In on the Act

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Adam Macaulay
DON’T TELL ME, SHOW ME:
DIRECTORS TALK ABOUT ACTING
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In the movie The Producers (now a musical), Gene
Wilder accuses Zero Mostel of treating actors like ani-
mals. ‘Have you ever seen an actor eat?’ is Mostel’s pithy
reply. There is a truth buried in this joke: eating can be
important to actors in a profession where much time can be
spent between jobs, ‘resting’, as it is euphemistically called.

Every year, at least 150 students graduate from drama
schools around Australia. Simon Phillips, one of the directors
interviewed by Adam Macaulay, estimates that only one in
ten has any prospect of working consistently as an actor.
But these students — and those who might be
hoping to join them — are clearly the
market Don’t Tell Me, Show Me is aimed at.
I suspect that they might find reading this
book a chastening experience.

So what are directors looking for in an
actor? Quite a lot, actually. Not surprisingly, they want actors who are responsive
to direction, in the sense that they are open,
vulnerable even, and prepared to take risks;
as Di Drew puts it, an actor who offers her
choices rather than a predetermined inter-
pretation. The kind of skills training pro-
vided by the drama schools is a definite
advantage. Directors also prefer actors with
wider cultural interests and intellectual
curiosity. ‘Go and see things — exhibi-
tions, concerts,’ Barry Kosky tells them,
‘and be inspired by great work outside your
normal experience.’ And if you have ambi-
tions to do Shakespeare, take note of John Bell’s advice to
read your Bible and Ovid first.

All the directors see rehearsal as a collaborative project
(well, one can’t help thinking, they would have to, wouldn’t they), though film and television necessarily impose more
restraints. But, more importantly, they stress the interactive
nature of theatre, actors needing to work off each other. There
is a particular frustration with the actor who is impossible to
work with in rehearsal and then produces an extraordinary
performance on the night, because this ignores the needs of
the other members of the cast. Similarly, Ros Horin expresses
her dislike for certain (unnamed) Sydney actors ‘who are
much celebrated and well thought of’ but who ‘suck energy in
rather than give it out’, making themselves ‘watchable’ at the
expense of the dynamics of the scene.

There is some unnecessary agonising about characterisation,
particularly the hoary old conundrum about the extent to
which the actor can ‘be’ the character. In fact, most of
Macaulay’s directors don’t want long preparatory discussion of
characterisation. Kosky crankily declares that ‘through an
appalling, watered-down, messed-up, fucked-up sort of
Stanislavsky-via-the-Studio-in-New-York thing, the entire
world has become obsessed with psychological profiling,
which is all chitchat’. Hackles are raised when an actor says
‘My character wouldn’t do that’, because the ‘character’
should emerge from the action of the play. Michael Gow is the
most uncompromising:

There is really no such thing as ‘character’. It is simply the sum
of all the actions that are in the script and that the character does.
If you ask me ‘What’s my character?’ or ‘What’s my character
like?’ I’ll say ‘Well, let’s rehearse it and see.’

Interestingly, amidst all the talk of collaboration and ex-
ploration, many directors pine, albeit with a hint of apology,
for actors with a high level of technique. Aubrey Mellor
regrets that it is unfashionable these days to ask actors to learn their lines by some
prescribed point in rehearsal. Drew com-
plains of the poor diction of many younger
actors — ‘I simply can’t understand what
they say!’ — and many of us will sympa-
thise with her. Bruce Beresford reminds us
that actors need to be able to do accents.
Technique, Gale Edwards feels the need to
insist, is not a dirty word.

And what do directors really think of
Australian actors? Kosky, safely en-
sonced as co-artistic director of the
Schauspielhaus Theatre in Vienna, blithely
announces that he is not interested in work-
ning with most Australian actors, seeing the
profession here as marked by ‘a sort of
inbred laziness or neglect’. Phillips, on the
other hand, presiding over the currently
prosperous Melbourne Theatre Company,
sees ‘many brilliant actors around Australia’.

There is, ultimately, a kind of mystery about what hap-
pens when an actor ‘acts’. Kosky laments that the traditions
of the West have lost sight of ‘the sacred nature of acting’.
Certainly, acting calls for dedication and commitment in
a profession in which financial rewards are usually modest.
Is it any wonder, then, as Edwards remarks, that actors can
be ‘fragile’?

Macaulay has assembled a cast of notable directors in
theatre, film and television. Inevitably, there is repetition and
some ‘thinking aloud’ rambling. It is clear that Macaulay has
heavily edited the original interviews, which one trusts will be
lodged in an appropriate archive. It is, nevertheless, the direc-
tors who are doing the talking: Macaulay should therefore be
identified as the editor, and not as the author, of the book.