as part of actor training's hidden curriculum (Jackson 1990; Peck 2017, 112–49). The self-management of independent study is an interesting example here: course specifications may outline expected hours of independent work, but the actual intensity of that labour is often left to students to regulate for themselves. Such regulation is, however, difficult to judge independently because the criteria for success in actor training is rarely objective or fixed. A common theme that has arisen in my discussions with current students is that they tend to work until they feel they have 'got it,' but where that remains difficult to judge, effort is easily extended into the even vaguer demand to keep going until one is satisfied (with responsibility for these determinations resting solely with the student). Tasks rarely come with clear limits on how much effort should be invested (effort being understandably difficult to quantify), and students, as differently situated individuals, police these demands unevenly under strong ideological pressure. The expectation that students will undertake substantial work beyond contact hours and absorb uncertainty as part of ordinary professional life is normalised before employment has even begun, under an ideological logic that equates effort with eventual success and thereby obscures the structural conditions that make such success scarce.

This is especially visible in relation to affective labour. Arlie Hochschild's 'feeling rules' (the social guidelines that dictate what we are supposed to feel, how intensely we should feel it, and for how long, in any given situation) shows how feeling

becomes organised, regulated, and made appropriate to particular forms of work (Hochschild 2012, 18–19, 56–57). This can be read alongside Jackson's account of the hidden curriculum. For Jackson, schooling doesn't only transmit the official curriculum, it also teaches students how to 'live within crowds' and conform to institutional power (Jackson 1990, 33–35). Feeling rules are, therefore, more than just free-floating psychological norms. They are territorialised through specific social and institutional arrangements, and reterritorialised through the repeated practices of sanction and reward enacted according to the expectations of particular organisations.

Actor training doesn't only teach technique, it also teaches students how to display feeling, regulate feeling, and judge the appropriateness of feeling within particular contexts and the boundaries of those contexts are, given the relationship between work and selfhood in acting, inherently ambiguous. If acting requires students to work with presentable and authentic feeling then the institutional regulation of the capacity to do so can appear as simply the development of craft with its disciplinary dimensions obscured. Under conditions where the boundaries of what counts as 'enough' remain unclear; more effort, more vulnerability, and more endurance, can become coded as signs of professional commitment. Affective labour and self-intensified work become mutually reinforcing and students learn to manage their selves as a resource for performance while also adapting their selves to institutional expectations of resilience and employability. Violence does not lie in affective labour as such but in the ways it becomes organised through disciplined and territorialised 'feeling rules' that subjectivise the worker into a service to professional production. Read through Galtung's terms, the harm lies in the reduction of capacity to realise oneself within the very processes and products for which one is being trained (Galtung 1969, 168; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011).

These ethical pressures become especially clear in relation to intimacy work and touch-based training. Moor argues that consent-based actor training must address not only intimate work in terms of physical contact, but also in power differentials, student agency, challenging material, and practices of de-rolling. Read through the present argument, such protocols do not sit outside labour politics, because they name the conditions under which students are asked to make the body available for future work (Moor 2023, 86–102). Kapadocha's account of tactile renegotiation similarly suggests that touch in actor training cannot be treated as a neutral technical tool, because physical contact reorganises the relation between self and other; when that relation is assumed rather than negotiated, the student's embodied difference and capacity for distantiation can be overwritten in the name of training (Kapadocha 2023, 201–215).

What is displaced onto the individual is more than responsibility for their own employment; it is responsibility for absorbing the risks attached to becoming employable at all, from the material costs of training (e.g. debt) to the possibility that one's very selfhood will be read in relation to perceived market demands (such as age, race, or height). Student debt is one clear mechanism through which higher education transfers risk from institutions and states onto individuals, but it forms part of a wider pattern in which the costs of uncertainty are unevenly individualised (Callender and Mason 2017; Glater 2015). Therefore, the same demand to remain professionally legible may register for one student as difficult but manageable, while for another it becomes an intensified and debilitating pressure.

A related intensification is visible in the position of international students and migrant actors. International students are often required to navigate employability through visa conditions, restricted access to work opportunities, and the pressure to convert training into employment within administratively constrained time-frames (Gopal 2022; UKCISA/LSE 2025). A fuller analysis of this position sits outside the remit of this article, but it sharpens the central point: the same demands for flexible self-management do not land equally when training is attached to the possibility that graduate employability may be interrupted by the border.

The normality of unpaid work is another condition that sharpens unevenness. It's not just an economic burden; it's a political one. In a labour market structured by heightened competition and fragmented short-term employment, unpaid opportunities are frequently taken up in order to build experience and relationships rather than being seen as something to be collectively resisted. Nathalie Delorme argues that unpaid acting work is partly sustained by the hope of enhancing future prospects and the fear that 'if [I] don't take the opportunity someone else will' (Delorme 2016, 104–05). Sabina Siebert and Fiona Wilson similarly argue that unpaid work in the creative industries cannot be understood only through the social-capital benefits it may offer to individuals, because it also affects those excluded from it and those displaced by it (Siebert and Wilson 2013, 711–12). Although it may be first conceived of as an individual strategy by the actor it does not remain so. Once normalised, it reshapes the conditions under which others can refuse. It's another vicious circle: the more workers accept unpaid labour to strengthen their chances within an overcrowded field, the weaker the practical force of paid-work norms and union standards become; and the weaker those standards appear, the more normal it becomes to treat unpaid work as a necessary investment. This dynamic is visible in acting work specifically: Equity noted that nearly half of its members had worked for no pay in 2013, illustrating the difficulty of sustaining collective bargaining when members are willing, or compelled, to break ranks (Equity 2014, 4). In an already precarious organisation of labour, collective resistance is further undercut by the very insecurity it would need to overcome. The political and economic exclusivity of the industry is magnified as those least able to absorb unpaid opportunities and prolonged uncertainty are placed at a structural disadvantage.

The point extends beyond unpaid labour narrowly conceived. Actors are not only asked to work without pay, absorbing audition and continuous training costs; they are also increasingly addressed as responsible for producing the conditions of their own employment. Zazzali notes that entrepreneurialism has become a significant learning outcome in actor training, with some programmes emphasising independent projects and knowledge of the business and its means of production (Zazzali 2018, 175–89). Yet this entrepreneurial ideal can itself become another mode of risk transfer where actors are encouraged to create work without training necessarily supplying the production skills needed to make that responsibility materially viable. The result is a further displacement of responsibility onto the worker, who must remain employable within a precarious field while also helping to generate the opportunities through which employability might be realised at all.

Debt and compliance: the cost of enduring training

Debt gives actor training's violence a material form that continues beyond the period of study and across social populations. As Deleuze remarks, 'Man is no longer man enclosed, but man in debt' and in the context of actor training, this reminds us that students don't just accumulate loans at the financial level and then pay them off: debt names a wider condition in which subjects are increasingly governed through obligation (Deleuze 2017, para. 11). Debt establishes itself here as a coercive infrastructure that redistributes risk top-down, onto individuals, and narrows their capacity to refuse harmful conditions. Writing in an Australian context, Gabrielle Metcalf and Andrew Lewis argue that the scarcity of stable employment makes it difficult for acting graduates to ever fully repay the debt accrued through a three-year degree, rendering indebtedness a defining feature of professional formation (Metcalf and Lewis 2020). Jonathan Glater also describes student debt as a mechanism of risk transfer, producing a culture where economic insecurity is borne by the individual rather than the organisation or the State (Glater 2015).

Ryan Evely Gildersleeve theorises the effects of debt beyond financial consideration, arguing that in debt-based education systems indebtedness functions as a mode of subject formation. Debt produces the 'indebted student' as a social and institutional type (Gildersleeve 2017, 54–55). This sits productively alongside Deleuze's account of the indebted subject in the societies of control, where subjectivation operates less through enclosure than through continual obligation and modulation. As Gildersleeve puts it, 'the subjectivation of students is made possible only via the debt economy, as the radically neoliberal version of late capitalism has become the ubiquitous epistemic technology of contemporary academe' (54). From this account, debt extends beyond repayment into the social relations through which training is rendered meaningful. Training can become something one 'owes,' and this can translate into a kind of loyalty towards the components of the training assemblage (such as specific techniques or trainers) through which one's professional identity is legitimised and made readable within a symbolic capital economy. Obligation gathers around the training, making compliance easier and critique harder. 'If history shows anything, it is that there's no better way to justify relations founded on violence, to make such relations seem moral, than by reframing them in the language of debt' (Graeber 2011, 5). The distance such framings of obligation produces between workers, their work, and their selves brings us to the concept of alienation.

Alienation and self-production: training the actor for work

Here, alienation shouldn't be understood as a subjective feeling of disconnect, but as an objective social relation (Sayers 2011, x–xii, 8–9). Following Rahel Jaeggi, the actor's relation to their own activity can become disturbed: their capacities and the products of their work are experienced through structures of value and obligation that stand apart from their selves, rather than simply as their own (Jaeggi 2014, 12–14). In actor training, this matters with particular force because what is cultivated is not an external tool or product, it's the actor's own body and selfhood. A paradox is produced. Training develops labour power that the actor can neither reliably realise nor retain on their own terms. Even when work is

secured, the conditions of its activity and realisation remain externally organised by others (such as training institutions or employers). Alienation, therefore, doesn't only apply to the scarcity of work, it's embodied. Actors confront these conditions as something to be assessed and adapted to in response to institutional and industrial demands. It's not a circumstance unique to acting; all forms of labour (within the capitalist circuit of production) arguably require workers to manage and adapt embodied capacities. In acting, however, this relation is unusually explicit because actors are the very materials through which labour is recognised and sold.

Actor training can, based on commonly established ideas and assumptions, be understood as a form of work on the self. The actor's primary tool is their self; labour is performed through the body and 'self-use' has historically been treated as a cornerstone of the discipline (Clay 1972). Contemporary programme specifications continue to institutionalise this logic. Guildhall's BA Acting specification describes training through 'acting from self,' embodiment, reflective practice, self-led work, industry preparation, online presence, self-taping, professional visibility, and one's own responsibility for career development (Guildhall School of Music & Drama 2025, 6, 14–18, 72–74, 90–92). Actors advertise themselves to potential employers through appearance, body type, accent, behaviour, and the management of affect; they also learn to perform the part of the actor-in-search-of-work in everyday life as well as the roles they are hired to represent. Casting, as Kirstin Smith argues, is a form of 'identity work' in which the actor materialises through embodied signs that are circulated and disciplined as part of the everyday labour of being castable (Smith 2020, 36–45). This market-facing work on the self has its pedagogical counterpart within training. If casting organises the actor's characteristics of self as signs to be read by others, acting technique often organises personal experience as material to be worked upon. Hetzler notes that, despite the 'dangerous reputation' attached to emotion memory, many acting teachers continue to include emotion-memory exercises in their training, including practices that ask actors to draw on emotional memories, past traumas, substitutions and inner objects in their work (Hetzler 2020, 1–2).

'Self-use' has therefore not disappeared from actor training, even where contemporary critique has complicated any simple notion that the self can be mined safely or innocently for creative truth. The idea that one could act without drawing on self at all may indeed be a kind of impossibility, given the nature of the work. Yet, under the ideological force of neoliberal individualism, these demands are easily recoded as matters of personal responsibility, making the boundaries between what is possible and what is ethical somewhat murky. The burden of success or failure is deferred onto the individual as a choosing, self-managing subject, required to treat the self as a site of continual investment (Brown 2015, 21–24; Davies and Bansel 2007, 252–53). Any failure here is more readily returned to the individual as a failure of resilience or insufficient self-investment. Structural instability is thereby reconfigured and internalised as a demand for greater efforts. Training works to normalise the structures one is being prepared for. Like trying to fit a square shape into a circle hole in a child's toy; training turns its students into economic circles, it rarely works to change the shape of the hole.

Differential violence and uneven exposure

As Dave O'Brien notes, theatre and the performing arts often present themselves as progressive and inclusive, yet in practice remain structurally organised through exclusion (O'Brien 2020, 242). Actor training mirrors this contradiction. It frequently speaks the language of openness and transformation while reproducing unequal distributions of legitimacy and desirability through the institutional mechanisms and sectoral biases that shape its processes. O'Brien's account of theatre's classed, raced, and gendered exclusions shows how a sector that claims to represent society can nevertheless reproduce social inequality, while Evi Stamatidou's Bourdieusian analysis of actor training helps explain how habitus, embodied characteristics, and symbolic capital shape what becomes recognisable as talent or professional legitimacy (242–43; Stamatidou 2022, 98–103). Such violence is often symbolic rather than spectacular, it operates through judgements that appear pedagogically neutral, while reproducing hierarchies that are misrecognised as legitimate (Bourdieu 1991, 23–25). These violences are mediated through the unequal conditions under which students are recognised and prepared for employment. Differential violence, then, is not a secondary political layer added onto the economic conditions of training, but one of the ways those conditions are lived and made to appear ordinary.

If actor training is understood as a form of education, symbolic violence becomes a way of naming how pedagogical authority can reproduce social hierarchy without appearing as violence at all. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron define certain kinds of pedagogic action as symbolic violence insofar as they impose meanings as legitimate while concealing the power relations that make this imposition possible (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, 4–5). Pedagogic authority then enables this imposition to appear as a legitimate formation rather than domination, because the authority of the pedagogic relation masks the arbitrariness of what is valued (11–14, 20–23). In actor training, this authority operates through differential processes of recognition, with some individual characteristics being more readily read as desirable because they sit closer to the field's dominant norms of legitimacy. This need not happen consciously, and trainers' feedback can function as social judgement without even being named as such. Students therefore may not learn only to perform, but to anticipate how their own embodied signs are likely to be valued, correcting or withholding aspects of themselves before correction is even given. The risk here is that unequal social valuations may enter training as ordinary pedagogical adjustments, becoming difficult to distinguish from professionalism or care in the process. The way these adjustments become imposed through their relations to particular forms of knowledge bears consideration.

Since responses to the murder of George Floyd, the representational terrain into which actors are trained has changed, but asymmetrically across theatre and screen. In screen contexts, Lin, Yang, and Han argue that Black Lives Matter mitigated negative audience responses to increased racial minority casting in film series (though more likely suggesting a shift in the evaluative conditions surrounding screen representation rather than the disappearance of racialised judgement itself) (Lin, Yang, and Han 2023). UK television data also indicate measurable changes in representation, with Creative Diversity Network reporting increases in on-screen and off-screen contributions by people from global majority backgrounds between 2019/20 and 2022/23 (2024). These shifts matter because

they show that audience expectation, casting value and institutional response can be altered by political pressure.

Theatre also shows signs of movement, but the evidence is more fragmented and the transformation less settled. Sigal and Rowson's research into post-pandemic British theatre notes progress around representation, equality, diversity and inclusion, while the Black British Theatre Awards' Act for Action Report records continuing barriers for Black theatre professionals on stage and off stage (Black British Theatre Awards 2024; Sigal and Rowson 2024). Brooks similarly reflects that there has been progress since Black Lives Matter, but that the labour of change is still often left to Black theatre makers themselves (Brooks 2025). Theatre's slower and more contested transformation is therefore not only a question of who is cast, commissioned or employed, but of the audience and institutional formations that shape what kinds of work are imagined as viable. Arts Council England data reported in *The Stage* found that 93% of National Portfolio Organisation theatre audiences in 2020/21 were white (Masso 2022). Read through Bourdieu, audience habitus does not simply describe who attends theatre; it helps shape what is produced, who is imagined as a viable performer, and which stories, bodies, voices and cultural references are treated as legible or commercially sustainable. Audience formation therefore feeds back into production, becoming part of the field's casting, programming and commissioning conditions.

This distinction between theatre and screen work matters because actor training sits between these employment pathways. Even where institutional training retains theatre-centred pedagogical inheritances, it prepares students for theatre, screen and related forms of performance labour. It therefore has to respond to fields whose conditions of recognition may be shifting at different speeds. Screen's more measurable changes may widen the imaginative and industrial conditions under which decolonising practice can be conceptualised. Theatre's slower transformation, by contrast, shows why decolonisation cannot remain only a representational demand placed on casting, programming or visibility. It must also be carried into the pedagogical and material organisation of training, including the ways students are taught what counts as professional, castable, legible and valuable, and into the audience-forming practices through which institutions shape who theatre is imagined to address.

Recent accounts of drama training suggest that this internal language has begun to shift. In her 2022 keynote address to *The Stage's Future of Theatre* conference, Josette Bushell-Mingo argues that drama training can no longer be organised around the authority of a single teacher who holds the final word, but must instead be developed through continuous dialogue with students (Bushell-Mingo 2022). In voice training, McAllister-Viel and Brown similarly argue that decolonising the curriculum requires an epistemological shift in which the lived experiences of students and tutors become part of the co-authorship of training (McAllister-Viel and Brown 2024). These interventions reveal a training territory responding to altered political and industrial pressures by bringing established decolonial concerns with authority, knowledge, curriculum and co-creation more explicitly into the organisation of actor training.

The difficulty is that the movement from reformist language to institutional practice is constrained by the multiple, and sometimes contradictory, pathways into which actor training funnels its students. Training prepares actors for theatre, screen and related

forms of performance labour, but these fields are not changing at the same speed or according to the same demands. This compounds the difficulty of reform within training, which is already shaped by wider legal, social, cultural, economic, temporal and political structures. Post-George Floyd interventions therefore demonstrate that actor training and its surrounding industries are changeable, but also that change is difficult to actualise. The rhetoric of reform makes other forms of training thinkable but does not by itself transform the material conditions through which training and labour are organised.

In its more familiar formulation, following Gayatri Spivak, epistemic violence names the imposition of dominant systems of knowledge across boundaries in ways that overwrite, displace, or delegitimise existing ways of knowing (Peñafiel Loaiza and Spivak 2020). Read in these terms, the issue in actor training goes beyond curriculum content into how certain knowledges install themselves as the correct or universal terms of practice and at the cost this presents to other potential knowings. Stamatiou suggests that acting offers emerge through the embodied dispositions of the trainee (2022, 100–103). Pedagogical intervention is therefore never only technical. It mobilises or attempts to reshape those dispositions through choices around text, repertoire, bodily and vocal norms, professionalism, and what counts as a truthful or appropriate response as understood by the individual and their relationship with the world. These normative alignments can't just be reduced to established categories of difference, they also arise from the irreducible non-coincidence between one embodied subject and another. No trainer can fully know the assemblage of experiences, dispositions, and meanings that a student brings into the room, yet training repeatedly risks treating the trainer's own situated understanding as if it were objective and universal (Kapsali 2014, 103).

Noting epistemic violence as the imposition of particular forms of knowledge across borders, and extending our conception of borders to include epistemes beyond the geographical, additional modes of imposition are revealed in practice. Lazlo Pearlman and Deirdre McLaughlin offer one clear example of this process in their discussion of a Meisner classroom encounter, where a trainer's instruction to a male student to kiss a female student 'if he wanted to' reimposed heteronormative gender ideology in the very moment the technique purported to free instinct and truthful response (Pearlman and McLaughlin 2020, 310). What appears as permission to follow impulse is, in fact, narrowed by the prior installation of dominant norms as the only intelligible form that impulse can take. Zoë Glen's work on autistic students in conservatoire training offers another example: where tutors equate 'truthful' performance with neurotypical modes of emotional expression, autistic students may find their own truthful offers treated as invalid or of lower quality, while dominant modes of legibility install themselves as the correct way to feel and perform (Glen 2025, 119, 122–23). Working from these groundings we note that the epistemic dimensions of differential violence lie definitionally in the unequal conditions under which students are aligned with dominant forms of knowledge and their associated assumptions. One student may therefore find themselves more able to identify themselves in correction and feedback than another, for whom the process will territorialise them into potentially unrecognisable formations.

These pedagogical and institutional violences take their bearings from the wider industry horizon to which training is oriented because they are constructed to respond to a 'preparation for work'. Under capitalist conditions, theatre and

performance industries are compelled to anticipate, and appease audience desire, privileging those characterisations (and, under the demands for authenticity, ‘characteristics’) thought most likely to secure appeal, and financial return. Within training, the trainer is often drawn into the role of playing audience-at-large, adjudicating what will read, what will feel truthful, and what will be legible according to anticipated industry and audience expectations. In doing so, pedagogy risks importing those broader norms directly into the room, preparing students for an unequal field, but also actively rehearsing its terms of recognition. The sector’s violence therefore doesn’t just become tangible in exclusion at the intersection of training and industry, but in the way anticipated audience desire and capitalist value already shape what kinds of actors training is able, or willing, to recognise as having viable futures.

Professionalism, endurance, and making harm meaningful

The figure of the suffering artist is often treated as a cultural cliché, but it is also a durable social imaginary through which artistic identity is organised. As Ana Alacovska and Dan Kärreman argue, creative workers may feel compelled to perform negative, ‘tortured and despondent’ identity work in order to sustain a positive sense of artistic self, while Katerina Ginis, Stephanie Stewart, and Leonie Kronborg identify the ‘tortured artist’ myth more broadly as the idea that suffering is a prerequisite for creativity (Alacovska and Kärreman 2023, 961; Ginis, Stewart, and Kronborg 2022, 431). Read in these terms, suffering becomes something that has been constructed in the social imaginary to signify seriousness, authenticity, depth, and vocation. Within actor training, this remains poignant because the potential harms produced by the assemblage can be affectively recoded through this trope as signs that one is becoming an artist in the proper sense, rather than as reasons to refuse the terms under which that becoming is organised.

The suffering artist trope is ideologically effective precisely because it does not operate simply as a belief about art. As John Protevi argues, ideology isn’t just a ‘mere belief’ but a shared production of ways of perceiving, feeling, and valuing the world, such that objects, actions, and situations appear with characteristic affective tones and thereby contribute to the reproduction of social life (Protevi 2019, ch.5, ‘What Is Ideology Supposed to Explain?’, para.1–2). Read in these terms, the suffering artist myth is more of a practical organisation of how pain is lived than it is a romantic description of pain after the fact. As such, precarity can appear as proof of seriousness, unpaid labour as commitment, correction as growth, debt as investment, and exhaustion as evidence that one is giving oneself fully to the work (Protevi 2019, ch.5, ‘Can We Save Ideology by Including Affect?’, para.4–6). Lived in this way, the injuries of the assemblage are repeatedly recoded as signs that one is becoming an artist in the ‘proper’ sense. What the assemblage produces as obstacles are re-presented as the very means by which those obstacles are to be overcome.

If the suffering artist trope has such force, it is because ideology does not operate only at the level of what is said or believed, but through what is practiced, repeated, and inhabited. As offered by Slavoj Žižek, ideology persists in the doing, the ordinary rituals through which subjects live their reality as meaningful (Žižek 1989, 33–35). Actor

training is especially susceptible to this because acting is itself a practice of repetition, embodiment, and rehearsal. Its values are enacted through exercises, correction, self-presentation, endurance, and the continual return to the body as the site through which legitimacy must be produced. The suffering artist, then, is not just a figure of cultural mythology. It's an ideological practice, a role inhabited, embodied and played, through which the violences of training are rendered meaningful, even desirable, and therefore habitual. Actor training persists, not despite violence, but (at least partially) through those forms of violence that are practiced as artistic becoming.

Conclusion: violence, political economy, and the persistence of actor training

This article has argued that violence in actor training should not be flattened to a consideration of spectacular acts of misconduct alone, nor to isolated failures of pedagogy or institutional care alone. Rather, violence is constitutive of the training assemblage itself: structural, politically differential, disciplinary, economic, and knowledge-dependent, reproduced through the everyday organisation of legitimacy and aspiration within labour. The point is not that every spectacular act of misconduct is reducible to structural conditions, but that such acts become more intelligible once situated within an assemblage where the ordinary organisation of the territory already distributes vulnerability, legitimises coercion, and narrows the conditions under which refusal becomes possible. Actor training persists, then, not despite violence, but partly through forms of violence that are organised and lived. Violence holds the assemblage together (Pavoni and Tulumello 2024, 62).

Just as violence cannot be adequately addressed through a single-axis account of positionality, so too it cannot be addressed through a single-axis account of delivery: not at the level of technique alone, not through more appropriate contextualisation alone, not through pedagogical adjustment alone, nor through institutional reform alone. A narrow focus on any one site of intervention risks missing the wider configuration through which violence is reproduced across labour conditions, institutional structures, pedagogical relations, and embodied norms. The dynamics traced here return us to embodied epistemic violence, not as a separate category of harm added to structural, economic, or disciplinary violence, but as the embodied mode through which those violences are made difficult to recognise as violence at all. Confronting violence in actor training (and potentially other sites) is a larger process than challenging abuse and attempting to resist poor practice. It is a collective project; we are all entangled within its flows and forces. What we must reckon with, all together, is the wider assemblage of conditions through which training reproduces itself, its potential futures, and the unequal field to which it remains persistently orientated.

This is why reform cannot be limited to the internal culture of training alone. De Bernard et al. argue that higher education institutions play a continuing role in theatre workers' careers, functioning not only as sites of training but as gateways to networks, professional visibility, paid work and later portfolio employment (De Bernard et al. 2024). Actor training is therefore not outside the labour ecology it prepares students to enter; it is one of the mechanisms through which that ecology is organised and reproduced. To address violence in actor training, then, is not only to make classrooms safer or

institutions more accountable, though both are necessary. It is also to ask what kinds of workers training produces, what forms of labour it prepares them to endure, and what more sustainable creative careers might require from the institutions that claim to prepare students for professional life.

Notes

1. You have to extend this realisation to its ultimate extent to appreciate the force at work. Drama schools are not public spaces and once a student has been excluded, they have no legal right to occupy the space. We all know on an unconscious level that if we refuse to leave when requested we can be physically removed by the authorities.
2. Such as 'take off your clothes' (Hurynag 2023)

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