LONGING TO BELONG:
TRAINED ACTORS ATTEMPTS TO ENTER THE PROFESSION¹

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Allan, the self-appointed caretaker, showed me around and introduced me to the occupants: fourteen old men, some of whom were conscious. We ended the tour on the ground floor, outside apartment one. Allan knocked and then slowly opened the door, allowing a strong and musty smell to fill the hall: a blanket used over a lifetime. Mick stood in the centre of the room, toward the end of his crumpled bed, supported by a walking frame. “Mick, I’d like you to meet Paul. He’s an actor come up from Adelaide.” Mick, his large yellow eyes passing over me, turned on his frame and shuffled away.

“Huh. Another one?”

(Paul Moore, ‘Journals’)

HAVING COMPLETED ACTOR TRAINING in early 1994 I followed the advice of my newly acquired agent, traveling overland by bus to Sydney, and to a bed-sit in a small, tree-lined avenue named Arcadia. I was fully aware that I was one of many who were struggling to gain a foothold in the acting profession but little prepared me for the winter that would follow. I had trained for four years, but was soon struggling to come to terms with a world of alien audition procedures, bizarre work practices and the intricacies of the actor’s relationship with significant figures—agents, casting and artistic directors, producers, technical personnel and other actors themselves. The slide from anonymity into obscurity was made all the more painful through the high expectations I carried and refused to abandon.

Each year in Australia approximately 600 trained actors embark on a similar journey.² Each has their goals and unique perspective, informed by their history, training and individual experience. In the following paper I will present my first hand experience of professional life (extracted from the diaries I kept at the time and printed here in italics). I will also use empirical and ethnographic research that confirms that the majority of actors find their ‘initiation’ into professional life as disheartening as was my own.

Sydney took me, promised me an escape, and the career I had trained for. Twenty-four hours in a bus on dusty interstate roads and I was dropped at Central Station. Tired but excited I flicked through a newspaper searching for somewhere to live.
The bed-sit in Arcadia Avenue was the beginning of my new beginning, and no amount of cynicism could dissuade me from my purpose: to be an actor in Australia’s largest city. The inhabitants of my new home were the saddest men I had ever met. I, on the other hand, was brimming with confidence. I had an agent, I was trained and committed.

Having barely slept that first night in the bed-sit I came to know as ‘the bunker’, I called the agency and announced my return. Following another meeting it was decided that we needed new head shots: photographs which exposed my teeth in case anyone should suspect they were missing. This seemed logical enough to me, particularly as I was the only person in my residence that had teeth. Presented with an imitation wood-grain answering machine, something of an antique, I was encouraged to “keep in touch” and assured that ‘go-see’s and auditions would be arranged.

On the way home that day I pondered what a ‘go-see’ might be. Over the months that followed, through a process that proved to be both trial and error, I discovered that a go-see literally refers to the actor going and seeing casters and casting directors—that breed of go-betweens who, I was to learn, held my destiny in their hands. I discovered that during such a meeting it is likely the actor will be asked to ‘chat to camera’ so that the ‘caster’ can judge what they perceive to be the actor’s ‘type’ and ‘range’ on the basis of demonstrated personality. Such a technique may also be used when casting a particular role. Alternatively, an actor can be asked to improvise a scene, or be presented with dialogue on arrival for an audition. Nothing in my training had prepared me for any of this. In fact, much of what we had been taught—the careful study and analysis of roles, the careful reflection upon and construction of character—flew out the window in the flurry of five minute preparations, of walking in off the street to be greeted with a highlighted scrap of script, a blinking red light on a tripod-mounted digital camera and a bored looking assistant scratching something against my name on a bright green clipboard.

Some weeks following my arrival, I received a call and was sent to such a ‘go-see’ with Liz Mullinar’s casting. Mullinar’s was at the time a major caster. I had been invited back as I had apparently impressed during an initial visit with a well-prepared monologue performed to camera. Expecting to be asked to perform this, or perhaps my equally impressive Shakespeare, I was nervous but felt well prepared.
On arrival I was shown into a small room. Beneath my casual “I’m okay, pleased to meet you” entrance my heart was pounding. She was there in the corner: Liz Mullinar herself, part Miss Havisham, part Hitchcock. Originally auditioned by one of her juniors, I knew that my reputation, and therefore my prospects of work, hinged on this meeting. I managed to stammer through a brief introduction. Then came the instructions: “We just want you to pretend you’re at a petrol station when you look up from what you’re doing and recognise your neighbour. Greet him with “Good day mate, didn’t expect to see you here!” Okay? And . . . go”. I look to the camera; the red light on the side tells me we’re on. I begin to squint: Australia, petrol, it’s got to be sunny. I’m thinking tan, teeth, laconic smile. I try to concentrate on my imaginary car. My hands reach for the petrol pump bowser; my legs are getting a bit wobbly. I’m pouring pretend petrol into a car that doesn’t exist; the flames are filling my stomach and brain. Then I see my neighbour approach, but I can’t look into his eyes. The shaking is becoming obvious. My tan and laconic smile begin to melt. I look up with an expression that suggests I have the body of my neighbour’s daughter in the boot of my imaginary car. The words fall from my mouth “G’day mate . . . did . . . did . . . didn’t expect to see you here—” The bowser has separated from the car. Petrol spills across the service station. As I attempt to grin the cigarette falls from my lips and the entire scene bursts into flames. Liz Mullinar watches from a safe distance, shakes her head, turns on her walking frame and spits: “Not another one!” (see Moore 2005, 2006).

Whatever reputation I had established was in an instant destroyed, utterly and irremediably. It would be months before I so much as heard from Mullinar’s again. I later discovered that each actor who auditions for this company has a file kept on them—I can’t help but think of the East German Stasi—and mine was now marked with a large ‘X’: ‘never to work in this town again’. Did I care? Well, yes, and no. On the one hand, and as the weeks turned into months, I became increasingly desperate to land a job. Any job would do. Yet I also remained committed to the ideals which training had encouraged me to embody. Arguably, it was this ‘faith’ in acting as an art that led me along with several other graduates to later form Brink productions, an independent, actor-run ensemble. Since the 1970s the rise of formal training in Australian performance has benefitted the arts theatre, and each generation of graduates has greatly expanded the skills base establishing standards and an appetite for increasingly complex forms. Structurally, however, the arts theatre in Australia remains dependant on meager funding. It can only ever support very few, and while many who produce and consume performance as art are predisposed to define it in opposition to commercial practice, most actors must be successful commercially in order to succeed artistically.

Years later I would set out to situate my first experiences against those of other trained actors through surveying and interviewing. The graphs and statistics here are taken from a sample of 110 actors, all trained for at least three years full time and all in the first ten years of professional life. As graph 1.1 (over) shows, most actors felt adequately, well or very well trained in terms of audition techniques for theatre. As graph 1.2 illustrates, however, almost all felt adequately, poorly or very poorly trained in terms of commercial screen work.
It should be noted that schools increasingly include additional work to camera within their curricula. Nevertheless, most continue to focus almost entirely on acting for the stage and on approaching work under conditions that are rarely replicated in the commercial world. Sociologically speaking, these schools are located as producers of actors as artists. They value a considered approach to acting emphasising the importance of technique and of rehearsal. Agents and the broader profession, on the other hand, are essentially interested in commercial screen production. A glance at the earning figures I later obtained through surveying income sources and the median days employed for actors in various media explain why.
In terms of paid employment screen work provides the most income and involves the greatest number of actors for the least amount of time. In the study that I conducted twenty-four per cent of actors were employed in television for a median period of one day, earning a median figure of $2,045 during the three month period in question (graph 2.2). This source of income greatly increases the actor’s financial viability in terms of continuing practice generally. Five per cent of actors received a median of $2,350 for a median of four and a half days work on film. Corporate production employed thirteen per cent of actors paying a median of $960 and theatre thirty per cent of actors with a median wage of $1,975 for eighteen and a half days work.

Agents are essentially after ‘earners’, as one later explained:

> We do represent actors who work in theatre, but unless they are in the big shows they will earn M.E.A.A. [Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance] minimum, even well known actors. We get nothing for rehearsal and if the season runs for more than five weeks our commission finishes and the actor is unavailable (interview with agent G.B., March 2002).

The focus of acting schools tends to ignore commercially-orientated practice or to actually define quality in opposition to it. The graduate, on the other hand, must adapt skills to varied working environments in which actors have little influence over working procedures. To do this actors require knowledge of professional practice in the broadest sense. When asked, trained actors felt they required both training and work experience in order to acquire the skills necessary to function professionally. Most rated ‘on the job’ experience as the singularly most effective means of acquiring the skills necessary to succeed (graph 3).

Graph 3 Means of acquiring practical skills

There can be little doubt that the harsh realities of the profession place educators in a difficult position. On the one hand actor training aims to, and arguably does, reinforce considered practice. The quality of the actor’s education is viewed in terms of long established traditions and practices that demand attention to specific techniques. These are associated with ‘quality’, and often are defined in opposition to the financially focused and hence hurried practices that tend to arise during commercial production. The difficulty for the trained actor, however, is that while he or she may desire to approach work in accordance with the standards reinforced during training, more often success is defined by commercial imperatives.

Actors themselves tend to reinforce the severity of the situation through a series of behaviours that
suggest avoidance, at least for a time, concerning the realisation of their professional predicament. Having left the protective environment of the training institution it never occurred to me to attempt to understand the business I was involved in. Instead, I ‘held out’, waiting for the break I needed while embarking on a series of lowly paid jobs. I washed dishes for students of the University of N.S.W., I sold hot dogs on the Manly Corso, I worked in many cafes, delivered newsletters and mopped floors. Through my later research I found many young actors endure this type of self-imposed serfdom. Young actors, periodically optimistic, regularly choose to work in unskilled areas for low wages believing this to be a flexible means of maintaining availability. In my own study fifty-nine per cent of actors under thirty worked in hospitality, service industries, were on the dole or combined these means into a cocktail which usually results in an acute sense of deprivation. These are young professionals who have trained full-time for between three and four years.

Almost all (ninety-eight per cent) of the actors I surveyed said that they would change their working arrangements if they could confirm that their wages from acting would not increase over time. They added, however, that they were certain their income from acting would rise in the future. These actors retained faith in their training and the profession’s capacity to recognise their skills. The figures I obtained concerning income, age and education suggest this optimism is misplaced (see graph 4).

As indicated above, actors tend to be employed more often and to earn greater amounts through performing in their mid twenties than at any other time. These figures are supported by Australian Bureau of Statistics Census. The Census shows forty-nine per cent of those employed as actors during the 2006 were aged below thirty-five.1 Figures directly linking the education of those employed as actors were last made available on the basis of the 1996 Census. These indicated that only twenty-six per cent of those employed as actors had tertiary qualifications in dance or drama (A.B.S. 1998, 34-35). It is impossible to gauge from available statistics the competitive performance of trained actors against the untrained as numbers of each grouping initially seeking available positions is not specified. Nor do the figures describe differences in the type or complexity of roles performed. What the statistics do suggest is that the profession as a whole selects for youth and that almost three quarters of the positions filled did not require the specific skills encouraged during training (or that these could be acquired elsewhere).

Unprepared to deal with an environment in which the skills they have learnt to value are often ignored, actors displayed degrees of professional paralysis. Almost fifty per cent of the trained actors I surveyed felt effort did not play a major role in determining their professional success, while sixty-three per cent...
saw luck as a major factor. Seventy-nine per cent thought actors had little say in the frequency and terms of their employment, something of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The majority of trained actors move from a world in which efforts are rewarded and in which inclusion is guaranteed into a temporal wasteland. Dispossessed, the actor, once reassured of his or her worth, wanders about—often a little pompous—in a changed world in which no one recognises his or her eminence. In my own case, the depression that this ‘mal-adjustment’ to professional life created was intense. Under these circumstances maintaining belief was too great a struggle in too conscious a sense. Increasingly I felt I had no control over my future and no reason to invest in it. Commenting on the effects of powerlessness and the sense of a lack of future, Pierre Bourdieu writes:

[t]he more power one has over the world, the more one has aspirations that are adjusted to the chances of realisation, and also stable and little affected by symbolic manipulation. Below a certain level, on the other hand, aspirations burgeon, detached from reality and sometimes a little crazy, as if, when nothing was possible, everything became possible, as if all discourses about the future prophecies, divinations, predictions, millenarian announcements had no other purpose than to fill what is no doubt one of the most painful wants: the lack of a future (2000, 226).

I would be the first to admit that my experiences following training left me feeling ‘a little crazy’. The following diary extract describes my increasingly desperate desire to belong:

One thing led to another, time moved on. I was up early, walking along Sydney’s dirty Broadway, 6 a.m. and even the birds looked at me strangely.

“I’m not on my way home birds, I’m off to work. I am to begin rehearsals with Peter Brook in a joint production involving the Royal Court and The Wooster Group. Yes, The Wooster Group, we’re doing an adaptation of the Chekhov classic, The Seagull.”

The birds didn’t look at me so oddly now: they were impressed.

“I’m to play Konstantin. A tortured young artist living in agrarian Russia where none of the red neck locals understand the symbolic importance of the seagull, so I shoot myself. Only in this version I shoot the seagull instead. Yes Mr. Pigeon, all the more chips for you! How did I get the Job? I simply asked for it. I rang up Peter and I said I’m looking for work.”

He said “Now, we can’t just employ anybody. Have you acted before?”

“I have Mr. Brook, I spent four years getting ready for just this type of position”

He sounded startled. “Why didn’t you say so! Do you mean to tell me that you have spent four years of your life in devotion and in the past six months no one has approached you to play Konstantin?”

“That is correct Mr. Brook”

“That is atrocious. Call me Peter” said Peter.

“Okay Peter.”

“. . . or Pete.”

“Pete” I repeated.

“Or Petey, call me Petey . . .”
“Petey?” I checked, and getting the go ahead I continued “and that’s not all Petey. I’ve been left to languish in a flat no bigger than a box and occasionally prompted to perform idiotic scripts for casters who don’t even know you exist”.

“This is outrageous” stormed Petey. “And can not be allowed to continue. I will hire you. You will play Konstantin!”

“That’s what he said, Mr. Sparrow, and so now I’m off to meet the rest of the cast — Willem Dafoe, Harvey Keitel, Judy Dench and DeNiro.”

The birds looked at me oddly again.

“What’s that?” I asked “You think I’m talking a load of shit?”

The birds didn’t bother to reply. They rose into the air above dirty Broadway leaving me to mumble to myself.

If failure was absolute, and could be reconciled with the past through acceptance, this slide into obscurity might convince the actor to quickly reassess his or her situation, and take action. Most actors, however, find intermittent work, and to lose faith is more than many can bear. Actors are compelled to continue investing with a great sense of loss, like problem gamblers who have already spent their rent. The trained actor enters a limbo; it takes considerable time for the ideals acquired through institutional immersion, and the expectations of self and the wider society, to lose their affect upon behaviour. Repeatedly the actor goes through the agony of reinvesting in a belief that fails to be socially reinforced and hence returns only the realisation of its abstraction. The decisions the actor makes within this period of maladjustment will greatly affect their potential to continue within the profession. And yet the phenomena described has precisely the effect of encouraging one to abandon decision, to eventually escape into cynicism, which at least puts stop to expectation, alternatively to take refuge in fantasy. Objective conditions, the possible positions the field offers, conspire to convince unemployed actors of their powerlessness.

Very occasional theatre auditions and employment provided me with a more familiar environment in which to work, some degree of shared language and of camaraderie. However, even in this world little more than lip service appeared to be paid to technique and a sense of ruthless competition hung in every foyer. Before long I was relying on a cynical rejection of the world around me, the hallmark of the failed artist, while on another level desperately seeking inclusion. Gradually I began to question whether the theatre for which I had trained actually existed. Although several companies used the term ‘ensemble’ in their publicity, none employed a regular cast on anything like a full time basis, and all resorted to hiring known actors in order to fill the auditorium. Those that came closest to the ideals of practice as I had been taught them, and had established reputations as a result, seemed inaccessible. There were no general auditions and letters written to directors went unanswered.

As 1994 drew to a close, I slipped into sadness, but stubbornly refused to abandon what remained of my expectations. Living in the bunker, washing dishes, I lost just about all the confidence I had developed through training. Auditions of any kind induced in me a sense of terror. Alone and disorientated I continued to satirise the situation in letters and diaries. Beneath the attempts at humour was festering a very serious sense of despair and hopelessness. I wrote to a friend in Adelaide:

Dear Jardine,

The romance of living beneath 14 old men is beginning to wear thin. There’s nothing I can do about
them and nothing I want to do with them. This is going to get better, isn’t it? I keep trying to tell myself it will but this morning something awful happened. Sitting in the bunker I was staring out of my window toward a tiny piece of blue sky hiding between some cancer gray and yellow clouds when I noticed Ted standing beneath the washing line. Ted is by far the most amicable of the tribe. He stood there waving his hands through the air and muttering something obscure and repetitious. A terrible realisation began to take hold. Ted wasn’t suffering from the tremors or some schizoid episode, he was rehearsing, practicing for some up and coming part that never up and came. Within seconds the full impact of this realisation hit me. I’m not living with a bunch of harmless old men. I’m living with the N.I.D.A graduation class of 1962, we’re all in this together and no one’s going anywhere fast.

These experiences, subsequent research and teaching within acting schools leads me to ask: ‘Are we training actors in too idealistic a fashion?’ Should we promote, rather than discourage, an acting student’s exposure to commercial production during training? Could we do more in terms of professional orientation from the very beginning of training? Should we encourage publicly funded arts bodies and producers to institutionalise assistance to graduates? Is it really in the interests of commercial producers to remain ignorant as regards how actors can work? How might we convince the commercial industry of the value of considered approach?

For some time, the problems that actors face, particularly those entering the profession, have been placed in the ‘too hard’ basket. Funding bodies and funded producers do not see it as their responsibility to assist graduates. Actors are viewed as employees rather than co-creators and/or authors of performance. That we would not have a functional arts theatre or commercial performance in Australia without a reservoir of young performers from which to draw, is largely ignored. Acting schools, perhaps fearing funding cuts and the logic of economic rationalism, seem to believe it is not in their interests to problematise the graduates’ situation. Recent research, however, based on the Census and substantiated by studies produced through the National Centre for Culture and Recreation Statistics, confirm that on a financial basis government and the Australian public are gaining a great deal on their investment in performance art and artists. Through this work it is very apparent that we currently spend far less on education and funding than is generated in income. While the acting profession remains unexamined, commercial industry also remains ignorant concerning actors’ skills and how these might realistically, and economically, be utilised to greatly increase the quality of what is produced. Research is also required to quantify the ‘cultural capitals’ performance artists contribute throughout their own profession and in the wider economy.

I should make it very clear that I am not suggesting we abandon educational standards or ideas of artistic excellence. Supplying the field of Australian performance with highly educated actors has fundamentally changed the market in a very positive way. The arts theatre for which actors have been trained is also that which performing arts graduates of all types seek out to consume—we simply could not be producing increasingly complex skills based theatre in Australia without having educated an audience capable of appreciating such work. Trained actors identify with this theatre and define their professional identity in these terms. They also carry their skills into the commercial sector and have raised standards within television and film. In my own case, I became a cofounder of Brink Productions precisely because I, along with several other graduates, wanted to improve artistic production. The accomplishment of Brink, however, is an exception and, as we discovered, the Australian arts theatre can barely support even the most successful of new companies. We certainly should not abandon the skills encouraged through training. We need, however, to gain a knowledge of the profession in the broadest sense and to equip students for all likely scenarios.
Notes

1. The title of this paper, and much its content, including statistical data and the graphs, is based on my Ph.D. research completed in 2005, and further unpublished scoping studies into the acting profession. See Moore 2005.

2. This is an approximate figure, as the intake into Australia’s acting schools varies considerably each year, as does the number of schools operating. This figure includes students graduating from courses that are university associated or affiliated, together with the major Technical and Further Education (TAFE) courses lasting at least three years full time. There are approximately twenty such courses currently operating across Australia. The figure does not include students of private academies or performance studies majors completed within arts or other degree structures.

3. Note that these figures pertain to paid employment in theatre. Should voluntary involvement be included the median income earned would drop.

4. A.B.S. Table 4.2 Persons Employed in Cultural Occupations (a) (b) (c) by age-2006 in Employment in Culture Australia (Cat. No. 6273) Wed 27th Feb, 2008. p 24. Note that A.B.S. catalogue numbers can remain the same for similar information obtained during various years. Further, these catalogues are quite often reissued under the same name and number with amended statistics should errors be discovered. It is therefore necessary to check the name, the catalogue number and the date of issue when consulting A.B.S. figures.

5. Australian Federal and State Governments provided almost 1.8 billion dollars in funding for Performing Arts production during 2004-5 (a figure not including monies for infrastructure) and a further 11.7 billion dollars was provided for broadcasting and film (A.B.S. Table 1. Cultural Funding by Category and level of government 2002-03 to 2004-05 in Cultural Funding by Government (cat. no. 4183.0) Oct 2006). During the previous financial year (2003-4) Music and Theatre Production generated 6.2 billion dollars in income, Performing Arts Festivals a further 88.5 million dollars (A.B.S., Table 1.1 Summary of Operations in Performing Arts in Performing Arts Australia (cat. no. 8697.0) Sep 2004) while Film and Video production generated almost 16 billion during the financial year 2002-3 (A.B.S., Table 16.6 Income and expenses of Business in the Film and Video Production Industry 1999-2000 and 2002-2003 in Arts and Culture in Australia: A Statistical Overview (cat. no.4172.0) June 2007). No claim is made that income means profit, and without a detailed quantitative analysis, the cost of educating performing artists of all types is impossible to determine. It seems highly unlikely, however, that education is a singularly large cost when considering figures that run into billions annually.

References

As noted above, A.B.S. catalogue numbers can remain the same for similar information obtained over successive years. Further, these catalogues are quite often reissued under the same name and number with amended statistics, should, for example, errors be detected. It is therefore necessary to check the name, catalogue number and date of issue when consulting A.B.S. figures.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (A.B.S.)
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Bourdieu, Pierre

Moore, Paul
—2005 Longing to Belong: Trained Actors’ Attempts to Enter the Profession Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Performance Studies, University of Sydney.
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