

***Playing for Real: Actors on Playing Real People*, edited By Tom Cantrell and Mary Luckhurst (UK: Palgrave Macmillan 2010)**

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This collection of interviews of actors who have played 'real people' on stage and screen, edited by Tom Cantrell and Mary Luckhurst, comes out of some preliminary research for a larger project which Luckhurst is currently undertaking. One feels that, keeping in mind a continuing public interest in actors and acting, the opportunity to present the words of internationally known actors such as Ian McKellen, Simon Callow and Jeremy Irons, was a publishing opportunity too good to miss and, as such, this book should find its audience amongst a general readership and undergraduate students. Cantrell and Luckhurst, perhaps in deference to their ongoing work, have allowed this collection to wear its theory lightly choosing instead to 'let the interviews stand because we would have needed to conduct many more interviews to make informed theoretical assertions' (3). Nonetheless, they do use three rubrics to organise their approach to the subject – "Researching the part", "Acting strategies" and "Performer and audience" – and these underpin the questions they ask.

By allowing their interviewees to speak freely in response to gently directed questioning, Cantrell and Luckhurst are able to evoke several insights into their processes. These range from Jeremy Irons' reflecting on his awareness of the limits of his celebrity when portraying Harold Macmillan ('One thing I discovered is that Jeremy Irons doesn't do bad teeth! I thought about it [...] but I decided against it' (88)) to Siân Phillips' delightfully idiosyncratic obsession with wigs ('I worked quite hard on the wig. I'm a firm believer in wigs. I have a marvellous wig-maker Paul, and he managed to get that strange loopy hair that [Virginia Woolf] had' (138)). In fact, wigs emerge frequently as a theme amongst the interviewees. Beneath this seemingly banal concern with superficialities, the actors in this collection wrestle with ideas of "impersonating" versus "inhabiting" a character, with several revealing a nuanced awareness of when prostheses aid their process and when they inhibit it.

Nearly all of the actors interviewed were alert to the importance of their characters' appearances with many noting the different requirements of film and theatre – the former generally requiring greater verisimilitude than the latter – and the importance of capturing the “iconic” qualities of certain characters. Timothy West, who played Winston Churchill twice for television, commented that the ‘enormously elaborate make-up process’ used in the first television production ‘made me look as though I was wearing a mask’, whereas he was much happier in the second series which made ‘a few key gestures towards the visual image. The cigar is important as is the blue-spotted bow-tie, various hats were significant [...]’ (154). For Roger Allam who played Hitler, it was Hitler’s “mask” – hair, eyebrows, eyes, moustache – that was ‘integral to Hitler’s public persona’ and it needed to be represented because, as Allam observed, Hitler was a character who came with ‘a set of iconic visual characteristics and physical mannerisms’ (29).

To the ancient Greek sophist, Lesbonax of Mytilene, pantomimes were “manual philosophers” and this is readily apparent in this collection. Ian McKellen, who also played Hitler, observed film footage that revealed a spinal problem that he ‘was constantly straining against [...] in the way he walks’ (101). Elena Roger also used film footage of Eva Peron giving speeches and observed

there was something strange with her hands, she held her fingers at a certain angle, there was tension in them’ [...] I wanted to understand the particular strength and energy which would make someone hold their fingers like that. What mattered was to understand her physicality, copying her was not the point. (148)

In contrast, Siân Phillips “laboriously” copied from film Marlene Dietrich’s mannerisms and vocal phrasing in her cabaret performances in order to reproduce these exactly, a process she compared to Samuel Beckett’s “mechanical” direction of her in *Eh Joe*. The more she did it, the ‘mechanical work suddenly became real, became personal, it was very strange [...] the same happened with Marlene, the external, the minute details one worked on [...] suddenly it all came together and one [felt] like someone else’ (140).

For readers who are interested in the acting process, this survey of British actors talking about their approaches to a role is a good primary resource. I was less convinced, however, by the strength of its premise, that there is something unique about playing a living person or a person who had once lived. After acknowledging the need to create some resemblance to the person (or not), and being aware of portraying a living or recently deceased person responsibly, all the actors in this collection felt their primary job was to represent the person in the script in the way that the playwright had intended it. In other words, their job portraying a “real” person was little different to playing a fictional character because in both cases they were still dealing with a playwright’s constructs. As Eileen Atkins comments, researching a “real” person is useful only to a point and then ‘you have to let some of your favourite things about the person go, you can’t bring them in. You can’t argue too much with the writer, because you accepted the script in the first place and that is what you have to work with’ (36). Similarly, Ian McKellen found that it was not “practical” to make T.E. Lawrence’s homosexuality ‘too explicit in the script’ because ‘the writer wasn’t particularly interested in that angle’ (102).

Jeremy Irons was alert to the nexus of actor and role, which the Prague Structuralists defined as the Stage Figure, and McKellen acknowledged this also in his discussion about portraying the film director James Whale: ‘I looked like Ian McKellen playing James Whale. That is what I am when I’m playing anything’ (100). For McKellen, an actor who plays any role, ‘real” or not, is just that, someone impersonating another even if that other person is one’s self, an experience McKellen had in an episode of Ricky Gervais’ *Extras*. It is all about choices, McKellen comments “you” are ‘not being yourself’ [but] [...] are being a version of yourself. That is acting [...]’ (107). Acting problematises ontological definitions so that once a character is staged, even if the person plays him or herself, the presentational reality of the performance is foregrounded. Albert Speer at Nuremberg is performing, as is the actor playing Albert Speer at Nuremberg; each is ‘real’, but ontologically different.

Playing for Real is a teaser for the work to come and it seems that the purpose of this collection is to provide the interviewees with space to express their views on playing

“real” people. As Luckhurst intends to publish further on this, I hope that she begins to problematise ideas of the “real” as some of her more astute respondents begin to do. For example: what is the relationship between reality and fiction for a fictional entity modelled on a “real” person (or an amalgam of several people), or for a character representing a “real” person acting in ways conjectured by the playwright? How does one account for parodic depictions in which the characteristics of a “real” person are exaggerated? What role does an audience have in making it “real” and how? How do actors from non-British performing traditions approach the task? I have no doubt Luckhurst is already considering these questions and more and I look forward to reading her future monograph.

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