Beyond Real(ism): An Investigation of the Twenty-First Century Transformational Actor and Identity

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Transformational acting is a fragile, technical process reflective of blowing a soap bubble. This type of realism-based acting, different to personality acting I will refer to as actors *disappearing* into characters. When they *disappear*, they begin living in a metaphoric bubble breathing life into its contents, keeping it afloat. Transformational actors work in fantasy worlds that could *pop* at any moment. A dangerous 'floating world' replicating the world actors live in *with* fictional character, moving from identity to identity. Actors sometimes 'lose' themselves in these imaginary 'worlds,' *disappear* inside this metaphorical bubble or it bursts depositing an unexpected psychological 'mess' on the rehearsal room, stage or virtual Zoom floor. Actors 'becoming' the character is a familiar statement in acting theory texts but what does this do to the actor's identity? There is currently little clarity or practical investigation into what happens to the actor in transformation. How could the process of transformation develop a language that grounds the phenomenon through *disappearance*? Studies blending cognitive science shed light on the transformational acting process, while keeping strong, 'sticky' hooks in 'mysticism' and acting folklore. My paper borrows from Leder's theory of *disappearance*, *dys-appearance* and *social dys-appearance* as an innovative lens viewing actors 'disappearing into characters' as an ever changing state of transformation relational to gender. My paper engages discourse in psychological and identity in acting, alongside the work of Mirodan and Stanislavsky to discuss the practice of transforming, highlighting the criticality of knowing who we are and what we do, when we act.

Key words: Transformational acting, realism, identity, Leder, Mirodan

There is only one thing about which I have no doubt – that to be able to transform oneself physically and spiritually is the first and principle object of acting art. (Stanislavsky and Hapgood, 1958, p. 18)

A TRANSFORMATIONAL DEFINITION

Stanislavsky's statement characterises the 'art of acting' as having the quality of transformation. 'As we well know from Stanislavsky, the process of interpreting a role engages the actor in a highly creative, psychophysical process that culminates in actualizing and living or experiencing that role as fully as possible on stage" (Zarrilli 2013, p. 7). What occurs within the identity of the individual actor reaching the point of stepping onstage and *living* the role, I suggest is transformational. Stanislavsky's work although important is based in a nineteenth century definition of a character actor prefaced in his statement '[t]here can only be one type of actor – the character actor' (Stanislavsky and Hapgood, 1958, p. 18). But what is the identity of the twenty-first century transformational actor? '[T]he "transformational" actor embodies varying personalities according to the role. I avoid the use of the term "character actor" to describe the latter, because that term is also used in "typing" to distinguish actors who play secondary roles from those who play leads'(Kemp, 2010a). Kemp points to a similarity between character acting and transformational acting as shifting between fictional and non-fictional identities. He says a character actor is also known to be support roles and not leads. He hints towards transformational acting as being both. Kemp's definition connects the twenty-first century to Stanislavsky and his strong beliefs about the character actor. I suggest a character actor *is* a transformational actor who plays lead and support roles and, '[h]e [she] must fit his [her] own human qualities to the life of this other person, and pour into it all of his [her] own soul' (Stanislavski, 2013, p. 13). This type of acting uses technique, lived expertise, creativity and imagination for producing realism in text-based performance. The transformation takes place bodily and psychologically; in '[p]osture, gait, gestural range, vocal qualities (pitch, timbre, tone, resonance), accent/dialect, breathing rhythms'(Mirodan, 2019, p. 19). Stanislavsky encouraged the actor to go beyond what the actor believes they are into what the character asks of them stating 'we have in us the elements of all human characteristics, good and bad. An actor should use his art and his technique to discover, by natural means, those elements which it is necessary for him to develop for his part'(Stanislavsky and Hapgood, 2013, p. 153). Stanislavsky built his system on the premise of fully *living the character's life* and transformation allows the actor to do exactly this.

IDENTIFYING THE RESEARCH IN A STICKY PRACTICE

Working out who we are as individuals daily is a life-long, handwritten story. Human beings identify through routines from the jobs we undertake and who we have relationships with, our past, present and plans. Where we come from also gives us a powerful sense of identity. To know who we are becomes a critical necessity switching between fictional and non-fictional identities. '[T]he ability to take on another's view of reality that is central to effective acting'(Hannah, 1994, p. 279) can also be losing one's own view. I am a practice-based researcher and transformational actor who investigates the 'psychology of transformation' (Mirodan, 2019, p. p.41), an under-populated area of expertise and its colleague, identity in acting, even lonelier. Identity in acting is important because 'tension may exist between the actor's own identity and his or her character's identity'(Nemiro, 1997, p. 229), and little is known of its impacts and effects. Although identity in acting could be a widely research practice-based area, the bulk of research to date is theoretical; quantitative and qualitative. Acting and identity are complex umbrellas in acting theory and have limited language to talk about transforming and disappearing into characters in *on-the-floor*, practical words. The field of psychology has made great advances to understand what we do, when we act. Studies blending cognitive science shed light on the transformational acting process, while keeping strong, 'sticky' hooks in 'mysticism' and acting folklore. Theory can only reach so far to grasp the process of transforming into another living, breathing, fictional human being. In this paper I will analyse the fragile, at times opaque process of transformational acting and identity, using the work of Mirodan and the psychological theories of Leder. My practice-based paper discusses, through Leder's theory of *disappearance*, *dys-appearance* and *social dys-appearance*, the intricacies transformational actors, I now refer to as the TA, develop using a language-based in *disappearing* into realistic character. The type of acting I refer to is popular in text-based Western theatre, but there are overlaps with other acting styles and most likely with other cultural practices of acting. The methods applied to the investigation of the identity of the transformational actor are rooted in Stanislavsky's teaching and other offshoots such as Hagen and Method.

DISAPPEARING INTO METAPHORIC BUBBLES

This practice-based paper on the identity of the twenty-first century transformational actor employs two metaphorical frames. One is the bubble metaphor whose ''outer' is there to cover the 'inner' with a protective shell' (Mirodan, 2019, p. 18). I unpack and decode the iridescent ideas of *disappearance, dys-appearance* and *social dys-appearance*; a new lens for interrogating the identity of the twenty-first century transformational actor. Transformative acting can be metaphorically akin to the art of blowing a soap bubble. I'm not suggesting character is a soap-filled illusion created by air, but I am proposing an alchemic reaction transmuting one substance into another. For example, the liquid substance (the soap) is gathers up in a circle-shaped wire apparatus, a wand (sometimes a wire coat hanger bent into a shape), and air passes by blowing, through the viscous liquid hanging on the wand. The air moves at just the right tempo and rhythm creating the bubble as it stretches through the frame and it transforms into a bubble. The bubble forms from 'a competition between the pressure of the gas jet and the surface tension of the soap film' (Conover, 2016, para.1). The bubble leaves the frame, and it floats magically into the air with a skin-shaped tight around the contents giving it *life.* The bubble pops becoming liquid again, but the liquid changes forever, it will never be the same as it once was having gone through transformation. Analysing this metaphor further, the liquid soap solution is information extracted from text, the wire frame is the actor's physical body and mind, and the air inside the bubble is *life*, holding with it, images from the actor's imagination. The bubble metaphor shows how an outer layer makes visible the inner contents and its form tell us, it is a bubble. A character's outer form shows a visible human being whose internal life may be opaque, but we know they exist *in their bubble* until they disappear.

Theatrical disappearance is a well-propagated subject area particularly in theatre and performance studies. Phelan says disappearance in theatre is 'an active vanishing'(Phelan, 1993, p. 19) but Leder's disappearance 'trades on the frequent use of *dis-* as a straightforward prefix of negation. To "disappear" in this sense is simply to not-appear'(Leder, 1990, p. 27). Where Phelan moves our thinking 'toward a consideration of performance as that which disappears'(Phelan, 2003, p. 293) and this includes theatre and actors. Leder defines

disappearance as a corporeal and psychological integration of a human body and all its working parts. 'In the modes of disappearance previously addresses, the body is away from direct experience. This could be called a primary absence. It is this self-effacement that first allows the body to open out onto a world'(Leder, 1990, pp. 90-91). Leder's theories are rooted in bodily and psychophysical practice influenced by the phenomenological and existentialism of Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau Ponty. The theories make a snug fit to substitute acting theories tied to popular practitioners and schools of thought often muddying the practice with opinions and bias. 'Transformative acting entails a 'conversation' during which actors deliberately guide spectators towards a particular understanding of their characters, by means of their bodies'(Mirodan, 2019, p. 2). Leder speaks through the body, to the psychological, looking for information about how the individual interacts as human and unique identity. Looking at transformational acting through Leder's *disappearance*, the healthy human body acts a second metaphor for the actor's relationship with character. The actor *disappearing* into the character is to say the actor becomes a part of the character, and the character a part of the actor and they expand as one being towards the world. Neither appears as dominant to the other, the same way a healthy body would present with all its limbs and organs in order. The character and actor share a heart and skin interacting with fictional and non-fictional given circumstances. The functional body creates the image a whole, *human* being and the actor joins with the fictional character to maintain and sustain its physical and psychological life for the duration of the story. 'Actors bring to their creative process two separate identities - their own and that of the character's being portrayed' (Nemiro, 1997, p. 230). In Leder's *disappearance* (working with realism), the fictional and non-fictional merge into one shared body; an illusion identifying *as* character.

Both metaphors offer new ways of viewing acting in realism outside of acting theories tied to Stanislavsky, Method, and Hagen. The body metaphor, like the bubble, enables a combination viewpoint of the imaginative and empirical accessing ways of analysing transforming and *disappearing* independently to popular acting theories and approaches. Transformational acting in realism is a fragile, technical process and like the bubble it has a practical component and a magical, mystery component science endeavours to explain. Sciences have not yet decoded, disapproved or demystified it as a practice. The actor and character co-create

the illusion of a human being 'living in a bubble'*;* 'a protected or fortunate situation which is isolated from reality or unlikely to last'(2020). The bubble is sustained for varying periods of time, with innumerable bubbles existing in the life span of a transformational actor. The bubble metaphor represents an imaginary world the transformational actor creates for the character to *disappear* into and *dys-appear* out of.

DYS-APPEARANCE: A WAY TO TALK ABOUT FEELINGS AND SEPARATIONS

To *dys-appear* in Leder's theory is to do the opposite of *disappearing*. The metaphorical healthy body transforms to a *dys*-functional unhealthy 'body.' To say the actor and character *dys-appear* is to say they stop co-creating the illusion of a healthy body; they are no longer a part of the same metaphorical body as they once were. I am not indicating it is unhealthy for an actor to not play a character in *dys-appearance*. 'In dys-appearance the body folds back upon itself. Yet this mode of self-presence constitutes a secondary absence; the body is away from the ordinary or desired state, from itself, and perhaps from the experienced 'I'(Leder, 1990, pp. 90-91). In realism-based acting, TA's speaking *as* is first person "I." Speaking as the "I" proposes a state of *disappearance*. In *dys-appearance*, TA transforming out of "I" is to be actor *as* character, not actor *and* character. *Dys-appearance* has two applications as it 'categorises not only the limits of vital functioning but those of affectivity. I may become aware of a raging anger twisting my body or a lethargic depression leaving me limp. […] Anxiety provides a good example of this phenomenon'(Leder, 1990, pp. 85 - 86). *Dys-appearance* also occurs when emotions and feeling states dominate; take priority over the body and its healthy, 'normal' functioning. An example Leder uses points towards the effects of anxiety changing the temperature and feeling of the skin or being looked at adoringly and blushing (1990). To look at transformational acting through the affective mode of *dys-appearance* is to suggest the attention of the actor on heightened emotion-feeling states is not normal functioning but to the contrary, it is vital. This is where I propose using Leder as a lens on transformational acting is invaluable. To say the actor is often in a heightened emotional state is to suggest the actor is often *dys-appearing* and more so than most human beings. *Dys-appearance* in the affective mode happens with positive and

negative emotions; emotions for the TA to decipher *as* character and self. Deducing affective responses is a process that helps diverse types of actors including the TA to create a character. But, *dys-appearing* must also happen between actor and character to allow the actor's identity to 'resurface' and prioritise itself. The identifying point to transformational acting Leder's theory shows, like the bubble moving from liquid to bubble returning to liquid, the TA moves from disappearance to dys-appearance and back again. The TA is changed in ways we do not yet fully understand.

SOCIAL DYS-APPEARANCE AND SPLITTING IDENTITY

Social dys-appearance is an important lens in Leder's theory describing what happens between human beings when they criticise and judge using a negative gaze. The unfavourable gaze positions one person as an *object* and the other as *subject* destabilising their equality. A split is created 'by the incorporated gaze of the Other'(Leder,1990, p.96) and it is often transformational in a negative way to the person receiving it. In the example of Stanislavsky observing and critiquing himself, *social dys-appearance* can be pointed to in the way he speaks and judges 'the creature.'

> I was my own observer at the same time that another part of me was being a fault-finding, critical creature. Yet can I really say that that creature is not a part of me? I derived him from my own nature. I divided myself as it were, into two personalities. One continued as an actor, and the other was an observer.(Stanislavski, 2013, p. 15)

Stanislavsky 'splitting' identity happens between actor and self as exampled in *dys-appearance*. He is neither fully 'Stanislavsky,' he is observer and actor, recognising both identities as being a division of a whole. In the metaphorically healthy body, this example is a head separated from a torso, or legs without a torso. The main point in this example is Stanislavsky is judging himself and does not succumb to self-criticism but make it into a self-observation about process. In reflecting on the opening quote, this observation is indicative a step in Stanislavsky exploring *transformation. Social dys-appearance* sees 'the

primary stance of the Other is highly distanced, antagonistic, or objectifying'(Leder, 1990, p. 96). The TA is suggested to experience the effects of *social dys-appearance* onstage, offstage and potentially within the self, as Stanislavsky experienced seeing themselves as Other. '[M]ost actors simultaneously create a "me" and "not me", an oscillation between self and other that takes place in rehearsal and during performance'(Thomson, 2012, p. 361). It is also suggested *social dys-appearance* can temporarily impact upon the TA when personal belief systems are in opposition to the fictional character and their behaviour.

Theatrical narratives contain elements of *social dys-appearance* often fuelling theatricalised, dramatic tension between women and men. '[A]n overview of the Australian theatrical canon shows a theatre that has long been dominated by male playwrights and directors writing and directing men's stories'(Haining & Heim, 2019, p. 14). The overview suggests theatrical narratives are told through a male lens positioning the female transformational actor, the FTA, in a closer relationship with *social dys-appearance*. 'In the realm of theatrical production, the gaze is owned by the male'(Case, 1988, p. 118)' which means the gaze is often directed from a high status position onto females as lower status or subordinate 'bubble'. 'Historically, the female characters of Australian theatre tended to serve as a reflection of men's perspectives of women failing to challenge the clearly Anglophile ethos of traditional gender roles'(Haining & Heim, 2019, p. 17). Whilst Leder considers *social dys-appearance* relevant to all human beings he 'acknowledges the greater vulnerability of some bodies to the alienating, objectifying gaze and the power discrepancies that it implies' (Gimlin, 2002, p. 703). This means that *social dys-appearance* is more likely to impact the identity of the FTA as she intersects with double the narratives (offstage and on) criticising and oppressing the female, gendered body.

GENDERED DIFFERENCES IN TRANSFORMATION

The actors' physical body often acts as a barometer through receive and read affective, *dys-appearing* states. The gendered body of the FTA and male transformational actor MTA interpret affectivity differently. It is well-known females and males experience biological differences and they also experience affective differences shown by *social dys-appearance*.

'Leder acknowledges that women's bodies do not *disappear* in the same way that men's do'(Gimlin, 2002, p. 704) and this suggests they do not *dys-appear* the same way either. Although gendered differences are explicit, I propose they are not yet fully investigated in ways that empower and embody them as strengths in transformational acting practice particularly when using realism. '[M]ale and female actors are expected to embody emotions and females to reflect social expectations'(Tait, 2008, p. 89) and many of the social expectations still consist of patriarchal images of what females *should* and *should not* be.

> When a female is asked to align with an unhealthy gender role, to search for self-revelations that are demeaning, and to yield personal autonomy to a potentially exploitative authority figure, a syzygy occurs that usually reinforces a woman's already negative ontological development. (Malouf, 1985, p. 66)

The FTA interacts with *social dys-appearance* onstage in narratives often objectifying and sexualising her body, pressuring her into a low status 'bubble.' She also intersects with it offstage in daily life and multiple negative bubbles may stick to one another as she gathers information to play the character from daily Western life. This double exposure can occur in subtle and intensive ways, and sometimes over extended periods of time. Women are 'expected to pay meticulous attention to their surface appearance, including hairstyle, make-up, dress, weight, and figure and skin tone. This exhibits the principle of *social dys-appearance'* (Leder, 1990, p. 99). As Leder observes, women are directed to pay close attention to the outer body, the shiny skin of the bubble more so than the *inner life* it holds. The gaze of *social dys-appearance* highlights some of the gender discrepancies between the FTA and MTA occurring onstage and well as offstage.

SOCIAL DYS-APPEARANCE AND THE SELF-CRITICISM OF ACTORS

Actors playing *real characters* is one of the oxymorons of realistic acting. Sometimes actors are asked to transform into realistic characters who are incompatible with their social or cultural 'bubbles' or with their body types. At these points of conflict between the personal and professional, *social dys-appearance* comes into play. Looking through the lens of Leder's

social dys-appearance, hypothetically, what if the actor's identity is affected by the character, they play transforming physical and psychological 'bodies' negatively?

> Based in historically and culturally specific power discrepancies linked to factors such as gender, 'race'/ethnicity and physical capacity, social dys-appearance provokes an explicit bodily thematization in the disadvantaged. Sexism, for example, causes women to 'receive more reminders of the visceral domain' and to be more conscious of their bodies than men. (Leder, 1990, p. 99)

Leder is right in women being primary sufferers of body image pressures and extremities of eating disorders. A gender-contrasting example in the recent disclosure of Christopher Eccleston about his battle with anorexia nervosa shows body image and acting are complex and intricately linked to *types* of roles actors play. Eccleston, well-known as one of the many Doctor Who incarnations, interviewing on "*Lorraine*" (Kelly, 2019) stated anorexia gave him an appearance that rewarded him in the industry for looking a certain way. Inspiring Eccleston to lose more weight, he controlled his image and increased possibilities of roles he could play. Eccleston indicates the effects of *social dys-appearance* as body image issues leading to anorexia as Leder has stated.

> Since childhood, he had suffered from body image problems. He wanted to be androgynous – "Still do, because I feel like a prop forward" – but he knew his mum and dad wouldn't have tolerated their kid dabbling in eye liner on the streets of working-class Salford, where he grew up' (Jonze, 2020, para.11).

I suggest by wining physical approval, Eccleston received more job offers but I suggest the types of roles received were stereotypically masculine in many instances. Eccleston points out the freedom in expressing himself in the feminine and rewards of fulfilling a Northern English obligation to masculinity and his ongoing struggle with image. The experience of *social dys-appearance* traumatizes Eccleston becoming a part of his identity as it is with many actresses in Western culture.

Actresses are exposed to greater intensities of *social dys-appearance* as I have pointed out already they are tied more firmly to bodily judgements and image pressures. *Social dys-appearance* hovers and descends on the FTA's daily existence particularly if she is asked to conform to the socio-cultural gaze of Western beauty and femininity standards. I suggest some of the well-known reasons why actresses potentially *blow* out and sometimes *burst* their biologically determined frame and replace it with a smaller or larger more stereotypically 'compliant' version is due to negatively stereotyped roles and social dys-appearance contained in the narrative and the experience of the actress. For example: Actress Portia De Rossi well-known from the television series *Ally McBeal*, discloses her eating disorder autobiographically in *Unbearable Lightness*(2010). De Rossi, also known as Amanda Rogers, talks on the subject of winning the role and maintaining the identity of Hollywood actress. Under the influence of social dys-appearance, De Rossi works to fit gendered expectations according to Hollywood standards. 'Throughout most of her narrative, De Rossi is indeed a 'hidden anorexic." In fact, her slenderness - before it becomes dangerous and grotesque -looking - wins her praise and admiration'(Bagno-Simon, 2016, p. 121) just like Eccleston's. Her fear of losing approval escalates with what I suggest is extreme *social dys-appearance*. The fear seems irrational and yet, reasonable to De Rossi knowing her appearance is one of the reasons she is cast in the role. Losing the character of Nelle Porter, threaten her livelihood.

> If this reckless eating continued into the following day, I'd get fat and I'd end up in TV purgatory, kept on the show due to an unbreakable contract, yet disappearing, making only the occasional background cross as my character's life with all the promise of great story lines faded into the blank page from whence it came.(De Rossi, 2010, p. 60)

The fear of losing her job, the character, Nelle Porter, disappearing because De Rossi gets 'fat' *outweighs* rational thinking. De Rossi transformed herself from model to actress in the film, *Sirens* (Duigan, 1994) alongside Elle McPherson. De Rossi's physical appearance has been a bubbling blowing framework for her career success in transformational acting. De Rossi discloses, 'I discovered while filming *Sirens* that acting was transformative. I

discovered that you could be someone other than who you were and get attention for it, be applauded for it. And all of that was very appealing to me—especially the part about being someone else'(De Rossi, 2010, p. 114). Being someone else, and losing the self also helped De Rossi to hide her sexuality. She did not openly allow her identity as a lesbian to become public knowledge for some time, and never throughout the filming of Ally McBeal. De Rossi could not afford to disrupt the heteronormative Hollywood framework reifying female gendered stereotypes. Instead, like Eccleston, she turned the narrative back on herself, unlike Stanislavsky who saw his creature as separate and still a part of his identity, De Rossi endeavors to transform completely into someone else. Eccleston's experience shows gendered characters could contribute to TA's experiencing *social dys-appearance,* literally physically and psychologically vanishing in self-destructive ways. 'Social dys-appearance may lead to biological dysfunction; a case in point is the current epidemic of anorexia nervosa'(Leder, 1990, p. 99). De Rossi shows us physical beauty is transformative for the viewer and of great currency for an actress. Feeling shame, and not feeling good enough to satisfy appetites, for fear of losing work, positions the TA's power to transform as one of its weaknesses.

DYS-IDENTIFICATION: A FINDING

Examining the identity of the twenty-first century TA through *disappearance* and *dys-appearance* is to further question identity as they move between the two. What happens to the TA in between *disappearance* and *dys-appearance*? Borrowing from Leder's theory, *dys-identification* is a new term I built on Leder's work. It describes a hypothetical interim state where the TA is *not fully actor* and *not fully character* indicating a state of flux, a slight suspension of identity. I propose the autonomous "I" of the actor (not *as* character) is temporarily *displaced*; 'put out of the proper or usual place'(Oxford English Dictionary, 2020). *Dys-identification* is the transition between the two identities of actor and not actor Stanislavsky hypothetically passes through in the previous example of actor/observer. He makes a clear distinction between himself and a 'creature,' another identity or facet of himself, a critical *socially dys-appearing* one. He would most likely transform back into himself, into *disappearance*. *Dys-identification* is different to disassociation,

dys-identification being a state of mind that includes *dys*-embodiment, *dys-appearance* and 'boundary blurring' (Panero, 2019, p. 432). Boundary blurring may result from 'choosing those actors who bear some psychological as well as physical resemblance to the character they are to portray'(Hannah, 1994, p. 278). Boundary blurring describes fictional and non-fictional identities getting 'mixed up' causing the TA trauma and to *dys-identify*. '[T]he actor's previous mental stability and ability to control the degree of boundary blurring' (Panero, 2019, p. 432) is a contributing factor to the degree of impact in *dys-identification*. Disassociation suggests itself to be an extreme and prolonged form of *dys-identification*.

> The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric association (APA) 2013 describes disassociation as an interruption or break in the typical integration of consciousness, memory, identity, emotion, perception, body representation, motor control or behaviour. (ibid, 2019, p. 433)

I suggest when transformational actors *dys-identify,* it is an unconscious flux in identity trying to rebalance fictional and non-fictional identities transforming out of theatrical context and into *offstage* life. Unlike disassociation, *dys-identification* purports a flux or lapse in self-identification, a slight disorientation in recognising and maintain a 'sense of self' that actors experience as a result of playing someone else. Hagen lectures, 'First, you must learn to know who you are. You must find your own sense of identity, enlarge this sense of self, and learn to see how that knowledge can be put to use in the characters you will portray on stage'(Hagen, 1973, p. 22) . The actor is destabilised in identity, the opposite of Hagen's advice, mostly likely shifts into extremities of boundary blurring and the effects of this are not yet in concrete. Hypothetically, without a stable identity to return to, the actor 'living in a bubble' has no point of origin and therefore no identifiable 'substance' from which they came. *Dys-identification* requires a deeper investigation of its impacts and effects.

LOSING ONESELF IN A METAPHORIC BUBBLE

Using the metaphor of the bubble, transformational acting in realism can be viewed as mimetic surfaces sticking together in a complex fragile form. Realism is 'a truthful relation between world and word, model and copy, nature and image' (Diamond 1993, p.3) fiction and non-fiction. But sometimes the reflection is an imitation I suggest has no originating source. Using the metaphor of the bubble, the TA takes the script and creates the character, blowing *life* into it. The script transforms into the character experiencing 'life in the bubble' and it is a representation of an idea, an illusion co-created through consistent rehearsal and practice. But '[i]f teaching, training and rehearsal are […] 'brain modification' working on biological and cultural fronts, this must change our sense of what acting is' (Blair 2006, p.173) and what transformation does on a professional, long-term basis. I suggest acting is part brain modification and part imagination, the evidence being a fictional realistic character 'living in a bubble.' A part of the longevity of the bubble is the TA's ability to sustain the existence of it without an originating image and this takes a strong imagination. But if 'the neural biology with which we are born interacts with our environment and experiences to determine the particular way our individual set of neural paths – and […] our self – develops'(Blair, 2006, p. 171) what does this mean for the TA forming another self? Leder's definition of *disappearing* and *dys-appearing* allows us to look at actor and their transforming *into* characters as a natural and normal, healthy process specific to transformational acting. To lose control and *become* the character through a complex rewiring of the brain is another conversation beyond the metaphor of the bubble or body. 'Losing oneself' and 'becoming someone else' are tropes used by many actors to explain their feelings of non-recognition of self when developing and playing a part' (Luckhurst, 2019, p. 83). To *lose* the self is to know what 'self' is but in transformational acting, the identity of the actor and self, is sometimes *socially dys-appeared*, *disappearing*, *dys-appearing* and *dys-identifying*.

TRANSFORMATIONAL ACTING AND PERSONALITY ACTING: A "TRUE" COMPARISON

Stanislavsky's passion towards transformational acting as the only type of acting is backed by years of exploration, analysing distinct types of acting, inventorying what methods worked. Stanislavsky knew what kind of acting told the best stories to his audiences, in service of the growing popularity of realism (which has not slowed down). In *Corruption and Discipline* (1966) Stanislavsky clarifies two types of actors; one true actor and one, he rails against as a less desirable type.

> Let us discuss for a moment the profession of a true actor. He is a creative artist and is work is high and noble. He is an instrument and an apostle of beauty. […] On the other hand, there is the actor who has sold himself for money. He can be described as a popular entertainer of the worst kind and his activities are unworthy of his calling and even debasing. (ibid, p. 387)

Putting together Stanislavsky's two statements on what defines an actor; technique, creativity and the ability to transform, acting portrays itself as a highly coveted superior skill. Chekhov aligns with this 'ideal,' and its transformative heart. 'No true actor can be persuaded that his profession consists of continuously repeating himself every time he has to act a new part. The desire and the ability to transform oneself are at the very heart of the actors.' (Chekhov 1985, pp. 98). Stanislavsky and his protégé, Chekhov point to transformational acting above other styles. Twenty-first century personality actors are found in a variety of settings. Personality acting is not a new idea. Hagen, in *Respect for Acting* questions actors using their personalities playing characters. '[I]f I must use myself, won't I be the same in every part I play? The question calls to mind the "personality" actor who is really the same in every part he plays. Examples of this type clog the stage , screen and television'(1973, p. 28).This style of acting now covers many forms of acting from stage, film, television and the phenomenon of reality TV. Kemp abbreviates the phrase; 'the "persona" actor maintains a more or less constant personality from one role to the next'(Kemp, 2010b, p. 113). The emphasis of character is from within the actor's own identity, their personality is the foundation of the

fictional creation. Personality (or persona) acting is more commonplace than transformational acting according to Mirodan.

> It has even become a cliché for Oscars to be won by beautiful women or glamourous men playing monsters or characters defined by a disability. However, switch on the television tonight or go to your local theatre or to the Odeon around the corner and the acting is unlikely to be transformative. For perfectly good reasons of personal inclination, commercial imperative or professional practice, much of the acting on display is rooted in an extension or refinement of the actor's personality. (Mirodan, 2019, pp.1-2)

Mirodan, through comparisons, illustrates the differences between transformational acting's celebrity acclaim, against the day-to-day of personality acting, a much more accessible common place type of acting. Personality acting uses the personality of the actor to play characters with little transformation away from the actor's identity. Transformational acting prioritises the character over the personality of the actor. The TA shifts identity physically, psychologically and emotionally into a fictional one.

CONCLUSION: SHINING A SPOTLIGHT ON TRANSFORMATIONAL ACTING

Applications of cognitive science shine a spotlight on twenty-first century acting in many ways showing realism-based practices can rewire the brain. Cognitive science proves, '[t]he brain's plasticity allows neurons and neural pathways to be altered by experience '(Blair 2006, p. 171) proving that, over a period of time it is possible to change thinking and behaviours on a long-term basis. Viewing brain rewiring as result of repeating new behaviours and patterns of experience over a duration, we must look at transformational acting, to a certain degree, as brain rewiring. We learn new habits and ways of being by practicing and changing routines. This being so, the TA learns new ways of being each time a character is created, and this also means they must be 'unlearnt.'

Considering the deep emotional involvement required for the effective development of a dramatic character, it should not seem surprising that actors report being psychologically affected by the roles they play. Although this mutual interaction between the process of character development and the actor's psychological state has been commented upon by theatrical professionals and educators, there are no reported attempts in the psychological literature to systematically document, much less quantify, the nature of interaction between the actor's own characteristics and those of the character he or she is playing. (Hannah et al., 1994, p. 279)

More research has emerged but considering the small degree of continuing research today, it is a vital to pursue concrete investigations towards clarifying the identity of the TA on a practical and theoretical level. At times, the cognitive science frame falls short at the intersection between prioritising the importance of the TA's identity interacting with the practice of transformation.

The better we know ourselves, the more freedom we have to extend our abilities into using realism to create the illusion of *being someone else,* safely. 'In finding and strengthening our own identity, can't we develop our capacity for identification to the point where we will be able to put it to service by revealing the human being in dramatic literature?'(Hagen, 1973, p. 33). Hagen's point is still relevant and important as realism evolves into hyper-realism and theories of acting take on a new COVID-inclusive identity. The hybridity of filmic acting and theatre acting is a complex space to occupy as many actors have in 2020, isolated in a COVID bubble. In the current era of online acting, bubbles burst when technology fails and the effects of this are relatively unknown. To 'burst someone's bubble is shatter someone's illusions about something or destroy their sense of well-being'(Ayto, 2020) potentially depositing a psychological mess on the stage, rehearsal or Zoom floor. In transformational acting the 'mess' has 'personal impact and psychological injury'(Seton, 2013, p. 26) potentially displacing the TA towards *dys-identification* for unknown periods and sometimes in isolation. A way to circumvent the impact and effect of a bubble bursting is to speak in a common language communicating the bodily and psychological feelings caused by it. Leder's *disappearance*, *dys-appearance* and *social dys-appearance* becomes an innovative, critical

new lens through which to examine the identity of the twenty-first century TA independent to theories of acting providing a new shared language through which to talk about the TA's process *on-the-floor* and in theory. It is important to look at transformational acting in ways that relax the influence of acting theories who have strong associations with Stanislavsky, and other techniques producing realism. These associations tend to attract enmeshments with iconic practitioners, acting folklore, celebrity actors and well-known character roles. The entanglements can be problematic bringing with them individual opinions, professional bias, influences of pop-acting culture and the tendency to look at one type of acting as being 'better than others.'

> Transformative acting remains the aspiration of many a student actor and constitutes the achievement of some of the most acclaimed performances of our age.: Mark Rylance in Jerusalem, Meryl Streep as Mrs Thatcher, Anthony Hopkins as Hannibal Lecter - the list is extensive, and we all have our favourites.(Mirodan, 2019, p. 1)

But, while we get caught up in the celebrity of transformation acting, we miss the opportunity to understand and uses its power. Additionally, using Leder's theory of *disappearance* as an anchor to the industrialised slang term of 'disappearance' brings a gravitas to the art and practice of transformation. Grounding an intangible, 'mythologised' idea in the psychological offers the opportunity of new meanings and possibilities beyond theatre and performance studies, beyond real(ism). 'There are numerous unexplored strategies for investigating the psychological processes of the actor'(Hannah, 1994, p. 278) I suggest benefit from confronting the practical components of acting in realism such as actors and their intimate connection with character, imagination and 'disappearance'. *Disappearance* is often treated as a mystical event that only happens to some actors instead of many. It is a state the TA often navigates in an intricate psychophysical relationship with characters in the pursuit of *acting truth*. 'The process of transformation remains elusive, mysterious even. Empirically, one senses that a complex psychophysical process is taking place, but what precisely this involves remains unchartered' (Mirodan, 2019, p. 41). The relatively unknown entity of transformational acting, like the bubble, is 'practical magic;' the better we know what makes it work, the better we protect and preserve everything within it.

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