

# Finding the light: Acting as an artistic and social project

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## Abstract

This keynote address delivered to the inaugural AusAct Australian Actor Training conference in 2018 applies theories of Bourdieuan sociology and post-Malinowskian ethnography to the challenges of acting, actor-training, and Australian theatre.

## Keywords

Acting; Australian Theatre; Well-being; Sociology; Bourdieu; Stanislavski

I want to begin by acknowledging that we meet on land that is and always will be Aboriginal land. I was born and grew up on Awabakal land around Lake Macquarie; I now live on Kuarna land in Adelaide, and today we meet on the land of the Wiradjuri people. I acknowledge the significance of this land to these people and their histories, and pay my respects to their elders, past and present.

It's not my intention to give a lecture on acting to a group of colleagues from whom I have more to learn than to impart. I accept the honour of opening the conference not as a champagne bottle smashed across the bow – not that kind of confident gesture, but a far less certain one in these times. I offer my thoughts today as a kind of whisper to myself, not, I hope, as a lecture or harangue. I apologise that I'm likely fail in that at certain points.

I want to share some findings from my research of the last six years or so which casts acting and theatre practice as sociological phenomena, and try to thread those observations through some assertions about acting, and through some concerns of currency: a depleted Australian theatre sector, and; concerns for actors' well-being.

Let me begin with a proposition:

If you meet an actor-friend in the street while they are in the middle of rehearsals for—let us say—*The Crucible*, and you ask them how things are going, here's what they are *not* going to say:

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*Oh, it's tough, because it's very cold in Salem, and those witches are hard to pin down.*

They are much more likely to say:

*Yeah, it's going well. The director has a really strong idea of what she wants to do. Good cast, lovely stage management. But no air in the room, and no natural light. The money's crap/good, etc.*

This is for me powerfully indicative of how actors experience acting and being an actor: not as a predominantly fictive exploration, but as an industrial, social and artistic immersion. My doctoral thesis searched for the fiction inside this broader phenomenon, and found it to a dappled presence in the concerns of the professional rehearsal room. The percentage of time actors and directors spend talking purely about the fiction is surprisingly limited. The vast bulk of the discourse is about the artwork.

If we can imagine a series of circles within circles: I have located the fictive concerns of acting wholly within a broader artistic compass, and located that artistic compass within a still-broader social pale. That too lies within a milieu of industrial imposts and liberties, and beyond this, the politics of state. There are no borders defining these symbolic spaces. That is to say, for those moments of inhabitation of fiction, the actor remains within artistic, social and industrial territory, under the influence of artistic, social and industrial liberties and inhibitions.

So it is that when an actor walks onstage he is walking into a fiction, yes, but that is a less resonant observation than the observation that he is walking into a work of art.

If we take an Olga out of a production of *Three Sisters*—let us say it is a superb performance—and plonk her down in another production, she will of course be lost. Her 'Olga-ness' is of limited transferability. What makes her Olga work—what brings the actor her agency—is her refined habitus developed not purely within the fictional compass, but within the artistic, the social and the political compasses. All of these developments of habitus are with her as she navigates the moment.

Ahh... The Moment. The cherished, fetishised nirvana of The Moment. The thing we are supposed to be *in*. I don't deny the importance of being in the moment, but I do ask, "What moment? Of what does the moment consist?" In the Americanised Stanislavskian tradition, it consists of fiction, and an aliveness and responsiveness inside that fiction. What I have is my John-Proctor-ness, witches flying around my head, my emotional reflexivity in relation to that fiction and the facts of my own emotional life and history, and—in the best of circumstances—a responsive connectedness to my fellow actors.

All of those things are within the moment, and are important, but I suggest they describe the moment but thinly. The fiction doesn't allow me to ride a laugh. The fiction doesn't even allow me to play an Action. The Moment is a fragment of the actor's score. Among the constrictions and misconstructions of American Stanislavskianism is the implication that this score is coherent with the fiction. The actor's score is essentially incoherent, and entirely idiosyncratic. It is a thing of light and sound, a director's note,

your mother's voice, a fragment of memory, an oblique image, a learnt rhythm, a discovered rhythm, a mathematical equation or architectural structure, a rhyme, an acronym implanted to remember a tricky bit of text, a spatial sensitivity, an impulse, a pattern of consonants and vowels, a colour, a song, a kid you went to school with: a kaleidoscope of knowledge, vagueness, lost-ness and profundity. A kite in the breeze. This is the moment. The actor's artistic score includes finding a light. Finding the light is not secondary or interruptive. Finding the light is among the little artificialities that make acting art.

If the actor is fixated only on being an inhabitant of the fiction her artistic agency is diminished. We need to train actors to be inhabitants of artworks, not merely fiction-dwellers. I have pursued this with my identification of the Aesthetic as one of the Dimensions of Acting in my book of that name. This emphasis has allowed me to do something that we traditionally find very difficult: describe actors as artists. This is rendered inarguable *only* by our engagement with the aesthetics of the stage, with artifice.

Now, to professional actors of long-standing this is stating the obvious, but two things are of interest:

1. What impact this might have on the well-being of actors;
2. That it is not a sensibility that exists with consistency or surety in our acting studios or in acting theory (although it is embedded in some theoretical rubrics, like those of Jacques Lecoq and Anne Bogart). We tend to see the rarefied acting studio as a place of pure fiction-hunting, and tend inevitably to cast the aesthetics of production, the technologies of the theatre, even collaborations with artistic colleagues, as impurities up ahead to be endured. And this is okay so long as the engagements with real acting, with being an actor, are up ahead. I'm thinking here of those of our colleagues now seeking to "train" actors purely in studio environments without access to six or eight full student productions as part of the training, or those of us working in institutions where the production house model is under threat.

But for now I want to return to the image of circles within circles and focus on the social compass. The actor walking on stage is walking into fiction, into art, and into technology. He is also walking into a society. I don't mean the society of Salem or Chekhov's moribund backwater. I mean the society of the cast. The qualities of the social relationships that have been forged have determined the artistic viscosity at every point, and continue to play out on stage. This sensitivity might be seen as an extension of what Philip Zarrilli has called the knowledges in, for and about the experiential phenomenon of acting (44).

I'm thinking of a high-profile production I saw a few years ago in which it seemed to me that the acting of the cast was patently disconnected, in which there was a near-total lack of empathic listening or spatial sensitivity or impulsive connectivity. I remember thinking at the time, "Something is deeply amiss in the social community of that cast." In the months and years that followed, I learned of a social toxicity that indeed

distinguished the experience for those actors. I think of those moments in the theatre—and I enjoyed one last year—where people say things like, “There’s a lot of love on that stage.” We can’t hide the former and we can’t fake the latter. The performance will not only evince but intensify the darkness and the light of the production’s social tenor. Where there has been social humiliation, that humiliation will be repeated and grow more deeply ingrained with each performance; where there has been joy, that joy will be reinforced and enshrined in the act of performance.

The social meets the fictive in a different way in the canonical Stanislavskian acting exercise of Public Solitude (Stanislavski, *Prepares*, 81-85). The title of the exercise is a description of the meeting of the social and the fictive. The student performs a task in an imagined familiar environment, and seeks a feeling of unselfconsciousness in the pursuit of some mundane or intricate behaviour. The criterion for success in the exercise is how close the student comes to a level of unselfconsciousness correspondent to absolute privacy. Some time ago I had the feedback from a student that he did okay in the exercise but was, from time to time, very conscious of the classmate he could see out of the corner of his eye. Not an uncommon response. Fifteen or twenty years ago, my reply to this report would have been along the lines that these moments of consciousness were distractions – essentially that they were instantaneous failures, and that the challenge ahead was in eliminating such distractions. I suspect that would be the theme of the feedback in many acting studios.

But on this occasion four or five years ago—deeply immersed in a research project that cast theatre practice as sociology – fuelled by the world-view-altering lessons of post-Malinowskian ethnography and Bourdieuan sociology, I just couldn’t bring myself to say to this student, “Your task now is to pretend your classmates don’t exist.” So instead I use this rupture to underline the reality of acting as a social project; that the publicity is as important as the solitude. “You are conscious of your classmate for the very good reason that your classmate is there. Therefore, we can say that the work of this exercise is not acting. It is an exploration of that part of acting that attends the fiction. Your total being, your selfhood, your subjectivity is finally correspondent with that of those around you.”

This intersects with ethnographer Michael Jackson’s notions of well-being as a kind of connectedness in lost-ness, the coming ‘into our own with others’ (93). Jackson invites a rejection of interiority—the reading of an isolated and independent psychological profile—as the spring of well-being, and favours social connectivity, meaningfulness, social purpose, as the true determinants. But it also comes from a reading of the late Stanislavskian shift of focus to the externally imagined Object (Crawford, *Dimensions*, 40-44).

This faith in the Object—the thing that is “out there”, outside of the self, as the thing that motivates and enables the moment—has become a central logic in my teaching. I extend the canonical acting notion beyond fiction—its Stanislavskian aim—and beyond an acknowledgement of a shared stage and auditorium, to the outer compass, the political world, and encourage students to look for social and political purpose in plays, roles, and in moments. The suggestion is—following Jackson’s theories—that these connections may allow acting to be a conduit to well-being, not a hindrance.

Let me describe one very simple exercise: one of a number I am exploring with students.

The first thing I do with students—beyond broad orientation—is to ask them to think about their grandparents, be they alive or dead. I ask them to report in what country their four grandparents were born. I write a list of the countries on a whiteboard. Currently I'm working with a very small group of only six first-year students—thanks, Minister Birmingham. Between the 7 of us, we listed 14 countries of birth of our 28 grandparents: countries of Eastern and Western Europe, South America, Asia, Africa, Australasia. I don't press hard on the multicultural implications of that list. It pretty much speaks for itself. The exercise I've been working towards for a number of years then asks students to tell a story about one of their grandparents, either from their personal experience of them, or from family lore, with details as the grandchild imagines them. This is researched and refined as a first acting exercise. My imprecise rationale for this exercise is that it touches history, it somewhat historicises the pursuit of acting, placing a highly privileged Object in an historical and political context. It sobers and centres. The acting instinctively achieves clarity, purpose and love. Acting is experienced as dedicatory and blooded.

My aim is to somehow attempt to open the work to the world. To “act with the windows open”, as I say: the windows to our imagination, and the windows to our knowledge and feelings about the world, in the moment.

The immediate pedagogical implication, of course, is that I must encourage students to take interest in the world. That's a terrifying challenge. I “get” my students for a certain amount of time, I am there to stuff into them a daunting amount of theatrical knowledge and experience, I am not a teacher of politics, history or philosophy, and they are not with me to study those disciplines. All I can do is make the world a constant reference. All I can do is frame acting as a thing occurring in the world, not discrete from it, and not entirely motivated by ego or by artistic aloofness or by fetishised virtuosity. I am unapologetic in allowing a class to travel—as it did a few weeks ago—to a précis of the history of the Louisiana Purchase. To anyone who might say, “That is not the stuff of an acting class”, I am old enough and bold enough to reply, “But what if it is?”

I am looking for the windows out of the rarefied studio, out of the elite huddle (and don't get me wrong, I'm absolutely for the training of elite talent – it is something we need to defend, but out of the huddle we tend to form around elite talent), out of the intimate one-ness of acting pedagogy and mentoring, and way out of psychological interiority, towards the other, towards art, the social manifestations of the stage and the auditorium, to the world and its histories.

I challenge students to dedicate their work to someone in the real world. Does this woman's problem exist in the town where the play is to be performed? If so, assume she will be in the audience, and do it for her. Speak to her and for her as if she was as dear to you as a grandparent.

I want to now apply this thinking about connectivity within and across my symbolic spatial compasses to a few moments in my recent experience that guided this address. They constitute three itches that I feel the need to scratch.

The first was a comment by a colleague who—in expressing concern about the well-being of a group of actors—conflated two things: the dangers and damage that might be caused by abusive behaviour in theatrical contexts, and; emotional hangovers experienced by actors in the hours, days and weeks following the performance of emotionally demanding roles.

If it is so that the reporting of concerns about well-being regularly repeat this conflation, it is more than likely because the issues are conflated in actor-respondents suffering some hurt. The fact is, however, that the only thing these two phenomena have in common is that people are hurt and deserve compassionate responses. The hurts stem from vastly different sources, and require entirely different strategies toward mending. So I glance back at my sociological compasses to attempt to make the distinctions, in the hope that clarifying sources of discontent might help clarify remedies.

It seems to me that un-wellness for actors might germinate in four broad areas:

1. in the compass of the capital-P Political, where actors' livelihoods and happiness are threatened by ascendant philistinism and market-obsession. Acting students, cursed with being both artistically-orientated and young, feel particular pressure from a federal government that seems to be conducting a war against their generation;
2. in the industrial compass, where actors are consistently subject to disconnection, disenfranchisement, radical whimsy, and infantilism by quasi-feudal overlords. It's important to qualify that point – I'm not talking about people but structures. The recent Artshub article by Queensland Theatre Company artistic director, Sam Strong, demonstrates recognition of the feudal structure in which good and compassionate colleagues—like artistic directors—find themselves inside the castle walls. Strong recommends excellent strategies for diverting the sources of poison and throwing some planks across the moats to the freelancers outside;
3. from the social compass; and
4. from the artistic (including fictive) compass.

In short, un-wellness might stem from:

1. How our society treats us;
2. How our industry treats us;
3. How we treat each other; and
4. How we approach the work.

I want to focus on the third and fourth of these delineations, as they were the two represented by the initial itch: social behaviours, and artistic emotional costs of acting. The key distinction is that one of them is around acting and the other is inside acting.

Let me begin with some thoughts about the social elements—and I have published more extensive thoughts on the social challenges for actors than I will touch on here (see Crawford, *Feudal*).

I continue to make the confession that I believe theatre practice among actors is chiefly characterised by happy, healthy human interaction, by inclusivity, respect, egalitarianism, intelligence, kindness. We now have the privilege and responsibility to acknowledge that this is not universal. There are ruptures and abuses. In making claims of goodness I am not downplaying the significance of the hurts that are felt, or the need for meaningful responses to those who are hurt, and to those who hurt. I'm not saying that anti-social behaviour is outweighed by good social behaviour and is therefore insignificant. I'm saying somewhat the opposite. I'm saying that theatre continues to be experienced by those with the privilege of experiencing it predominantly as Nick Enright described it to us as our acting teacher at NIDA: a phenomenon that occurs when people move toward each other with open hearts and open minds; that theatre's enduring tendency is for social cohesion, inclusivity and respect. It is precisely because of this that transgressions are significant. They are abuses not only against immediate victims, they are abuses against the ethos of theatre and the nobility of acting. They have gone shockingly unattended because of the unrecognised privileged immunity of some, like me, and the silence of others.

What I have learned over the last couple of years—shutting up long enough to hear the voices of wounded colleagues—is that I have experienced theatre through a lens of somewhat immunity. Stories of abuse—coming so belatedly to me, and so surprisingly, and finding me so dumb—suggest that with the continual forming and reforming of theatre's social groups, the inequities attendant upon their construction tend to be replicated within them: imbalances breeding imbalances. My research has shown, for example, that marginal players in a rehearsal room practice social marginality, and that leading players practice social centrality. We need to foster a culture where this peculiar social behaviour is recognised as part of the work, not reflective of the social value and the rights of anyone. The quality of mercy is not strained by the size of one's role. These kinds of sensitivities, this kind of intelligence, and an equal voice for all are among the changes that I hope and I believe are now happening.

Theatre is not a rotten barrel, but the caution has been given to this theatre-tragic that the good stuff won't be maintained without acknowledgement, strategy and vigilance.

Many of our theatre companies have developed codes of behaviour and are asking all actors to sign them before commencing work. This is an appropriate thing for companies to do—I am on the board of one of them, and have endorsed it—but as an actor, the code posted in the greenroom is not why I'm going to behave the way that I'm going to behave. My problem with the codes of behaviour is that they infantilise actors. The codes tend to frame actors as naughty children who must behave in the adults' house as the adults instruct, and they consequently tend to frame the adults, the

authors of the codes—directors and management—as pious signatories to their own absolution. What does that have to do with us as teachers? Well, who would dare to suggest that the dangers of power-imbalances that might beset acting schools should implicitly exclude teachers? As a teacher and course leader, I hope I can deal with these things—I hope I am dealing with these things—not by infantilising my students, but through processes that might follow the modest, folk-beat of intersubjectivity (Jackson, *Ethnographica*). As an actor, I will sign the code, because it is consistent with how I conduct myself. But I will also make this point to my cast-mates: “Let us behave well toward each other not because the boss tells us to, but because we are actors. If one of us is treated disrespectfully, we are all treated disrespectfully, and acting is treated disrespectfully. There may be great and small roles, and great and small cv’s, but we take our bows together, and we look after each other, because that is what actors do! We are not naughty children. We do not need well-meaning colleagues casting themselves as our adults. We are inheritors and protectors of noble and good things: theatre and acting.”

I love acting, and I won’t forego or betray its beauty and goodness. Acting is a social project. The work will evince the society. The work is the society.

The other element in what I’ve described as this conflation is the notion of emotional cost of acting to actors. On this, I’m afraid I have a frank and uncomfortable belief to share. If an electrician goes from job to job continually electrocuting herself, I will ask, “What is she doing wrong?” If an actor is more than a little troubled for more than a little while after performing a role of emotional scale, I ask the same question: “What is she doing wrong?” Because she is doing something wrong.

Acting must be joyful. Amateurs say “good luck” to each other; professionals say “have fun”. So have fun.

My question to advanced students—particularly relevant in the context of emotionally demanding material—is always, “Was it fun?” You’ve ended the scene with a genuine emotional connection to grief; we have identified that emotional connection as being subject to any number of external stimuli; we have identified that emotion as a function of motion; even if you have acknowledged your personal experience of grief, you have assiduously avoided immediate reference to it in the moment; we have named the emotion of the moment an ‘artistic cousin’ of grief, not real grief; we have acknowledged that the actor’s emotion is of no intrinsic value; you have dedicated the moment to someone who might be in our audience, and identified the acting as story-telling; you will find the light, and so render the fiction as art; you have made a connection to the world, and so rendered the art purposeful. Nonetheless, you are in tears. Was it fun? If the answer is no, then one of two things is true: either you’re still doing it wrong, or you shouldn’t be doing it.

I hope this “tough love” can be seen as such: a strategy of avoidance of hurt. I won’t guide actors to pursue acting in a destructive way.

Through Medea, through Hamlet, via connectivity, purpose, privilege, to joy!



The second of the three inciting moments for this address was seeing an ad on my Facebook feed a few months ago. It was a notice for a series of acting classes for Australian actors aimed at readying them for ‘Pilot Season in the US’.

Why did this disturb me, and make me feel that I had landed on another planet?

At the risk of seeming merely nostalgic—let the chips of nostalgia fall where they may, I say—the message we were given at NIDA, implicitly and explicitly, was: You are being prepared for a career in Australian theatre. Go make Australian theatre great. While there was regular crowing about the success of Mel and Judy in the US (well might a school be proud of such distinguished graduates) we understood that phenomenon as a kind of lottery-wheel spinning around on another axis. It would pick up whomever it picked up, while we all kept our focus on Australian drama on stage.

But how has the Australian theatre changed since I graduated from NIDA 34 years ago? At that time there were professional regional theatre companies all over the country. Throughout the 1990s we watched them all squeezed out of existence. In the 1980s, a Sydney actor might prepare for playing Rosencrantz at the Sydney Theatre Company by playing Hamlet in Newcastle, Townsville or Wagga. The central counterclaim of those who opposed the establishment of the Major Performing Arts companies was that the creation of flagships would sink the rest of the fleet. That is precisely what happened.

The Australian theatrical landscape is so reduced by the destructive and cynical instrument of nurture and decay that is the MPA funding structure, that any student told today to dedicate his working life to the Australian theatre industry has the right to laugh in our face: “What fucking industry?”

So I’m not critical of colleagues proposing that students look to American tv to make a living, or of the actors who do so, but when I saw that advertisement for that Pilot Season course it struck me that nothing could symbolise the distance we have travelled these thirty years more thoroughly than that little piece of marketing.

Not critical, but worried. I worry about what it means for Australian theatre and what it means for young actors and graduates. I continue to work with well-trained, excellent young actors who are every bit as committed to theatre as I was and am. The work is scarce. It always has been. I fear it is scarcer than ever for these young colleagues. Perhaps more threatening are governmental pressures on young people between jobs—the tortures of Centrelink and associated privatised harassment agencies. As has always been the case, some will still be actors when they’re fifty, most will not. All actors who come to the decision to seek a divorce from acting face a challenge that requires a little bravery. No one gets out of here without tears.

I believe in the old lefty notion that a society might be judged by the circumstances of its poorest citizens, so I wonder if our industry should be judged by the experiences of those not “making it”. But in a country where one can no longer walk a block of our major cities without encountering people sleeping and living rough—those who have failed to position themselves to reap the benefits of the great trickle down—this notion seems quaint. What is the nature of an actor’s failure? Is it determined by the nature of

the pursuit? How is it different for those actors who chase American pilots? In Bourdieuan terms, what are the stakes and values of that field? What is the *illusio*? And what is being reinforced through us, and in us, by our engagement with it? (Bourdieu, *Rules*, 172, and *Meditations* 11, 102) I have spoken to a number who have tried the US couch-surfing life for between two and ten years, and failed. And I have been struck by how profoundly they feel that failure, how hard their landing seems to have been, and how disabled and disconnected they seem for alternative pathways in life, or for ongoing faith in the art of acting. Is there something more organic about failure in the cottage industry of Australian theatre, an industry fitted for failure? Is it easier to fall from the smelly former set-piece couches of our green rooms than it is to fall from the imported leather settees of Hollywood waiting halls?

And might this relate to intersubjectivity: to a sense of community-in-journeying, connections to audience, connections to other actors, relative agency inside projects, the identification of social purpose? Is there something intrinsically less connected about acting in television and film, even when we get the job? Acting in front of a green screen for the interests of a commercial shooter game may be interesting, skilful, and assumes sound pedagogical legitimacy via canonical acting practices and theories (sensory recall and neutral mask, for example), and may earn some good bucks for a happy few, but is there sufficient social purpose at the heart of that pursuit, for example, to bring it to the centre of a training course? Is it easier to find purpose in the shared space of the stage and the wrap of a live audience? Is the social *raison d'être*—dare I say, the moral—of the work in which we “ground” acting students a thing of lasting significance? Is the work’s social ambition the stuff of longevity? Did not the VCA, for example, begin its pursuit of actor-training with a manifesto for just the kind of connection to social and political purpose that I am advocating? What cultural capital is accrued by actors? How is it accrued, and to what lasting benefit? I was in the first production of John O’Donaghue’s *Essington Lewis, I Am Work*, in Newcastle in 1981: a play written and partially set in Newcastle, a play about work in a working-class town, performed by a mainly untrained cast of locals. Audiences became packed with workers. Spontaneous standing ovations—total standing ovations from audiences who didn’t necessarily know what a standing ovation was—every night. Decades later I said to Jonathan Biggins—who was also in that cast—that it was a blessing and a curse. We understood as 19- and 20-year-olds that this was special, but we didn’t understand that this was as good as it gets. What value that experience in our careers and lives? Well, I carry from that experience the knowledge that theatre can—though it rarely is—it *can be* like that. Cultural capital begins with and is dependent upon cultural ambition. Among the many things to grieve in the loss of our regional professional theatre network is that their regionality tended toward social connectivity. In this way, these smaller professional companies were not merely the secondary outliers of Australian theatre, they were the exemplars – they achieved things that MPAs do not achieve, and are discouraged from achieving. They were not the outer branches but the roots.

These broader reflections lead me back to the questions: Can Australian actors afford to overlook Australian theatre for LA couch-surfing? Is it a healthy pursuit?

I make the assertion that we can't teach the purpose of acting without theatre. Finally, I suspect it is not acting that holds us, but theatre. Isn't that among the lessons we mark for delivery to the 18-year-old who comes to us with nothing but an ambition to be Heath Ledger? Don't we instinctively want to recalibrate that naiveté? To politicise? Not to mention the darkly ironic instinct: to save? We can't do it without theatre for the earlier reasons I suggested, that theatre practice delivers the non-fictive elements that turn acting into art (that is, in the studio I can teach someone how to act; but only in the theatre can they learn how to be an actor), and we can't do it without theatre because theatre has—I will continue to argue—inherent social properties; social properties that can and do manifest in actors as life-affirming and joyful: as well-ness.

With the reduced theatre sector and an increased strategy of looking toward the US to build a career, Americanised Stanislavskianism, which we fought pretty hard and pretty successfully to keep down in the hole for a number of decades, seems to be on the increase in its reach and influence in Australia. This concerns me from a cultural point of view, but also in relation to well-being. Where the pathways of acting practice lead inward to psychologising, emotionalising, autobiography, and where the pathways of career-ambition lead overseas, to isolation from family, friends, cultural reference and cultural coherence, we should continue to expect young Australian actors to be destabilised and isolated by acting. They are isolated because Americanised Stanislavskianism wilfully isolates them, and sees their isolation—even a kind of spiritual self-immolation—as its purpose.

The third itch that I want to briefly scratch stems from a conversation I had at a dinner party recently with one of Australia's leading playwrights. We were discussing the emotional impact of acting on actors. He was very sympathetic and concerned, both for them and for his own work. He said, "My job is to create traumatic circumstances for characters. To ask actors to enact trauma. Am I now being asked to check that, or to stop doing that?"

Finally, what do I tell my playwright friend?

Don't surrender your art for the sake of bad acting and bad teaching. Don't surrender your vision in the face of a neglected and depleted industry. Bring us the trauma of life that surrounds you and surrounds us. Compel us to look toward the world as you look toward it. Compel us to connect, to politicise, to historicise as you do. Compel us to dig our feet into our own earth; to dance as the Wiradjuri people danced on this land. To the same purpose. Connect us, that we might learn social connectivity as a renewed purpose and inspiration for our art. Such that a way of acting that is purposeful, political and joyful, might become a way of being.

Thank you.

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