

**Acting in opera,
A consideration of the status of acting in opera production and the
effect of a Stanislavski inspired rehearsal process**

by

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Abstract

In opera, acting is often seen as secondary to vocal performance. This study considers the status of acting in the development of opera performance and considers whether a more complete actor training system might better equip classically trained singers as actors. It reviews the actor training offered by the Conservatoires in the United Kingdom, the experience of training for the stage reported by some notable 20th century singers and some singers and directors currently working internationally in opera.

The study draws its conclusions through a comparison of a production of *Dido and Aeneas*, where the singers use Stanislavski influenced methods of preparation and a collaborative approach to rehearsals, and a production of *Acis and Galatea*, employing the more usual didactic style of direction, which makes up the practice-based component of this research project.

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As the associate director of *Andrea Chenier*, I am taking the singer playing Maddalena through the movements on stage (blocking) for her aria ‘*La Mamma Morta*’. She is one of three singers who will be singing the role and was not present when the scene was first rehearsed. To avoid this being just an exercise in replicating blocking, I repeat the director’s thoughts on the relationship between her character and Gérard – the other character on stage – and how that impacts on her moves. She stops me,

‘Don’t tell me why; just tell me where.’

I am shocked that she doesn’t search for reasons for her actions, which lead to her objective – to evoke his sympathy. Unless she can find some motivation for her moves I worry that they will appear unconnected. Her approach seems to reduce the process to orienteering.

She shows me her notebook. There is a series of sketches of the set and of her moves pencilled in and annotated. She tells me she has a notebook of each role she has done and of the various productions she has been in. In this way she can relearn a role on the plane and be stage-ready for the revival upon landing.

Is this typical of opera singers? Do the demands of sharing a role, jumping in to revivals of productions, playing a role in your repertoire in a variety of styles and concepts, make learning a set of moves quickly a sensible survival strategy?

A popular conception has been that opera singers are hired for their vocal virtuosity and any resemblance to the character, or an ability to make an audience believe the truth of their situation, was a happy bonus, but hasn’t this changed with the advent of

performances being recorded on DVDs, a change in audience expectations and an influx of directors with a theatre background? If this is the case how are classical singers equipped to make acting more important, how should their training adapt to meet these new demands?

Do opera directors really want singers to work collaboratively in an industry, which has allowed them and their designers to be one of the most significant presences on stage? Any opera director who wants to make a career must have their trademark concept, which shapes the production and, with the design, hovers over the event like a billboard advertising their work.

This 'Regietheater'¹ can range from simply changing the period of the piece to seek contemporary resonance to more extreme examples such as the 2012 production of Wagner's *Das Liebesverbot*² directed by Dmitry Bertman. Here the cast were dressed as construction workers and the conductor began the piece by waving an electric drill. The work is subsumed as a vehicle to protest against the proposed redevelopment of the theatre.

There have been many such concept productions in spoken theatre, of Shakespeare for example, from the Birmingham Repertory theatre's modern dress *Hamlet* of 1925, to Ostermeier's *Hamlet*³ for Schaubüine Berlin where the same actor played Ophelia and Gertrude, lines were added and the piece opens with Hamlet's father's funeral.

However, although the director has been responsible for the original concept, the

¹ Regietheater, German term which describes theatre where the directorial concept is paramount.

² Helikon Opera, Moscow, premiere 26. 10. 2011.

³ Barbican, London, November 2011.

rehearsal process I have witnessed, and experienced as an actor, is more inclusive. The actors don't seem to be disregarded in the way that singers can be, certainly in being active in the creative process. Is this because actors must have a range of skills and not rely on their vocal virtuosity? An opera director I speak to about this asks, 'How often is the acting seriously discussed, or even mentioned in an opera review? Hardly ever, in fact I can't recall one review.' (Keith Warner informal interview 2012)

In attempting to unpack some of these questions, I want to look at how we arrived in the present state of opera production, what directors and singers feel about this issue and what the implications might be for the training programmes of Conservatoires.

In practice I will work with singers in two very different rehearsal environments, one where we use acting process, by which I mean using acting techniques to develop characterisation, and where the cast are collaborators in creating the production, and one where the more usual didactic style of director driven concept shapes the work.

The Influence of the Development of Opera on Acting Style

There is a large body of research around the musicology of opera, but it is indicative of the status of acting within the genre that there is virtually no serious discussion or research of that aspect. If acting in opera has been less prized than other production elements, then how might such an imbalance have developed?

Whilst choruses, and possibly other text, were sung in Greek drama and singing was included in the Medieval mystery plays, it was not until 1600 that a distinct form of sung theatre emerged. This new genre was developed by Monteverdi, who set text to an orchestral accompaniment, which supported the emotional state of the character and followed a through dramatic line.

‘Monteverdi is adept at manipulating the musical forms themselves as part of his dramatic expression. . . but never drawing attention away from the words.’ (Cannon, 2012: 20)

Grout (1973) and Headington et al (1987) agree that this form of sung-theatre became a more populist entertainment in which dramatic situations became incidental to spectacle.

John Evelyn Bray, visiting an opera in Venice in 1645 notes in his diary,

‘...and machines for flying in the aire, and other wonderful motions... one of the most magnificent and expensive diversions the wit of man can invent.’

(Bray, 1819: 191)

Grout (1973: 341) indicates the ‘jumbled plots’ peopled by, ‘improbable characters and situations. . . mainly as pretexts for striking stage effects.’

As the state of absolute monarchy, with its attendant etiquette and structure began to fragment, classicism – as envisioned in myth and legend - was championed, in opera, by Gluck and Rameau. Whilst romanticism placed emotion above reason and celebrated genius and inspiration rather than logic and science, classicism rejects nature, a messy, platonic imperfect copy of a perfect ideal, upholding science and reason as the key to understanding the universe. Drummond (1980) sees this as a return to Monteverdian principles.

Acting that best fits this rational and scientific aesthetic requires emotional detachment and so the art of gesture became the system whereby the emotional state can be signalled without being experienced.

Austin (1806: 248) praises the singer Grassini for her voice but also for her, ‘great variety, grace and expression in gesture, of which she most happily avails herself.’

The ‘rules’ of this stagecraft are well documented making it possible to imagine with some accuracy how performances appeared. Henry Siddons, writing in 1807 in response to Engel’s 1778 work on stage acting, cites two reasons for gesture. One is to create stage pictures and the other to show the, ‘interior operations of the soul,’ (Siddons 1822: 27) Siddons regrets that the first reason is the more used, but believes

that the second still requires preparation and is to signal an emotional state rather than arising from an emotional state. Practise, he believes, will make gestures – even when following prescribed rules – flow naturally. Further he urges study of, ‘the vulgar, the child, the savage, in a word the uncultivated man . . . for the expression of the passions. Where we do not seek for beauty but merely for truth and force.’ (Siddons 1822: 97)

In a series of letters to an imagined correspondent, he sets out gestures and physicality for a range of emotional states, together with specific examples:

‘Juliet, thinking she has heard Romeo, should lean towards the direction she thinks he will come from, ‘It is only on that side that the foot will be planted with firmness, whilst the other, rested on the point, will seem suspended in the air; all the rest of the body will be in a state of activity. Very open eye, hand to ear and the other arm directed to the ground.’ (Siddons 1822: 98)

Andrea de Jorio (1832) as cited by Soloman (1989) describes not only the art of gesturing and hand positions but the rules concerning entrances and exits and the placing of characters on the stage: the ill intentioned enter from the left, two people on stage never stand parallel but on a diagonal, never show your back to the audience, groups on stage should form a semi – circle and dropping the hands indicates that acting has ceased.

Political change and the rise of scientific thought might have continued to promote a more rational aesthetic but in fact composers began, during the 19th century, to consider instincts and feelings and counter this rationalism with romanticism.

Headington et al (1987) support this view, as does Drummond (1980: 276) who goes on to highlight the tension between the rational language of the structure of expression and image, and the irrational language necessary for the content of these expressions and images. He suggests Wagner provides at least a temporary solution.

Certainly Wagner's writing of continuous opera, i.e. not broken into the aria, recitative pattern which Kerman (1989: 113) refers to as, 'stop-and-go opera,' allows for a music drama in which it is more possible to engage with the drama without being continually reminded by the form of its artificial nature.

There was no diminution of scale however. Wagner's settings of myth and legend, Verdi's reworking of Shakespeare, Shiller etc. required massive forces to sing, play and create the larger than life staging. Bawtree (1991: 20) sees this 'galloping elephantiasis of the operatic form,' as stemming partly from the emergence of a middle class and partly from the way opera was now managed on a commercial basis.

Whilst the grandeur of opera in the 17th century reflected the reality of life for courts and princes, in the 19th century it reflects the aspirations of the bourgeoisie – not least in the plastered, gilded and crystal-bedecked foyers and auditoria. Here for a time it is possible to drift in a suitably aristocratic setting of marble and plush. Small wonder that when the acres of velvet curtain ascended, the stage setting already had a lot to live up to.

Many of the grand opera houses built in this period are still in use today. These theatres, and other great edifices of civic pride built in the nineteenth century, were

expensive, and though the building cost is finite; the upkeep and increasing repair bills continue to spiral and to influence the shape of opera. This largeness of scale is not conducive to reality in acting. Theatre directors and designers have since attempted to address this by bringing audiences and actors closer together, but even newer opera houses such as Glyndebourne⁴ or Wales Millennium Centre⁵ retain a proscenium arch and preserve the distance between the singer and even the front row across the orchestra pit. This space, together with the convention for declamation and gesture, added to the trend towards the broad-brush style of acting.

As artists sought to examine and record the real world, partly in response to the Industrial Revolution, with a naturalism, which neither idealised or romanticised the subject matter, set design and performance styles were judged by the extent to which they present reality on stage.

The operatic contribution to this was Verismo (from the Italian ‘vero’ true) where the subject matter placed recognisable people in identifiable situations. To contribute to this ‘truth’ some singers temporarily abandoned purity of vocal tone.

Verdi sought a dramatic intensity in his casting of Lady Macbeth. Rejecting a ‘handsome’ singer in a letter quoted in Osborne (1973: 150) he says the role demands a voice that is ‘hard, stifled and dark.’

⁴ Glyndebourne Opera House opened 1994, designed by Michael Hopkins and partners.

⁵ Wales Millennium Centre opened 2004, designed by Zaha Hadid.

Bel Canto⁶ the most influential and widespread method of vocal training from the late 17th century until the present day, and believed by Kayes (2004: 191) to place beauty of sound above other performance considerations, was felt to be compromised by showing emotion through the voice and whilst the realistic subject matter and setting of verismo operas continued, singers returned to purity of tone. Streeton and Raymond (2014: 16-17) maintain that, with appropriate training, Bel Canto need not be an obstacle to acting and the demands of the production.

Shea (1915: vii) suggests that singers might be musically prepared but are, ‘ignorant of the practice of acting.’ He addresses that issue by describing gesture and physicality for a variety of situations and emotional states. He explains how to move when singing an aria. After singing the recitative upstage, on the right, the singer moves thoughtfully downstage to just inside the proscenium for the first part of the aria; just before singing you,

‘advance your right foot slightly, throwing your weight thereon, and at the same time gently raising and extending the right hand, palm downward and fingers a bit separated, on a level with the chest. This position may suffice for a whole musical phrase, or more, according to the sentiments expressed.’

(Shea, 1915: 13)

To vary this attitude he suggests turning the palm over and moving the arm a little to the right. In the example he gives of the Grail recital from Lohengrin the singer may, ‘at the twentieth measure,’ employ an accentuated gesture, ‘i.e., the index finger on high.’ Whilst the gestures may have changed somewhat, this early 20th century book

⁶ Bel Canto – literally meaning beautiful singing - originally referred to a specific school of Italian singing.

urges a style of acting and adherence to conventions familiar in the 18th century. Similar advice was being given a hundred years before about the need for careful preparation of stance and gesture to avoid spontaneity and, above all, anything ugly.

When the old world order collapsed in the ravages of global war, opera re-emerged, not now as a celebration of wealth and privilege, but more as a nostalgic view of past glories. In this environment Grand Opera suited the mood precisely. Audiences had had enough gritty realism in their everyday lives.

To talk of realism in Opera may seem absurd. How can it be real to sing inner thoughts, or to argue and discuss in song? No less real perhaps than to do the same in iambic pentameter. Bawtree (1991: 158) suggests that, 'lifelikeness' – his preferred term – is achieved by actors in Shakespeare when the 'energy of the meaning is well married to the rhythms of the verse and if the actor behaves in every other way as if the given circumstances are real.' Bawtree believes that this can make verse speaking seem to stem from spontaneous thought to an audience but wonders if this can be true for singing. At one time the 'absurdity' of singing, as Bawtree calls it, was part of the useful frame distancing of Opera, where actions, if too lifelike, might disturb an audience.

As Headington et al (1987: 308) attest, 'Some operatic events avoided positive offence because of their setting and handling.' A mythical, historical or culturally different setting adds a psychological distance to the physical distance in an opera house so that bloody murders, cruelty and madness are veiled and don't demand a real level of emotional response. In this construct the unlikely also becomes acceptable. It

is possible for Elektra to dance herself to death or for Salomé to demand the head of John the Baptist. Belief - to re-work the overworked phrase – is easily suspended because there is less belief to suspend. This contract between stage and audience, together with the pre-eminence of musical values and the size of opera houses, has encouraged opera stereotypes to exist; a clearly overweight Mimi can die from consumption and an elderly, physically challenged tenor can captivate the village maidens. Stanislavski (2008: 157) felt this lack of desire among audiences to engage with truth and belief was, in part, the result of an inclination to escape ‘real life,’ ‘Real life bores them and they don’t want to have to face it onstage. “Anything rather than real life,” they say and, to avoid it, they look for as much distortion as possible.’

Stanislavski and Opera

Stanislavski's systemising of acting continues to be widely used in actor training today. Merlin (2007: 4) believes that he:

‘was arguably the first person to systemise natural (and often *unconscious*) human responses and organise them into something which could be *consciously* applied to the artifice of acting.’

His work sought to eliminate those actors' clichés such as the premeditated posturing, which Shea (1915) advised for opera singers. Stanislavski trained as an opera singer and it was in opera and operetta that he began to explore a fundamental shift in acting from seeking to show the character's emotional states to being the character and experiencing emotional states. At first he felt that ‘all is made ready for you by the composer.’ That the singer must, ‘yield to the magic power of the sound.’ And that characters such as Mephistopheles ‘are so definite, clear and established forever that no doubts can be raised about them. Imitate – that is all you have to do.’ (Stanislavski, 2001:133) Stanislavski began to rebel against this yielding to the music and reproduction of the outward states of the character.

‘When you force yourself to be loud for the sake of loudness, courageous for the sake of courage, without any inner meaning and inspiration, you feel ashamed on the stage.’ (Stanislavski, 2001:136)

Gradually he began to understand that the skills of performance – in this case voice, musicality and movement – are merely craftsmanship which:

‘...teaches the actor how to walk on the stage and play. But true art must teach him how to awaken consciously his subconscious creative self for its super conscious organic creativeness.’ (Stanislavski, 2001: 168)

Wyman (2008, 266) believes that this move in viewing acting as an art form rather than a craft is at the heart of the ‘great debt we owe to Stanislavsky.’ In pursuit of the art form Stanislavski argued for creating an inner-life for a character. The circumstances in which the fiction placed them should be fully investigated and understood. Imagination – ‘develop it or give up the stage.’ (Stanislavski, 2008: 63) – is used to flesh out these circumstances and to answer the questions: who, when, where, why, for what reason, how? Without a rich inner-life, ‘There is nothing for it but to resort to simple, convention-based theatrics. . . this is mere imitation.’ (Stanislavski, 2008: 28) or, to indulge in, ‘mindless rushing about onstage.’ (2008: 42) Belief in the character is fundamental to creating truth.

‘Truth is inseparable from belief and belief from truth. They cannot exist without each other and without both there can be no experiencing or creative work.’ (Stanislavski, 2008:154)

Wyman (2008) warns against the mythologizing of Stanislavski, urging consideration of the time in which he lived and more recent developments in science. Gillet (2014) points to the many controversies about what Stanislavski actually said or meant and whether he changed significantly throughout his artistic development but when considering acting in opera, his work, in moving acting from a craft to an art form, is particularly significant. Opera singers are encouraged in the main, to think of the music as the art form and that their vocal technique and the ability to communicate result from acquiring and applying craft. To change this attitude and to develop singers who can create an inner life for the character requires training.

In 1918 Stanislavski agreed to direct the opera studio of the Bolshoi Theatre. With the help of his brother and sister he began to train singers using the methods he had employed with actors.

Some singers didn't see the need for time-consuming work with him on an aspect of performance they regarded as secondary to vocal expertise, but Stanislavski was sanguine about some of the better-known singers being tempted away by lucrative contracts. He was happier to work with committed, if less vocally talented, performers. He stripped away all the tendencies to pose and gesture inherent in opera singers. He,

‘did not recognise any beauty in gesture or pose for its own sake; he always insisted on some action behind it, some reason for a given pose or gesture based on imagination.’ (Stanislavski and Rumyanstev, 1998: 6)

He worked with ballads to build on the studio exercises of movement, relaxation, improvisation and an examination of the text and the musical clues to establish the given circumstances of a character, even in stand-alone songs where the words:

‘must paint pictures for my imagination of the life created by the author. But how shall I, the listener, be able to visualise these pictures if you, the conveyor of them, do not see them? You must infect me with the desire to see your pictures, images.’ (Stanislavski and Rumyanstev, 1998: 25)

Living within the moment of the text, as though bringing together those words for the first time, Stanislavski called, ‘the creation of the living word.’ (Stanislavski, 2000: 26)

In the detailed reporting of Stanislavski's direction of *Eugene Onegin* it is possible to see how he moved away from conventional opera production. He ignored the given stage directions and allowed the music to suggest the emotional states and, from there, a line of action.

Previously, in the letter scene, the singer playing Tatiana would have been dressed in a style thought to befit a leading lady – the status of the singer being greater than that of a young girl from the country. Traditionally the singer would use the stage to pace and fret as she portrayed Tatiana's struggle to write of her passion to Onegin. Stanislavski insisted on Tatiana wearing a simple nightdress appropriate for her age and background and keeping the action fairly static and confined mostly to the bed. Her lack of physical action pulls the audience towards her inner conflict, which, by being 'un-staged' seems to be natural and spontaneous. This did not mean he would not offer stage movements to a singer,

“You, Nurse, after your first moment of bewilderment rush over to the icon for some holy water. As you go you feel Tatiana's forehead so that you can say: 'You're all on fire', Then returning with the holy water you try to sprinkle it on Tatiana, who says: 'Leave me alone, leave me alone'. The last words are: 'I am in love', and that bowls you over, you plump down on the foot of the bed as you say: 'How can this be?'" (Stanislavski and Rumyanstev, 1998: 85)

From Maya Melser – Tatiana in this production – whose recollections of Stanislavski's instructions to her, are repeated by Rumyanstev:

“Choose for this situation a comfortable, but at the same time expressive pose. Here you are having a moment of hesitation. You will have to find some action to convey your state of distraction. . . Perhaps you will lean your elbow on the table, perhaps throw your arms down weakly or hang your head.

Anything will be right if it is based on your inner motivation, But never check these movements of yours in the mirror – that is a dangerous thing to do’’

(Stanislavski and Rumyanstev, 1998: 88)

Stanislavski was aligning the need for movement by actors in the scene to their emotional state and their objectives. He was offering blocking but at the same time offering reasons for each move so that characters’ emotions promote actions. He also created a working environment where the performers – including the orchestra - are co- creators. He spoke frequently to the orchestra asking them, for the scene above, to think of Tatiana’s emotions and to play for her.

Stanislavski’s continual struggle was to prevent singers singing towards the front, looking at the audience instead of looking at the person on stage they were addressing. ‘He considered this habit one of the worst and most hampering in the work of opera singers.’ (Stanislavski and Rumyanstev, 1998: 59) His other battle was to prevent singers foregrounding the vocal quality of their voices, seeking vocal colour for effect and to impress the audience as themselves, rather than to reflect the emotional state of the character.

‘Do not attempt to substitute the sweet timbre of your voice for your beautiful feelings. . . Your artistic creativeness lies in your showing us: This is how I interpret this thing. A role is not made by words alone but by what the actor puts into them.’ (Stanislavski and Rumyanstev, 1998: 293)

Whilst Stanislavski’s work on acting continues to be discussed, developed, used in rehearsals and actor training, his work on opera is less widely known.

Throughout the twentieth century opera singers continued to receive little training in acting. The training they did receive was concerned with acquiring skills to refine the outward appearance of characters through movement, deportment and fencing – craftsmanship to support the art of singing.

Some Twentieth Century Opera Singers and Their Approach to Acting

Astrid Varnay⁷ who was to become for many people the definitive actor/singer of her generation, was introduced to the notion of serving the role, rather than imposing her vocal expertise on the role, in 1939.

Although still young, the size of her voice seemed destined for the great Wagnerian roles and she was able to obtain coaching with the celebrated Hermann O Weigert⁸. Having been asked to prepare the role of Sieglinde in *Walküre*, when she arrived for her coaching she was surprised to be asked to sit down, and even more so when Weigert said to her,

‘What can you tell me about Sieglinde? Who is she? Where does she come from? Who are the other people in her life and what is her relationship to them?’ (Varnay and Arthur, 2007: 76)

This questioning continued to be Weigert’s approach; only when these questions were fully answered was Varnay allowed to express her knowledge in singing.

Weigert also introduced her to the circumstances provided by the orchestra – hearing the horn, in the orchestration, alerts Sieglinde to the return of her dangerous husband. Varnay absorbed this approach,

‘I gradually found myself developing the skills of taking on another personality and building my own actions and reactions on the logical response

⁷ Astrid Varnay 1918 – 2006 Dramatic soprano of Hungarian heritage and Swedish birth.

⁸ Hermann O. Weigert 1890 – 1955 German music coach and conductor who married Varnay in 1944.

of that individual to the motivations at hand.’ (Varnay and Arthur, 2007: 76-77)

This kind of preparation and analysis was limited to only some of the singers she worked with. She describes stage direction as,

‘Fairly rudimentary, consisting mainly of traffic management. This was anything but conducive to ensemble acting. The few singers with a theatrical flair would be left to “do their own thing,” while the great majority simply went where they were placed by the stage director, where they stood with dignity and sang well.’ (Varnay and Arthur, 2007: 92)

Varnay never lost this appetite to flesh out her roles through research and experience. ‘My quest . . . [has] taken me to the library, to art galleries, to the hills of Mycenae, to the big cities and the hinterlands of many countries.’ (Varnay and Arthur, 2007: 107)

Varnay places acting at the centre of her work; her vocal artistry is the means by which she communicates the text but her emotional connection to the role is what drives her performance and finds resonance in the listener. It is remarkable that such an approach to creating an opera role was very unusual. It seems that Stanislavski’s work at the Opera Studio had little or no influence on the wider world of opera where the expectations of acting continued to be low and foregrounding the voice continued to be the norm.

Beyond the useful insights provided by Weigart, Varnay learnt to act largely through rehearsing and performing. Whilst Conservatoires and music colleges recognised the need to provide some sort of training in stagecraft for emergent opera singers, the

time given to these activities was minimal and largely concerned with outward appearances.

Birgit Nilsson⁹ is another singer who describes how her training, which was comprehensive in terms of vocal, musical and linguistic development, lacked any rigour in acting training. She had played a number of roles as an amateur singer ‘I loved being on stage and burying myself in a role.’ (Nilsson, 2007: 43) but, training at the Stockholm Royal Academy of Music in 1946 she found her weekly acting classes.

‘Robbed me of all my joy in acting. He [Roger Hytén – Cavallius, acting tutor] often made fun of us and imitated our errors with outrageous exaggeration . . . he forced us repeatedly to do set gestures without motivation: he called these gestures “classic”’ (Nilsson, 2007: 43-44)

Jon Vickers,¹⁰ another singer who achieved international acclaim for major operatic roles, trained at the Toronto Conservatory in 1950. There he had weekly classes in fencing and stage deportment but similarly felt that learning to act came later when actually performing. The training for acting was based in physical appearance and moving as directed within the space. (Williams, 1999)

As well as the training provided, the expectations of the singers play a part in making this aspect of their course effective. Having worked in training both actors and singers, I have found that, largely, those training to act have always wanted to perform, but, those entering vocal training, have often found themselves with the gift

⁹ Birgit Nilsson 1918 – 2005 Swedish dramatic soprano.

¹⁰ Jon Vickers 1928 - Canadian heldentenor.

of a voice and been encouraged to pursue a career in singing, only realising later that, as a career, singing will only provide a regular income if they go on stage.

Linda Esther Gray¹¹ training at the Royal Scottish Academy in the 1960s found,

‘I dislike and feel uncomfortable during the opera classes . . . my acting comes from my voice and the exercises he gives us are unrelated to this and a waste of time and energy.’ (Gray, 2007: 58)

Joining the London Opera Centre¹² in 1969 she had classes in movement, stagecraft, makeup and fencing. She was apprehensive about the acting classes given her previous experience. Sure enough, ‘some of the acting classes were a humiliating waste of time.’ (Gray, 2007: 61) For Gray sending a message round a circle of other students in a made up language bore no relation to what she might do on stage and seemed only to increase her self-consciousness. She writes about this, in her autobiography, to emphasise her belief that formal acting training bears no part in preparation for a life in opera. She is emphatic about the need for rigorous vocal training and feels that this is all the singer needs in order to perform on stage.

After a series of difficult experiences she has success in a class when she was asked to improvise a telephone conversation, which she did by simply having a conversation with her close friend about a forthcoming visit she was planning. She went through the details and knew her friend well enough to gauge her replies and responses. For once she was praised and got a positive response from the group, but, just as nobody seems to have explained the purpose of the previous exercises, she was not asked to

¹¹ Linda Esther Gray 1948 – Scottish soprano and singing teacher.

¹² Later to be known as the National Opera Studio London.

discover the key to the effectiveness of her ‘acting’ or how she might take that forward in her work. She made some connections for herself.

‘Acting, as such, had not been mentioned. I had been given a task to perform and did not pretend to do it but had actually made it real and reacted as if I had been in a real situation.’ (Gray, 2007: 63)

These accounts offer an insight to a system of acting training, which is sketchy and haphazard, and where the purposes of the activities are not shared with the students. There seems to be an acceptance that some sort of acting training is necessary but only as a supplementary skill to the prime object of the institution, which is musicianship. Limiting the time for training increases its superficial nature. Given further time to develop acting skills, Linda Esther-Gray’s frustrations in acting classes and her subsequent ‘breakthrough’ could have been reflected upon, and developed, to promote a greater understanding of the process.

Current Training in Acting for Opera Singers

I have contacted the other nine Conservatoires in the UK¹³ to ask what actor training their classical vocal students receive. In the replies there is a common theme, whilst realising the importance of this element there are difficulties in making provision for it. The average is one hour a week of some form of training and then only for part of the year. All of the Conservatoires refer to performances as an opportunity to acquire the appropriate skills.

The quality of training during performance preparation must depend on the teaching skills of the director who will have been booked for their reputation in opera direction and may not have the skills or the will to bring the necessary pedagogy into the rehearsal room. Just as it may not be appropriate to have an early driving lesson on a motorway, can preparing for a role in a production be the best environment for basic acting training?

None of the Conservatoires were able to say if particular acting systems were used or if any particular practitioners were followed.

Speaking to singers¹⁴ who are now working professionally, most mention the lack of training in acting at their colleges, although they recognise that learning repertoire, language classes, coaching and song-classes made a busy time table. Susan Bullock¹⁵ remembers that at The National Opera Studio students were shown, by John Copley¹⁶

¹³ See attached data for details of the Conservatoires approached.

¹⁴ See attached list for names of singers interviewed informally.

¹⁵ Susan Bullock 1958 – dramatic soprano.

¹⁶ John Copley 1933 – opera director – his *Bohème* is one of the most frequently revived productions at Covent Garden.

how to walk in character, but she, like many, cites certain directors as having helped her to develop as an actor. The American singers I spoke to seemed to have a much more focused training – particularly those who attended the Juilliard.¹⁷ The prospectus for the Juilliard opera school states they are seeking, ‘superb vocalists who are emotionally fearless.’ (Juilliard, 2013)

Stephen Wadsworth¹⁸ is the new director of opera at the Juilliard; he works in both spoken theatre and opera internationally. He was asked what he would most like his students to remember, ‘The most important thing is to become who you actually are and to use your craft to tell the deepest truths you can access.’ (Juilliard Journal, April 2013)

American singers such as Lester Lynch¹⁹ or Scott Hendricks²⁰ were notable in the rehearsal situation (Bregenzer Festspiele 2012) for being able to engage with the director, asking questions, opting to try new things and talking from within the character. They both felt empowered to do this because of actor training but further Lynch makes the point that he has a ‘vocabulary’ which allows him to talk about acting to a director in the same way that his musical vocabulary allows him to talk to conductors. (Lynch 2012, informal interview)

Wyman (2008: 260) believes that one reason that Stanislavski continues to be widely used in actor training is his contribution to the development of a language of acting.

¹⁷ Juilliard School New York.

¹⁸ Director for 28 years dividing his time between opera and spoken theatre.

¹⁹ Lester Lynch American baritone studied at the Juilliard School.

²⁰ Scott Hendricks American baritone studied at Houston Grand Opera Studio.

Without acting training Conservatoires risk creating singers who merely portray the role through singing the text, wearing the costume and make-up and moving around the space as directed, rather than singers who seek to embody the role. By not being properly trained as actors, singers can also become defensive about the need for acting as such. Proclaiming the voice as the single essential performance element allows them to remain in their comfort zone. Whilst there are directors who might choose to push singers around the space to inhabit their concept, directors I spoke to²¹ rejected the notion of using singers as über-marionettes – only capable of fulfilling the directors’ visions of filling the space and reacting and interacting as instructed - but they accept that time pressure, and the need to exchange singers in roles can dilute their preparation to a series of moves which the singer has to complete. Stanislavski quotes Fedotov, justifying himself for demonstrating a character for a singer to copy: ‘How can I avoid showing the thing to them, when there is so little time before the performance?’ (Stanislavski, 2001: 164)

²¹ See data attached.

Research through practice

I wanted to investigate how singers would respond to an acting process in rehearsal, contrasted with the more usual directorial approach. I worked on two operas simultaneously:

A production of *Acis and Galatea*²², in which the singers were given stage direction according to my production concept, given an outline of character, but no supporting exercises with which to develop them. I kept the production process close to the one I have seen in most opera rehearsal rooms. There were two casts and each cast was expected to reproduce the movements of the other to such an extent that the casts were fully interchangeable.

A production of *Dido and Aeneas*²³ was created collaboratively with considerable dramaturgical work and acting process. Again there were two casts, but each followed their own route in creating the production.

I was hypothesising that using Stanislavski inspired techniques would create a different kind of experience for the singer and consequently a different experience for the audience. By creating the characters' inner-lives and placing them within, 'not plain but illustrated Given Circumstances,' (Stanislavski, 2008:76) by aiming for each word and movement on stage to be part of a line of physical actions, working towards an objective, I hoped to develop truthful performances. Of course that is a difficult and subjective thing to measure but if the singers might be able to:

²² *Acis and Galatea*, 1731: Composer G F Handel (1685-1759)

²³ *Dido and Aeneas*, circa 1689 composer H Purcell (1659-1695)

‘Forget about the audience and the effect you’re having on them and instead of trying to charm them, confine yourself to small physical, realistic actions, small physical truths and a sincere belief in their genuineness!’ (Stanislavski, 2008:164)

Then there should be a marked contrast to the performances in *Acis and Galatea* where the singers will be encouraged to show their ‘acting skills’ and remain continually aware of the audience whilst reproducing given movements.

Because of design and costume demands I had to make early decisions about time and place. This was not an issue for *Acis* but I wanted the cast of *Dido* to have some input. We discussed it; many of them had been in a production of *Street Scene*²⁴ and felt that the work on the 1940s could be useful and so *Dido* was set in France towards the end of the German occupation. This reflected the themes within *Dido and Aeneas* of war and allegiance.

In order to make the comparison more equable, I decided to set *Acis* in a stately home just before the First World War. The lady of the house would be mounting a production of the piece, using family and servants as cast. This gave all the singers characters, which invite development, and framed both operas to give distance from their mythical roots.

Early rehearsals for *Dido* were spent working on the story line within the new context and developing and creating characters. *Dido* became the owner of a cabaret bar in

²⁴ *Street Scene*: Kurt Weill, performed by Birmingham Conservatoire March 2012, directed by the author and set in 1947.

Paris. Aeneas, her would be lover, a Gestapo officer and the witches, members of the resistance.

The consort, of eight singers, began to align themselves with the protagonists: Aeneas' henchmen, workers in the bar, members of the resistance, visitors to the bar who might also work for the resistance or the occupying force. We had a list of films such as: '*Army of Shadows*' (Melville 1969) '*The Sorrow and the Pity*' (Ophüls 1969) and '*Is Paris Burning*' (Clément 1966) and, after watching them, the cast found a reason for the witches' vendetta. Dido, in the opera, has been married. The death of her husband is a reason for her reticence towards Aeneas. In our version this previous husband was a member of the resistance, shot by the Gestapo. A photograph was found of a resistance worker being executed and the cast wanted the audience to see this. The internet provided many powerful occupation images such as Hitler by the Eifel Tower, and we decided to project a montage of these over the opening music.

This gave a set of Given Circumstances within which the singers could use their imaginations to create Previous Circumstances. They were asked to answer Stanislavski's questions (2008: 83) who, when, where, why, for what reason, how? Their responses were shared with the other singers through interviews in role and improvisations, such as a new staff member being shown how to work the bar and Dido telling Belinda about the romantic approach by Aeneas. They wrote about their lives before coming to Paris, before the war, their families and their hopes for the future. They listed what they knew about the times they were living in and the work and experiences they had, and then listed what they would need to find through

research to flesh out their inner lives. We referred frequently to Stanislavski's words displayed on the rehearsal room wall:

‘Where are you to search, and how are you to create truth and belief within yourselves? Won't it be in your inner feelings and actions, that are in your mind, as an actor and a human?’ (Stanislavski, 2008: 160)

Sitting round a table we divided the text into episodes. The first one being Dido sharing her confusion about Aeneas with Belinda, and, for each event, asked the question ‘If I were in these circumstances what would I do?’ Dido worked out what she wanted from her exchange with Belinda and Belinda decided what she wanted to achieve by encouraging Dido. In this way the ‘tasks’ became clear and informed the way the text was delivered. I used the word ‘tasks’ with these singers because they were not being trained as actors in the usual way and there was no time to unpack what Wyman (2008: 66) calls the ‘accretions,’ which have been developed around that word or its transference to ‘objectives’. I felt the word task here was more easily aligned to a series of actions.

I asked the cast to identify what Stanislavski (1960: 130) calls the ‘Superobjective’ of the piece. What, beyond a pleasant piece of music, was the purpose of this opera?

These discussions revealed another potential obstruction between classical singers and the desire for truthful acting. Whilst most could cite plays which seemed to contain a central theme and an identifiable reason for the author having written them, the general feeling was that the purpose of opera was to entertain rather than make the audience think. The consensus was that the production concept could use the written

piece as a vehicle for stimulating a thoughtful response and we began to collect ideas that this production might examine such as loyalty and the human response to surviving occupation by an invading force. Rehearsals for *Acis* began a week later and, after a brief introduction, went straight into me blocking the first scene from a pre-prepared text.

Lady Marjorie Bellingham, in this version the director of the masque, over the short overture, instructed the servants to remove the furniture for the rehearsal, stopped her husband going to play golf and her daughter going on a picnic with her fiancé. Lady Marjorie gave out the parts and awarded the part of Acis to Jack – the footman, rather than to her daughter's fiancé Rupert, or to her son Simon, as had been expected.

When asked by cast members what they should watch or read to support their work. I told them that we would not be watching things collectively but they could find things for themselves if they wished, but if they did any research they must reflect the need to do so in their feedback. The second cast re-created the same blocking.

To create the blocking for *Dido and Aeneas* I asked the cast to improvise each episode within their Given and Previous Circumstances, driven by the task they had to achieve. A typical example of this process was the opening scene.

Dido enters the bar – her domain – she looks over it with a practiced eye to make sure that everyone and everything is in its place and as it should be. She wants to speak privately to Belinda. Belinda senses this and makes sure they are undisturbed. This

being the small community it is all the others are aware of the problem Dido is wrestling with.

This method of Physical Action as offered by Stanislavski in *Creating a Role* (2000) helps the discovery of character and the dynamic between the characters. It produces physical actions from a psychological impulse and a psychological effect from a physical one. In this opening scene one of the bar workers may be aware of Dido's glance and begin to work more quickly. Another may share a look with a colleague about Dido's need to talk privately to Belinda and so on. Because these actions come from the actor being in the circumstances they are truthful and believable. Had these singers been given the opportunity for training in acting, not only would the process have been quicker but they would have felt more confident about the benefits of this system.

We continued to use this approach for each episode in the piece. The process of improvising the scene, within the Given and Previous Circumstances, to discover a series of actions in pursuit of each character's task created a belief in the world we were creating which distracted the singers from foregrounding their vocal expertise or adding what they hoped was acting. Actions – such as cleaning tables and emptying ashtrays – were informed by physical and emotional states; how tired they were, how much they resented Dido or feared for her.

‘If one small truth and moment of belief can put an actor in a creative state then a whole series of such moments, in a logical succession, and in sequence, can create a very big truth and a whole long period of belief.’ (Stanislavski, 2008: 164)

As I directed *Acis and Galatea* I was surprised at how passive the singers had become. They attempted to fully replicate what I offered with the only questions being about clarity of what I wanted, rather than why, reflecting Clive Barker's view of this directing strategy:

‘Often, because he has already conceived the effect he wants from a production in his mind’s eye, often because he does not know sufficient about the actor’s ways and means to translate his objectives into active processes which will stimulate the actor to work without prior reflection, and, often because time in any production is at a premium, the director in rehearsal gives the actor the result.’ Barker (1977: 47)

I asked the cast how they felt about this method of rehearsing. Several with more experience said that it was the process they had experienced most. One said she liked to be directed – as in told what to do. But what, I asked, if you were asked to do something which seemed totally wrong for your character? Some said they would question it, but the consensus was that the director’s will must be allowed to prevail. Training in acting could better equip them to have this discussion with a director.

I asked the cast of *Dido* how they were finding the process. ‘I was relieved when we started singing,’ said one, ‘I was getting stressed about the time we had to do this, and the time we spent just talking.’ There was some support for this, but equally, some felt the ‘talking’ was now speeding up the process. One said that he sometimes wasn’t sure what to do when given a free choice to be anywhere in the space. I asked the others for suggestions for such moments. ‘Do nothing,’ said one, ‘only do something

when you have to because you can't help it.' I asked her to expand on this idea. 'Well you have to be in the moment and not plan ahead, then if you do something it comes from you.' I asked how they would deal with a director or even another cast member asking them to change something but they thought that went against their belief in the role. Everyone said they would resist that by explaining how it was inconsistent.

The singers for each cast were chosen by the conductor, according to their vocal expertise. This meant that acting ability was never considered in the selection; this is a usual procedure in opera although many conductors (Lionel Friend, Antonio Pappano, Stephen Barlow, in my direct experience) maintain that the way a singer performs an audition aria can show a great deal about their acting potential. In this project the cast were selected from all year groups and post-graduates, which led to a wide range of innate acting ability and exposure to training.

In the *Acis* group there were several singers who have acting skills and who had engaged with the minimal training. The singer playing a footman and the one playing Lady Marjorie's secretary for example were following the imposed blocking, but somehow still managed to seem real and without changing the given characterisation suggest an inner life. They were being rather than playing the role.

With each production there was a different quality to the notes and questions raised in rehearsal. For *Acis* these were largely about staging. The subtle needs of timing, using props and so on. In *Dido* the points raised were more frequently about character and interaction. The DSM and my assistant pointed out that the *Acis* cast were more

relaxed – perhaps feeling that the job was done – whilst the Dido cast, in a more organic process, were still working towards their goals.

The singers reflected on their experiences and their view of the process, in a blog. Many of the early entries confessed some disquiet in the Dido cast about time. This exposes one of the major differences in preparing opera. The roles have been learnt before production rehearsals begin and there is always an anxiety about how well they can sing them off copy. There is a sense of wanting to rush into rehearsal and sing through the role whilst it is fresh. Initial rehearsals with no singing, foster concerns, that musical knowledge is not being tested and strengthened by repetition. It also highlights a lack of training in acting, which would help them to see the strategies used to create the role as equally important to memorising the music.

For *Acis* the process was comfortably familiar in that the musical knowledge was added to a series of physical demands and the singers' task was to bring the two together. It was not until the second week that the *Dido* cast began to talk more positively about the process. They began to consider the fact that they had new knowledge about their character and that this knowledge could influence and change the way the role was sung. Trained as they are by teachers and coaches that musical preparation is what happens before rehearsals begin, this clearly felt a little dangerous, but once they had a taste for it there was no stopping them. Several of the cast reported that they felt more confident about making musical choices because they could find non-musical reasons for doing so. I asked them to expand on this thought. A singer, playing Dido, gave this example,

‘If a passage is marked p (pianissimo) then, obviously that’s the way you learn it, but if you’re allowed to find a reason, I don’t know, something obvious like the people in the bar are too near, then it becomes natural to do it like that and stops being a musical mark that you need to remember.’ (In a conversation on June 10th 2012)

This resonates with Stanislavski’s (2001: 136) struggle with, ‘loud for the sake of loudness’ that he found as an opera singer. Again, training in acting for singers could make a contribution to finding truthful ways of fulfilling the composer’s dynamic markings.

The *Acis* cast’s responses were very positive. Everyone, who gave feedback, mentioned in some way, how confident they felt on stage. I asked how much thought or work they had put into their roles outside rehearsals. Many found they had chosen a character – real or fictional – to base their role on. A lot had used *Downton Abbey*²⁵ as a sort of model. It became clear that there was a lot of generalisation about the sort of person they were. Only two had thought of exact ages, the rest talked of, ‘about’ such and such.

When watching the two operas I could tell which singers were living in the moment and whose character seemed fully drawn and which singers were demonstrating an emotional state they felt appropriate to the circumstances. The first state was much more common in the *Dido* cast, even from this relatively short period of training in acting.

²⁵ Television period drama set in a stately home and dealing with life above and below stairs.

I accept that in commercial opera there is rarely time for the *Dido and Aeneas* model as described. However, what does seem entirely clear is that if there is to be a change in the way opera singers behave on stage and what they bring to the rehearsal process then the training they are given needs to equip them properly with acting processes and a professional vocabulary. Armed with training, a singer who meets a director who sees their role as moving characters around a stage, could create an inner life and find truthful reasons for making those moves.

In an article for the New York Times, Charles Isherwood suggests that, ‘Acting in Opera need no longer be an oxymoron,’ feeling that such things as, more directors from a spoken theatre background, the practice of broadcasting operas in cinemas and the drawing closer of audiences to the text since surtitles, are some of the elements which have coincided to stimulate a desire for raising acting standards. He quotes Mary Zimmerman²⁶ – well known for reinvigorating theatre classics on Broadway – as wanting to bring the same, ‘emotional immediacy’ to Opera,

‘You still have to prioritise the voice, but for me the question is, Is the singer present in what he or she is singing? It is not possible to engage an audience if the singer is unengaged, no matter how much scenery you have around. The show has a dead center. People deserve the total experience that opera has advertised itself as providing, a union of all the arts.’ (Isherwood, 2007)

This view is supported by Marc Taslit, who agrees that a more sophisticated visual understanding by the public means:

²⁶ Theatre director b.1960, faculty member Northeastern University.

‘Viewers’ emotions can no longer be aroused by simplistic, obvious play acting because our increased visual discernment has greatly diminished our tolerance of such acting.’ (Taslit: 1995)

Isherwood (2007) reports Renee Flemming’s belief that, during her professional life, acting standards have improved. She believes that this is largely through the work of directors rather than a change in training methods. Of course there have always been those singers who, for whatever reason, have managed to transcend the acting in opera clichés. Watching Maria Callas or Martha Mödl on film a captivating level of engagement with the text and the moment can be seen. And there have been directors with the teaching skills and desire to make the acting better, such as Franco Zeffirelli or Luchino Visconti, but there has been no systematic approach to developing this side of the craft. Isherwood (2007) cites Natalie Dessay who has, ‘been acclaimed for her performances in the sometimes psychologically flimsy repertoire of the lyric coloratura.’ Dessay is unusual in that she studied acting before she discovered she had a voice of rare quality. It wasn’t possible for her to study both acting and voice. In France those arts are separate entities. She wonders if this is because, unlike America or Britain, France has no tradition of musical theatre. This may be true in part but certainly in Britain, whilst it is possible to study Musical Theatre, where the training is an amalgam of singing, acting and dance, the quality of the singing training is not in the bel canto system which develops true vocal stamina, any more than the dance training has the rigour of a ballet school. So where does the classical singer go for acting training? Stephen Wadsworth is determined to make the Juilliard School such a place but believes that continues to be rare.

‘It is a singular tragedy and source of shame that Conservatoires and Universities that offer serious actor training you can count on one hand. . . even today ninety per cent of the opera productions on view would make Handel or Verdi spin in their graves because of the extent to which the music is curated responsibly and the drama irresponsibly.’ (Cited in Isherwood: 2007)

Wadsworth’s, ‘handful of Conservatoires and Universities’ applies to the situation in America. Within the UK’s nine Conservatoires there is evidence of some acting teaching but it is minimal, largely ad hoc and without rigour. This is partly because of the demands of time. Training at a Conservatoire is expensive; the institution has to supply one-to-one tuition in voice, song classes, repertoire and language coaching and, in order to be credible, staged performance opportunities – and of course the academic requirements for a degree. The financial and time implications of squeezing in a structured, systematic acting course have encouraged the institutions to adopt the one hour a week, occasional workshop model and hope for directors for their productions who have the skills and the will to develop acting.

In my research practice I found the singers perfectly aware that acting would be a career requirement. Not once, in either piece, did the singers shy away from the need to perform beyond merely fulfilling the vocal demands. The newest and least experienced seemed to see acting as another layer, to be added like a costume, and reproduced what they thought acting looked like. In *Acis* they were aided and abetted by the directing style to ape mannerisms. In *Dido*, when supported and given techniques to become the character, they were able to stop ‘acting’ and fulfil the

series of tasks their character needed to undertake. The more experience they had had of doing this – for example those who had been in *Street Scene* – the easier and more successful this was. They had a determination to make what they were doing consistent with the circumstances. Evidence of this was that the *Dido* cast would suggest or ask for props. This never happened in the *Acis* cast. It was difficult in *Dido* to ever find someone on stage who wasn't busily living within the scene, whereas in *Acis* the reactions stopped and started largely with what had been directed.

Part of what makes something a profession is a shared vocabulary specific to that profession. Of course the singers have a musical vocabulary and additionally will use physiological terms when talking about vocal issues. Given an acting vocabulary the singers felt much more empowered to discuss their role, the situation and to describe any problems they might be having. Interestingly the *da capos*²⁷, where variation is supplied by vocal ornamentation, became the subject of a lot of discussion. 'Why am I saying this again?' and, in finding reasons, the ornaments had a purpose beyond the merely decorative.

There is much more work to do in researching these issues through practice, but from this small foray I am convinced that classical singers have the need and the right to access proper acting training. These singers got enormous satisfaction from being part of the creative process, acquiring the tools that helped them to create and develop a character, and from living in the moment on stage. They will probably still get their first job largely through vocal expertise, which can be further enhanced by being the character, singing within the given circumstances. But recently I have seen at least

²⁷ Composer's mark indicating that a section of music is to be repeated.

two international directors opt for casting acting over voice so I remain optimistic. When they are in rehearsal the acting singer will have much more to bring to the rehearsal process, skills to find reasons for the moves they are given and the vocabulary to support their characterisation. Training institutions, which do not take developing singing actors seriously, are failing their students and continuing to contribute to a genre where acting is entirely secondary to the principle business of singing and where parodies of realism continue to alienate all but the already devoted audiences.

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Footnote 16 singers who discussed their training with the author

<u>Singer</u>	<u>Country where trained</u>
Fredrika Brillembourg	America and Germany
Susan Bullock	United Kingdom
Louise Crane	United Kingdom
Verena Gunz	Austria
Scott Hendricks	America
Kathryn Lewek	America
Lester Lynch	America
Rosalind Plowright	United Kingdom
Kirsty Swann	America
Bryn Terfel	United Kingdom
Sir John Tomlinson	United Kingdom

Opera directors who discussed acting in opera with the author:

John Fulljames
Michael Gieleta
David Poutney
Keith Warner

The singers and directors named have given permission to be quoted in this research. The singers from Birmingham Conservatoire remain anonymous for ethical reasons.

Footnote 17 Conservatoires in the United Kingdom

Birmingham	Birmingham Conservatoire
London	Guildhall School of Music and Drama London
Leeds	Leeds College of Music
London	London College of Music and Media
London	Royal Academy of Music London
London	Royal College of Music
Glasgow	Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
Manchester	Royal Northern College of Music
Cardiff	Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama/ Coleg Cerdd a Drama Cymru
London	Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance