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6. A Materialist Feminist Perspective on Time in Actor-Training: the commodity of illusion

by Evi Stamatiou

Introduction

During a module feedback session with UK conservatoire trainees in November 2014, I asked the class: 'Did you find it valuable that during the training process we considered the inequalities that women face in the acting field?' A female trainee, responded: 'No. I would rather concentrate on my acting now and not worry about the future.' Writing from the perspective of an actor and actor-trainer, I aim to raise awareness about the fact that temporality in actor-training, considered in socio-economic terms, is different for women. I will explore temporality using Gary Becker's concept of 'human capital' (2009: 12) which enables me to analyse the risks of a woman's time investment in actor training for her future socio-economic prospects. A socio-economic notion of time emerges from this analysis: time as a commodity of illusion.

Using a materialist feminist approach, I critically analyse the use of time in actor-training. I use quantitative data, such as gender-related statistics relating to employment and training from Purple Seven¹ and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). I also use qualitative data, such as reports about undergraduate students' rights under consumer law from Competition & Markets Authority (CMA); key findings about employability from The Higher Education Academy (HEA); actor-training practices, such as classical text-based training and cross-casting; and, anonymized participants' testimonies. This analysis highlights the fact that it is paradoxical for a person to invest their time in actor training if

their gender, race, ability and other embodied characteristics mean that their commodified body is a less desirable product. It contributes to contemporary debates about the ‘political turn’ in actor training – Maria Kapsali writes that the interrogation of the political nature of actor-training ‘has now acquired an urgent, pragmatic and ethical dimension’ (2014a: 104) – and raises awareness about the ethical implications for actor-training institutions which do not directly address the challenging employability perspectives for women.

Women’s experience of time in training has been affected by material changes in the UK during the last decade: arts funding has been cut, traditional conservatoires have been increasingly merged with universities and university fees have been increased. Following the 2008 economic crisis, the Arts Council of England and the British Film Institute lost 15% of their funding (HM Treasury 2010: 65), which immediately affected the acting field. Local government spending on arts and culture between 2010-2015 has also declined by 16.6% (Harvey 2015: 9), which indicates that job opportunities for actors in the UK in the last decade have declined by more than 15%. These significant cuts in funding are likely to continue (Harvey 2015: 10) and therefore employability of actors will probably deteriorate.

Another factor that affected employability in the acting sector is the merging or association of conservatoires and universities. As a result of this ‘the courses studied at these drama schools have become three-year degrees rather than diplomas’ (Prior 2012: 79), which indicates that women spend 33% more time in training than before. Also, there has been ‘an increased number of places available to students’ (ibid.), which further affects the already saturated market of the acting field. This gloom picture gets worse with the introduction and the increase of university fees: a £1,000 per year fee was introduced in 1998, which was raised to £3,000 in 2004 and £9,000 in 2009. Such changes have affected both the trainee’s experience

of time in training in relation to economic returns from acting jobs and also their increased expectations from actor-training institutions. As CMA suggests, since 2015 the trainee/institution relationship is a consumer/provider relationship, ‘together with the existence of a supportive learning and pastoral environment within an academic community’ (CMA 2015b: 3). The fact that the broader interest in the politics of actor-training in the 2000s (Kapsali 2014a: 103) began at the same time as the trainee became an economic agent, invites us to consider the trainee’s socioeconomic agency in relation to actor training as socio-economic temporality.

The materialities of the present

Women trainees’ material experience of the present is influenced by educational institutions’ structures and goals. Alison Hodge suggests that traditionally the ultimate goal of actor-training institutions, which is also true for most contemporary actor-training institutions, is ‘to prepare the actor for work’ (2000: 2). This suggests that trainees’ time in the institutions was always projected into the future. My materialist feminist lens focuses on how the preparation of the actor for work and its relation to the economy affects how the female trainee is projected into the future.

The economic changes of the last decade, which have been driven by a neoliberal agenda that seeks the privatization of higher education, are primarily institutional changes that affect the present and future experience of the female trainee. The trainee’s relationship with the actor-training institution depends on their ‘provider-consumer’ contract. After being accepted on a course, she signs a ‘consumer contract’ with the ‘business’/educational institution (CMA

2015b: 17). This works for both parties: a trainee needs to fulfil her economic obligations to the institution and the institution needs to acknowledge the duties and responsibilities of their side of the contract. Higher education has increasingly adopted managerial models of organization from industry and commerce (Ridout 2014: 77), which have established the idea that actor-training institutions should consider professionalization not only as production of ‘professional actors’ but also as providers of skills that aim for sustainable professional careers for the trainees, which is determined by the economic returns on jobs that are a result of the specific degree. Such changes lead actor training to see the actor’s work not only as ‘an aesthetic, artistic and affective dimension [...] [but as] a form of labour with a monetary and cultural value and, as such, subject to a wider set of political and economic transactions’ (Kapsali 2014a: 106). The structure and nature of actor-training institutions and the socio-economic temporality of training urges us to consider time in training as a form of investment with a monetary and social value. As such, it is subject to a wider set of socio-economic transactions.

Considering the woman trainee as a socio-economic agent, brings attention to her monetary investment in training and how it generates money in the future through acting jobs. The CMA considers it a necessity that HE students should be protected by consumer rights law because enrolment on a course is often ‘a ‘one-off’ decision involving the investment of a significant amount of time and money’ (CMA 2015b: 3). Women’s time in training represents investment that they expect to get them a return in terms of acting jobs in the future. They acquire knowledge about how to act and how to get an acting job. Thinking about the trainee’s time as ‘invested’, ‘spent’ or ‘wasted’ under such capitalist terms invites the economist Becker’s concept of human capital.

Human capital is an individual's investment in their education, or other activities such as medical care, migration or searching for information about prices and income. In most cases, it results in a higher income (Becker 2009: 12). To calculate human capital during actor-training, it is necessary to consider both direct expenses, such as the tuition fees, and indirect expenses, for example, if women were not in training they might be working and earning money. Becker, who applies the term to education, has been criticized for referring only to monetary value.² If actor-training institutions consider themselves service-providing businesses and their trainees consumers, this affects the number of trainees they recruit and train: the more students they train, the bigger their profit. However, this produces more qualified actors and further saturates the acting market, which means that getting a job is getting more difficult whereas getting a degree is getting easier. To tackle the highly competitive market, actor-training institutions insist on promoting trainees' employability and transferrable skills. Therefore, human capital is an appropriate term. This form of capital is called 'human' and not 'physical' or 'financial' because knowledge or skills cannot be separated from the person, unlike physical or financial assets (Becker 2009: 16). The trainee invests in her own acting knowledge; from which she cannot be separated. The investment is deposited as she goes through training and acquires knowledge, and her earnings are expected to rise as she begins to work in the economy.

On the other hand, every investment has an associated risk, and the rates of return on education, in monetary terms, and not the same for all individuals.³ Becker suggests that an individual's incentive to invest in education is determined by how they perceive the job market: they see which careers will give them higher-earning jobs and they invest in the relevant education (2009: 9). This is important, because it highlights the paradox that women trainees invest in actor training in higher numbers than their male counterparts, even though

they are aware of how more challenging the acting profession is for them. Women are the majority of trainees across conservatoire and university actor-training courses.⁴ A 66% rise in the acceptance of women applicants in 2016 mirrors a general rise in acceptances in higher education, and its main aim is to generate more profit from trainees' fees for actor-training institutions (UCAS 2016a). According to 'UCAS conservatoires end of cycle report 2015', following a 17% rise in applications and acceptances from the previous year, the total application numbers indicate that women are 60% more likely to apply and be accepted (2016c: 22). The number of women applying is even higher for drama-specific courses (UCAS 2015: 3). This indicates that female trainees' incentive to invest in education is not immediately relevant to the job market.

Applicants who fail to get on to a conservatoire actor-training course often reapply to conservatoires or enrol on university Drama courses: data demonstrates that 67.4% of women who applied through UCAS conservatoires for Drama specific courses also applied for Drama courses through UCAS Undergraduate (UCAS 2016d: 26). Again, most applicants and acceptances on these courses are women (ibid: 33), with acceptances in 2016 for the subject of Drama reaching 2,385 men and 5,545 women (UCAS 2016c: W4).⁵ Even though Drama-specific University students do not necessarily aim for the acting field, many of them often do and the recent turn of universities towards professionalization in order to enhance the employability prospects of their students, adds to the overall number of women who compete for acting jobs.

As UCAS's data demonstrates, women train on courses in which the majority of other trainees are women. The paradox is that this not only does not improve women's experience, but on the contrary makes the whole training process more stressful and unequal, especially

with regard to text-based work. Female trainees face more competition even during training, because there are fewer parts for women in classical and contemporary writing.⁶ For example, when I trained actors on a UK undergraduate conservatoire course in 2014, the group consisted of eleven women and seven men. The module lasted 12 weeks from October to December and included the staging of two works: Shakespeare's *Richard III* and Joseph Stein, Sheldon Harnick and Jerry Bock's musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. In both works, the main character and most of the supporting characters are men. There were few supporting roles for the women.

Rehearsal and stage time in conservatoire productions is typically distributed according to the roles in the full production. The male characters in the works had more stage time, and it was divided among the seven men, whereas the female characters had less stage time, and it was divided among the eleven women. Therefore, although the women paid the same fees, they got less rehearsal and stage time during training, leaving them with a time quantity disadvantage. However, there was also a time quality disadvantage: the main characters, Richard in *Richard III* and Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*, are written with more depth than the female supporting characters. Consequently, the women had fewer opportunities to develop their acting skills. Therefore, the women in the cohort were disadvantaged in their overall experience of time in actor training.

The experience of these female trainees is common. The Bechdel Test⁷ highlights that most texts give more time to men, and that women's parts are generally less important. Gender bias is acknowledged to be a problem on stage, especially in classical works, like *Richard III* and *Fiddler on the Roof*, which are often used in text-based training within conservatoires. Therefore, the texts used in actor-training disadvantage women's socio-economic temporality

and career prospects: women are given less time, both quantitatively and qualitatively, to develop their acting skills, even though they should be better prepared than men for a more challenging future. This inequality of experience and opportunity is not only an ethical issue but also something that Higher Education institutions are required to address, as indicated in the Quality Code for Drama, Dance and Performance from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2015: 3). Many actor trainers understand this, which is why works like Federico García Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba* and the musical *Sister Act* are popular in conservatoires' repertoires. However, because contemporary UK actor-training does not officially address the gender inequality of time, most women are likely to be subjected to repertoires like the one I describe above.

I discussed the inequalities women face in the acting field with the class I trained because I wanted everyone to make a shared decision about how the parts would be distributed among the trainees, and therefore how rehearsal and stage time would be allocated. For example, I suggested using cross-casting, which is a useful casting device that solves the challenge of having a majority of women trainees and a repertoire that limits casting opportunities for women. The women in the class did not want to spend six weeks rehearsing and performing the role of the main character, Tevye, because they felt that taking on a part that they would never perform in the industry was a waste of time. They said they would rather train as Tevye's daughters – although the characters have smaller parts, are limited in depth and are always discussing marriage – because that is how they assumed that they would be cast after graduation. Their acceptance of this time inequality in training foresees a future of surrendering to the broader inequalities of the acting industry.

The materialities of the future

Many women invest their time in actor-training, even though the current situation in the acting industry shows that future prospects for women are disappointing. Kapsali observes that, even when employed, ‘performing arts graduates will most likely be engaged in an industry that shows alarming signs of deregulation, low remuneration and gruelling working conditions’ (2014a: 104). The unemployment rate for actors reaches 92%, and it has been suggested that the other 8% is the same people constantly in employment (Simkins 2009). Since 2009, the situation has worsened, as the cuts to arts funding have led to a situation in which ‘more than half of actors are under [the] poverty line’ (Vincent 2014). Jen Harvie describes the ‘real’ actors’ jobs in the West:

To remain available to compete whenever a suitable audition comes up, so-called resting actors between acting contracts generally do anything but rest, needing to take jobs, but jobs that are flexible so that they can be dropped at short notice. The actor’s typical ‘resting’ jobs – office temp, cleaner, waiter – are indeed comparatively flexible, but also therefore comparatively insecure and ill-paid.

(2009: 39)

The acting profession, as labour that brings in money, is not only precarious but hardly ‘real’ for most actors, especially if they have ‘the most fatal characteristic of all in regards to succeeding as an actor’ – in other words, if they are a woman’ (Willmott 2015). Data from Purple Seven reveals that, amongst employed actors, only 39% are women (2015). Therefore, women are more likely to spend most of their time looking for acting jobs while working in other positions. Given that looking for jobs and enduring temping is a fundamental part of an

actor's future career, especially if she is a woman, actor-training institutions that promise 'employability' should arguably develop a curriculum that devotes at least 50% of the time to preparing actors for job-searching.

Conservatoire training has traditionally linked job-searching with auditions, which are usually a result of a talent agent putting an actor forward for a specific role. Actors are not typically encouraged to be proactive: traditional conservatoire training assumes that actors must wait to be employed by casting agents and directors. The first step for the trainee after graduation is to find a talent agent, but the 'best actors often don't sign with an agent, because they are young, white, brown-haired women who are over-represented in the industry, and have fewer opportunities for work' (Alexander in Kapsali 2014b: 223). If women cannot get talent agents, they are less likely to get well-paid acting jobs.

The fact that most trainee actors in the UK are women is at odds with the realities of the acting profession for women. This might lead us to think that female trainee actors are less competent in judging profitable investments or more willing to take on risk, but, I would suggest another possibility: they consciously buy the systemic illusion for a 'hopeful future'.⁸ Actor-training institutions compete in the relevant education market and their desire to attract applicants often leads the promise of career prospects that are unrealistic (Tibby 2012: 6), and this further sustains the illusion. To the extent that an employability agenda attempts to unrealistically relate training time to future employability, the female trainee's time in actor-training is experienced as an illusory investment in human capital.

Frank Camilleri writes that actor training in the contemporary West is a commodity sold by institutions and bought by students (2009: 34), which echoes Brecht's and Anderson's

description of knowledge as a commodity that is acquired to be resold (1961: 21). However, the material conditions of the acting profession indicate that the acting knowledge is less likely to be resold, which means that female trainees buy a ‘commodity of illusion’. Because female trainees consciously buy the ‘commodity of illusion’ within a systemic neoliberal agenda of a ‘hopeful future’, contemporary actor-training institutions are morally responsible for taking action: acting knowledge is not a waste of time and money only after the trainee has managed to get a job, which indicates that ‘getting acting jobs skills’ need to be prioritized over ‘acting skills’.

Most of the trainee’s time in conservatoire actor-training is spent on ‘acting skills’, which is achieved primarily by putting on productions, especially in the last year of training. Although acting in a public production gives the actor more experience, the institutions’ primary aims are to use such productions in order to attract talent agents (Prior 2012: 79), which is a central point of attraction for applicants. Given that talent agents make a decision after seeing a trainee only once, repeated public productions seem like a waste of time and money. Public productions are aimed at only one employability option – talent agents – and trainees do not develop other skills they need to get a job. Although conservatoires boast about their achievements in getting talent agents for trainees, not all trainees get an agent and, even if they do, it does not guarantee work (Prior 2012: 80).

Actor training courses tackle the need for getting acting jobs skills with a growing tendency to teach entrepreneurship skills. Such skills have allowed for the emergence of the actor-entrepreneur, who succeeds what Broderick Chow describes as the actor-manager. Chow’s historical reading suggests that the ‘how to act’ actor-training processes resonate with the ‘how to get an acting job’ processes: both the actor-manager and the Stanislavski actor plan a

series of actions and execute them, the first as a socio-economic agent of the acting field and the second as an artistic agent within the same field (Chow 2014:135). Ultimately, Chow points out that the origin of the actor-manager coincided with the development of organizational management under capitalism (ibid.). Similarly, the emergence of the actor-entrepreneur historically coincides with the last decade's economic changes in the UK acting field and beyond.

Actor-training institutions' focus on the development of the self-employed artist since the 2000s, coincides with the 'growing recognition of the value of the creative industries to the UK's growth and prosperity' (Evans 2010: 1) and the promotion of 'small new businesses and entrepreneurial activity by graduates from across all sectors' (ibid.). Already by 2010 entrepreneurship skills like setting up companies, raising funds, touring work and 'experiencing the professional environment and life-world of small-scale theatre entrepreneurs and businesses' (Evans 2010: 30) are embedded in the curriculum and represent a 'holistic, integrated and immersive entrepreneurial experience, highly engaging and strongly motivating for the student' (ibid.). Investing time in entrepreneurship skills promotes the 'employability credentials' of the actor-training institution and perpetuates the idea of the 'hopeful future', as projected by neoliberal ideology. The actor-entrepreneur is not only a creator who takes the initiative, and by doing so changes their future, but they are equipped with 'transferable skills' that guarantee employability in the broader neoliberal job market. However, the ratio between practice/theory/entrepreneurship shows less focus on entrepreneurship (Evans 2010: 12-15). After the 2008 economic crisis and its consequences for the acting field, if entrepreneurship skills are seen in the light of the great risk that female trainees take willingly, it appears that more actor-training time should be spent on 'getting acting jobs skills'.

Actor-training institutions have varied graduate employment rates, which in the first instance seem to be related to the diversity of the courses' curricula, structures and policies. This might indicate that the curriculums of courses with higher employability rates, like prestigious conservatoires, should be followed as an example. However, such thinking neglects how the actor-training and acting fields sit within the broader social structure of the acting field. Mark Evans in *Movement Training for the Modern Actor* (2009) writes that the actor-training course that an actor graduates from is a form of capital that has an impact on her future career: prestigious training courses can equip the trainee with greater capital and improve their employability. Because of the higher economic expectations of prestigious institutions, including fees and the high cost of living in London where most of these institutions are, trainees with particular resources can afford to enrol on particular courses. Even though various policy bodies pressurise prestigious institutions to become accessible, still the majority of their trainees derive from privileged economic backgrounds: a number of scholarships cannot defeat neither the high fees nor the high cost of living in London, both of which keep rising with every year. Prior suggests that the prestige of such institutions guarantees better future employability for its already privileged students: they attract the best students, more high-profile teachers, wealthy benefactors, the 'best' agents and the 'best' jobs (2012: 136). Consequently, their trainees can afford to spend less time in 'getting acting jobs skills'.

However, not all trainees graduate from prestigious drama schools and, even if they do, not everyone achieves agent representation (Prior 2012: 79). The trainee hopes that training will transfer her from non-professional life to the professional life, but the idea that time in training alone guarantees work is an illusion. Therefore, not only does the trainee actor not

invest in her human capital, which will return earnings on graduation, but she is more likely to be the one who sponsors the institution, and in the long-term the acting field. The experience of buying time in actor training as a 'commodity of illusion' with the future hope of an acting career puts the trainee into a place where the chasing of the dream, or the carrot, turns her into an unconscious sponsor of the field.

Conclusion: The commodity of illusion and the neoliberal hopeful future

There are clear problems with the idea that time in actor-training is preparation for work and that investment in human capital will return money to the female trainee. UK actor-training institutions ought to consider the material realities of the acting profession in the neoliberal economy and the ethical implications of using the term 'employability'. At the moment, institutions fail to address the inequalities of the acting market, and their employability agenda does not address the fact that women are less desirable actor-training products. Individual trainees cannot see the problem as systemic and institutionalized because it is often reduced to an individual level: 'you are just not good enough'.

If employability is increasingly associated with entrepreneurship, then prioritising the skills of the actor-entrepreneur would be beneficial for the trainee's socio-economic prospects. I would suggest that embracing the new organizational structure which sees actor-training institutions/ trainees as businesses/consumers can prompt female trainees to explore the capitalist system for their own benefit. Fighting the inequalities in the acting field with tools that were developed within the mechanisms of the capitalist system has a potential of working within the system to reform actor-training and the industry. I therefore suggest that time in actor training should be invested both in acting and entrepreneurship skills, with an

entrepreneurial environment being a priority in non-prestigious actor-training institutions.

The implementation of the actor-entrepreneur further sustains the neoliberal agenda of the field by sustaining its existence and prosperity. To continue to produce for the saturated neoliberal acting market, it is essential to focus in the present and have faith in the future. The fact that women are less desirable than men not only affects the individual's agency and wellbeing but also causes a specific form of crisis in the market. The identification of specific actors as less desirable leads to two options: either stop the production line of "other actors" – which many training courses do by recruiting only people who look, sound and move in specific desirable ways – or invite actors to create their own future. Until there is a systematic effort to address the inequalities in the acting industry, time in actor-training for women remains a commodity of illusion. Sphinx Theatre use the Bechdel Test for stage with the aim to 'encourage theatremakers to think how to write more and better roles for women' (Snow 2015). Similarly, policy bodies ought to develop tools that investigate how the unequal experience of time affects the agency and wellbeing of female trainees and encourage actor-training institutions to take positive action.

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¹ Purple Seven is an audience insight agency that analyses data in the Arts and Entertainment industry. It collects data from 110 venues across the UK, including the Barbican and Sadler's Wells (www.purpleseven.co.uk). Its 'Gender in Theatre' study is 'powered by the largest survey of UK theatregoers with half a million responses and is designed for venues to precisely target marketing and identify the diversity in their audiences' (Purple Seven 2015). The study highlights the paradox that even though women account for 65% of audiences, 'only 39% of actors, 36% of directors and 28% of writers' are women (ibid.).

² If I were analysing actor training from a cultural rather than a socio-economic perspective, it would be more appropriate to use Pierre Bourdieu's notion of academic capital, rather than Becker's human capital. Academic capital relates to a person's formal education and is measured by their degrees or diplomas and is not reducible to economic capital (Bourdieu 1993: 7). However, there are two problems with using Bourdieu's concept in a discussion of time and temporality. First, it relates only to qualifications, rather than the process of training, which is an experience of time. Secondly, conservatoires and institutions in the UK over the last decade have been operating as hybrid structures combining educational and corporate objectives and modes of functioning. This makes the trainee actor's academic capital of a different kind to that which Bourdieu discussed, and more relevant to professionalization and turning the investment into money.

³ For example, Becker writes that incomes tend to be higher for urban white males than for black rural males, and higher for black women than for white (2009: 9). The relationship between education and earnings is more complicated when it comes to minorities, with women and minorities earning less than white men when they show 'lower productivity signals'—for example when they hold a degree which they acquired after three years of study—and more than white men when they show higher productivity signals—for example when they are accredited by specific professional bodies (Belman and Heywood 1991: 720). The difference in earnings also vary depending on the specific subjects undertaken. For example, 'women undertaking education, economics, accountancy or law subjects have significantly higher returns to their higher education than women undertaking other subjects' (Blundell et al. 1999: 13).

⁴ According to 'UCAS conservatoire end of cycle 2016: acceptances by sex' data, the number of applicants accepted into conservatoires rose from 1,355 in 2010 to 2,250 in 2016. Of the 2,250 trainees who were accepted into conservatoires in 2016, 55.3% were women and 44.7% were men. The 55.3% represents 23% of the total number of women applicants whereas the 44.7% represents the 31% of the total number of men applicants (UCAS 2016a).

⁵ The equation is very similar for Postgraduate applications and acceptances (UCAS 2016d: 40-42).

⁶ Purple Seven suggests that this is due to the majority of writers being men (2014).

⁷ Alison Bechdel's comic strip 'The Rule' sets out two questions to probe the gender inequality in movies: Does the movie contain at least two women? Do they talk to each other about something other than a man? (Bechdel 1985). The Bechdel test aims to raise awareness of, and tackle issues relating to, the representation of women in the media, but it can also be used for theatre works.

⁸ If this was a cultural analysis rather than a materialist feminist one, Bourdieu's concept of capital could lead us to think that the incentive of most trainee actors, especially women, is non-monetary. Trainees may aim to maximize what Bourdieu describes as their cultural and social capital, which are immaterial (1986: 241-258). Cultural capital comprises the individual's cultural goods and consumption, and their social connections. Applying this to the actor-training environment, trainees would seem to be aiming to advance their cultural goods and consumption, and their social connections.