Introduction

HAMLET: . . . I have thought some of Nature's Journeymen had made men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abhominably.
PLAYER: I hope we have reformed that indifferently with us.
HAMLET: Oh, reform it altogether.[1]

In the face of his patron's reformist zeal, and the implied accusation that he is a mere journeyman, a day labourer rather than a true master of his craft, the professional actor responds with the word 'indifferently', studiously ambiguous. What expression did the audience glimpse in the eyes of the player who played the player? Opaque deference? A humble admission of inadequacy? Or suppressed rage? In this book I shall examine the way actors worked, seeking to disentangle their actual methods from theories foisted upon them by intellectuals, who never write without a moral agenda. This is a book about method. It is about the way actors, unseen by the spectator, worked on their roles in order to create their performances, their artworks. Before Stanislavski's celebrated attempt at the end of the czarist era to systematize a method of acting suitable for an emergent bourgeois world, another great system of acting provided the foundation for European practice, a method whose inspiration and principles lay in Cicero. Roman rhetoric provided premodern actors with a vocabulary and set of working principles that shaped the art of acting from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century, particularly in the domain of tragedy. These principles were malleable, and constant modification lent the tradition its vitality.

Today, with the teaching of classical languages in the UK largely confined to private schools, it is easy to think of classical culture as the historic preserve of an elite. We could, however, make the same complaint

[1] *Hamlet* III.ii.33–7.

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about the social reach of modernist art. Modernism and classicism alike permeated deep into the cultures of their day, establishing discourses and practices that became battlegrounds for status wars. My purpose in this book is to uncover not an elite voice but a subaltern voice, the voice of the professional actor, largely suppressed both by our historical sources and by modern academic interpreters. It is predominantly critics, playwrights and cultural theorists whose thinking has found its way into the archive, and into historical accounts of performance theory.

The study of 'rhetoric' has long vanished from UK education, and in US and French curricula it constitutes an approach to the written word. In popular usage the term 'rhetoric' has largely pejorative connotations in light of a commitment to emotional and scientific truth. It is important to confront the fact, therefore, that pre-modern stage acting was by and large seen as a branch of rhetoric, a means of using embodied speech to sway the emotions of an audience. Until the later eighteenth century, actors normally performed in the fashionable dress of their own time, and because the auditorium was lit they could look into the eyes of the spectators upon whom they were working, always aware of the effect their words and actions had. They felt they could transmit emotions from one human soul to another, and did not worry, in the bizarre modern manner, about making themselves indistinguishable from that other human being whom they represent.

I have set English theatre alongside French theatre in this book, with brief forays into Italy and Germany. It is no coincidence that the book was written during the troubled period when Britain voted and negotiated to leave the European Union. The classical tradition once lent Europe a common culture, increasingly eroded by the dominance of the nation state, and the disciplinary structure of modern academia makes dialogue between scholars of English and European text-based theatre curiously difficult.[2] Actors have often found it easier to cross borders. Thinking through multiple languages forces the historian to recognize that historical figures often did not understand by their words quite what we do. The rhetorical tradition emphasizes that words are not so much vehicles of meaning as a means of acting upon people. Manuals and other written descriptions of the acting process have to be read not as transparent revelations of what actors once thought and did, but as ways of modifying human behaviour. Though manuals on acting constitute my major source,

[2] The European perspective of Vicentini (2011–12) has recently been followed by Marie (2019), a book that appeared too late for me to take full account of its argument.

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we must remember that most were published for the benefit of amateurs, while professionals shared their skills with each other in the privacy of the green room. The working conditions of professional actors, undertaking much of their study in private and at speed with only their own roles to hand, created a context for their rhetorical art that was not necessarily shared by the amateur.

The focus of this book is the tragic actor. Tragedy was on the whole a more popular form than comedy during the period under consideration, representing human beings who were less socially particularized, and whose emotions were therefore more generic. Though tragedy has long represented an aspirational ideal, the principles of rhetorical acting apply to most forms of narrative-based comedy involving the interaction of characters. To tease apart the multiple inflections of comedy, from the Aristophanic to the lachrymose, and to map a classical system of 'humours' onto a system of 'passions', would require another volume. Though I shall only touch on opera, the principles of rhetorical acting applied equally to tragedy in its lyric form, at a time when there was no clear divide between the two skills of 'acting' and 'singing'.

The timespan of this book is defined at the start by the birth of urban professional theatre, when actors learned how to make a living from performing secular narratives capable of engaging literate spectators. The skill of holding the attention of a crowd in the Roman Forum differed little from that of holding an early modern public audience. At the other end, there is no such natural terminus. The French revolution in some degree marks a breakpoint, bringing to an end the movement long known as the 'Enlightenment', which gave birth to modern assumptions about individual human rights and to modern conceptions of the actor's creative autonomy. Theatres thereafter became larger and more oriented towards music and spectacle, until the late nineteenth-century naturalist movement returned to principles first articulated by Diderot, which included the idea of the audience as the 'fourth wall'.

I begin this book with a case study, begging the reader's patience with close textual scrutiny. I put under the microscope Hamlet's advice to the players, which has long been regarded as a canonical expression of Elizabethan acting theory, revered on account of its authorship, and argue that Hamlet, far from articulating Shakespeare's personal manifesto, sets out academic principles in order to support the performance of an excruciatingly bad academic play. Shakespeare, an actor himself and the beneficiary of a classical education but not of a university education, knew that there was an alternative approach to the business of acting, based upon the

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primacy of emotion. Hamlet's struggle with the art of acting is a thread running through this book. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* reveals how far, within the framework of Renaissance classicism, acting was both socially and aesthetically a contested field.

I proceed in Chapter 2 to describe the rhetorical tradition in antiquity, to which most educated people had access until the end of the eighteenth century. The principles of Cicero were fleshed out and transformed into a system by Quintilian. I portray the great project of Cicero and Quintilian less as a body of theory than as a body of performance practice, and note the difficulties encountered by St Augustine when trying to Christianize his pagan predecessors. Either directly or indirectly, the rhetorical tradition provided actors from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment with a vocabulary for conceptualizing and debating the art of acting. Cicero, Quintilian, and Augustine wrote with insight because they were themselves performers, unlike most of the university-educated intellectuals who later adapted their theories, more interested in writing than in embodied speech.

In the next three chapters, I map some broad processes of historical change. I begin with the sixteenth-century Renaissance, where, apart from the special case of *Hamlet* and some early Italian manifestoes, there are no significant texts which differentiate stage acting from the broader methods of secular and sacred rhetoric. I focus this chapter on Erasmus, who did much to set English education into the mould of Roman practice, and whose writings reveal how the Renaissance actor must have tackled the language of a dramatic text in a manner very different from today. Erasmus' final great work elaborated a theory of preaching with obvious implications for the stage, and his lifelong struggle to reconcile Protestant and Catholic impulses helps us discern a parallel fissure that opened up within stage acting, since the reformers' ideal of speaking from the heart could not easily be reconciled with the need to speak artfully. In Chapter 4 I turn to the Baroque era, characterized by monarchical and aristocratic attempts to assert absolute power, and my focus shifts to Paris as the centre of theatrical innovation at a time when Britain was locked in civil war. I argue that Jesuit manuals on preaching opened up a new approach to performance, allowing Christians to talk without shame about manipulating their bodies and voices for conscious performance effect. Once it was legitimate for bodily aspects of the orator's craft to be isolated and analysed, the door opened for stage actors at the start of the eighteenth century to define the specifics of their rhetorical craft. In Chapter 5 I examine the French Enlightenment, when bourgeois intellectuals

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challenged aristocratic authority. Many aristocrats used amateur theatricals to explore the performative aspects of their social identities, and the voices of professional actors entered the public domain in this context. In order to cut through the wealth of source material, I confine myself to a single case study, that of Diderot. In its rationalism and insistence on pure technique, Diderot's *Paradox upon the Actor* epitomizes many of the values associated with the word 'Enlightenment'. I view Diderot as a second Hamlet, an intellectual who pontificates about acting despite his complete lack of practical experience. While the players in *Hamlet* remain respectfully silent, the professional actors whom Diderot invoked to support his Jesuitical argument did have voices, and I allow them to be heard so we can recognize how their point of view differed from that of the famous litterateur who, today, still monopolizes scholarly ink. These voices reveal how far Diderot's Enlightenment voice was specifically a male voice. Diderot's *Paradox* became a point of reference for William Archer and others at the start of the twentieth century in their conversations about the inner emotional work of the actor, and it is probably the only work of acting theory prior to Stanislavski that retains a place in the cultural memory of the modern acting profession.

In the second half of this book, I explore four running themes that have emerged. First, in Chapter 5, comes the fundamental question of emotion, which Hamlet sought to suppress in his instruction of the players. I argue that 'emotion' is a category that we need to historicize in order to understand why the core job of the rhetorical actor was to delineate and embody the so-called passions. I explore competing ideas about how to categorize the passions, along with debates about whether the acting process should begin with the mind or the body. In Chapter 7 I turn to 'declamation', the art of speaking in a tragic register honed to touch the emotions of an audience. I show how pre-modern dramatic texts were conceived not as containers of an authorial meaning that the director and actor have to interpret, but rather as scores to be played by the actor's bodily instrument. Chapter 8 is devoted to 'gesture', considered within the rhetorical tradition as integral to the act of speaking, in contrast to today when physical and text-based theatre have become polarized, with movement and voice teaching prised apart in the curriculum. In my final chapter on training, I consider what might once have been understood as a 'science' of acting. I ask how pre-modern actors learned their craft and sharpened their skills, developing emotional, cognitive and muscular capacities that allowed them, with far less ensemble rehearsal than today, to produce persuasive performances.

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Much important recent work has focused on the institutional structures of theatre companies, and Tiffany Stern's work on rehearsal practices has been particularly enlightening.[3] My own focus is on the creative and aesthetic practices that grew from and determined these material working conditions. Claudio Vicentini, in his *Theory of Acting* (2011–12), provides a valuable overview of theoretical discussions about acting, ranging across English, French, German and Italian sources, but he is not concerned as I am with the empirical question of how ideas were deployed by individual actors in particular contexts. Joseph Roach in *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (1985) has demonstrated powerfully that pre-modern acting merits the attention of cultural historians. Though the analogies between acting and physiology that Roach explores are always illuminating, it remains unclear how far the imaginations of professional actors were shaped by scientific theories. Professional actors today often delight in metaphor and metaphysics more than scientific innovation. Roach's focus on science sidelines religion as a historical driver of human behaviour, while I contend that religion remained crucial to the way pre-modern actors saw themselves.

Robert Hume criticized Roach's historiographic model for placing moments like the emergence of Garrick on the London stage as paradigm shifts, arguing that 'rhetorical acting' was not so suddenly swept away.[4] Stern, in a similar vein, concluded that 'when examining the evidence, the innovations of the latter half of the eighteenth century seem surprisingly tame. The "new" ways of acting, proclaimed to be less stylised than the "old" ways, were still very stylised indeed.'[5] When the history of acting is constructed on the basis of reports by spectators, it is easy to take at face value the claims of each successive generation that acting has now become more 'natural' than it used to be, and it is salutary to set accounts of Garrick's 'natural' style of acting against the copious iconography depicting Garrick in poses which today we are inclined to see as the height of artifice. I have included relatively few illustrations in this book because I am less concerned with what a gesture looked like, its visual style, than with how the actor created it. What the historical spectator once regarded as 'natural' bears little relation to the historically conditioned taste of a modern spectator.

It is a tempting ploy to frame the history of acting as a journey from 'rhetorical' acting (= artificial, 'stylized', unlike us, bad) towards 'natural' acting (= better, like what we do). Alan Downer, for example, in a seminal

[3] Stern (2000). [4] Hume (1999) 166–70. [5] Stern (2000) 256.

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essay of 1943 on eighteenth-century acting, identified a sequence of four 'schools' of English acting, and even though careful to distinguish 'rant' from 'cadence' he left the reader in no doubt that his sympathies lay with the 'reforms' and 'natural' style of Garrick rather than the apparently regressive neoclassical style which followed and allowed for 'a certain amount of exaggeration'.[6] When Roach carves the history of acting into discrete phases, his strategy generates a whiggish model of progress, with the unspoken implication that pre-modern acting methods can be no more relevant to today's practitioners than pre-modern scientific paradigms to modern medics. I have chosen to focus this book upon continuities and fault-lines rather than distinct moments of change, and have avoided postulating single monolithic entities like 'Elizabethan acting', or constructing genealogies of innovators.[7] Ultimately no historian can escape the obligation to chart change, but I have attempted in so doing to avoid notions of progress, using the broad-brush terms Renaissance, Baroque and Enlightenment to position intersecting flows and contradictions within a wider culture.

Much work on the history of acting is organized around the notion of 'styles'. This vague concept may evoke the ephemeral shifts of fashion characteristic of clothing and coiffure, but may also point to tensions that lingered for centuries, as in the opposition between 'Attic' and 'Asiatic' styles in Roman rhetoric.[8] Under the rubric of 'style', discussions of Elizabethan acting were long caught up in an unproductive binary opposition between supposed 'formal' and 'natural' styles, rebranded as 'presentational' and 'representational' styles.[9] I endorse Edward Burns' view that it is fruitless to quarry Hamlet's advice to the players in a quest for Shakespeare's own notion of 'an appropriate acting style' because this involves searching for 'a non-existent object – Elizabethan acting theory. It is in fact the absence of this object that is historically interesting.' As Burns concludes, 'Acting and rhetoric are never seen as distinct entities.'[10]

[6] Downer (1943) 1026. See likewise John Golder's attack on the 'school of chanters and ranters' who preceded Adrienne Lecouvreur: Howarth (1997) 542.

[7] Like Downer, Joseph (1959) hooks styles to individual innovators.

[8] Cicero describes these styles in his *Brutus*; and in *Orator* he develops a critique of the Attic style ('*genus*'). Alfred Golding (1984) opts for the term 'modes' when describing three successive styles of 'classicistic' Dutch acting. Alan Hughes (1987) links 'styles' of acting to the history of art, where the notion of style has been embedded.

[9] The discussion stretches from Harbage (1939) to Thomson (1997). On the problem of the 'natural' see e.g. Voskuil (2004).

[10] Burns (1989) 9–10.

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The purpose of rhetoric was to move the emotions of a public audience, on the premise, which runs counter to much Brechtian theory, that emotion is the necessary prelude to action. An understanding of pre-modern acting is relevant, therefore, to discussions about the place of live theatre within the public sphere. More broadly, pre-modern acting helps us think about the performativity of public figures. At the time of writing, there is much media lament about democratic decisions made on the basis of emotion rather than rationality, yet rhetorical persuasion has always been integral to democracy, and classical rhetoricians never forgot that argument had to be harnessed to emotion. Contemporary democracy is beset by the problem that the art of public speech has vanished from the classroom, to be replaced by an obsessive attention to the written word. A legacy of the late Enlightenment, as it shaded into romanticism, was the celebration of a private, inner and supposedly more real self, best represented through the confessional mode of writing, which allowed human beings to be remodelled as autonomous economic units. There is good political reason for engagement with pre-modern acting.

Pre-modern acting yields a fresh perspective on the principle that thinking is inseparable from feeling, a running theme in contemporary psychology and philosophy. Neurological research has demonstrated that human beings have no single centre of selfhood or of rational decision-making, echoing post-modern philosophers often more hesitant to admit biology into their language-based models of what it is to be human. The insistence of pre-modern actors upon the materiality of the voice, connected simultaneously to the muscles, fluids and vapours of the organic body, and to a mental entity which they usually preferred to call the 'soul' to avoid connotations of pure rationality, offers an alternative way to think through the complex relationship of mind and body, thought and feeling within the work of the actor. Actors had no need to fall back on now tired notions of 'character' which presuppose a constant core of 'self', and on the concept of 'intention' which presupposes a disengaged mind that does the intending. A rhetorical perspective calls into question the primacy of the dramatic script, which only in the eighteenth century began to be understood as the container of a disembodied authorial thought.

In respect of creative practice, looking to the past can be a way to look forward. While the Stanislavskian tradition has, many would argue, run its course as the foundation of actor training, no longer preparing students for the diversity of demands made upon them in a global, multimedia marketplace, there is no coherent replacement on offer. Radical practitioners have more often turned eastwards in search of renewal than to their own past.

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Thomas Aquinas' account of the passions, which informed the work of early modern actors, parallels the kathakali actor's deployment of *rasa* theory. A characteristic eastern emphasis upon the breath chimes with European practices which are too easily dismissed as 'declamatory'. When 'chakras' are preferred to 'souls', and the holistic principles of yoga to humoral theory, it seems to me important to establish the relevant cultural parallels and connections. I believe in a twofold response to the past. On the one hand, we need an 'exotic' past, because otherness is a source of inspiration; but on the other hand, we need cultural memory, for we can free ourselves to change only through recognizing how far we have been the unsuspecting products of tradition.

The impossibility of any bygone theatre performance leaving more than traces of itself behind has been a disincentive to historical study within the academic discipline of Theatre Studies. I am concerned in this book with a period that lies beyond the reach of the video camera and of first-hand living memory. Paradoxically, the fragmentary state of the archive enhances its ability to stimulate the imagination. To be a historian is not unlike being an actor. On the one hand there needs to be an impulse to step forward in an empathetic embrace of human creatures furnished by the imagination, and on the other hand an impulse to step back, weigh the evidence, and contemplate in wonder the extent of human difference. Acting and historiography alike draw their energy from this dialectic.

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