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An Actor Diversifies: A Diachronic Examination of the Work and Career of Tony Curran

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This chapter examines the work and working practices of Tony Curran, an actor we consider to have noteworthy versatility. Focusing on his career in television across a number of projects, contexts and years, our argument is that Curran's versatility involves a number of factors, both within and exceeding his creative agency. These include confidence and creative risk-taking, an emphasis on acting as a craft that requires discipline, preparation and attention to the methods of production and exhibition, as well as awareness of the social culture within which the careers of actors are located.

The chapter combines close analysis of selected moments of Curran's acting with insights gleaned from a personal interview with Curran, conducted on 6 May 2016. Brett Mills cautions that 'it is important to acknowledge the subjectivity within any interview material, and not to use this data as evidence of certain kinds of working practices.' (2008, p.152) We agree with his first point; but especially for scholarship on acting, interviews can provide pertinent knowledge that would otherwise remain inaccessible; and we map Curran's thoughts against our study of the relevant industrial/production contexts. Our methodology further brings together the scholar and practitioner perspectives, which adds a valuable awareness of and emphasis on process and the reality of practice to our analysis. This complements in turn the actor at the focus of our attention: with audiences more likely to recognise him by his face than by his name, Curran is the kind of actor who would not have typically been written about in past scholarship on performance, which has traditionally placed an emphasis on stars. Tony Curran is the kind of successful professional actor whose achievements are worth highlighting and illuminating for the study of acting.

Our analysis of his performances in *This Life* (BBC2, 1997), *Doctor Who* (BBC1, 2005-present), *Defiance* (Syfy, 2013-2015) and *Roots* (History Channel, 2016) will pay particular attention to how medium and/or genre may intersect with Curran's acting, and the preparation and rehearsal methods he draws upon to manage such diverse parts. This critical evaluation of one actor's working practices will pay due attention to the production and industrial/institutional contexts within which Curran's career has unfolded. In doing so, our analysis will illuminate issues concerning acting and the professional life of actors within the contemporary creative industries that have wider relevance beyond the chapter's focus on Curran himself.

To introduce him in a little more detail, the career of Tony Curran is both representative of and somewhat atypical for contemporary British actors. Like many of his professional peers, Curran, who was born in Glasgow in 1969, trained at a drama school: the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. (This was the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama at the time he received his Diploma in Dramatic Art in 1993.) Since signing with agency Scott Marshall Partners following his graduation showcase, he has worked as a professional actor across film, theatre, television and video games. With his profile developing through industry recognition and acclaim, Curran is part of the wave of British and Irish actors who relocated during the 2000s to the United States, where he has played roles in several high-profile television series.

Given the contexts of training and professional experience, Curran's and his peers' work are located within a Western, broadly Stanislavskian approach to performance. With 'An Actor Diversifies' recalling the seminal *An Actor Prepares* (Stanislavsky, 1964), the

chapter's title indicates the centrality of Stanislavski to our approach to the analysis of Curran's acting. Whilst there is no space here to discuss his complex and complicated work and legacy, we will note that broadly speaking, Stanislavskian approaches to acting focus on realism, naturalism and 'emotional truth': notoriously unstable, slippery terms.[1] In the expectation that our readers are more likely to be familiar with the terms realism and naturalism, we note that we use the term 'emotional truth' to refer to acting that imaginatively utilizes an actor's personal experiences in an effort to produce a performance that is read as believable by an audience. Curran himself is one of many actors who see finding the truth of any given scene and making the performance truthful as their main intention and responsibility.

These commonalities with a number of his peers notwithstanding, Curran's professional development is unusual for two reasons: firstly, there is the level of success and near-continual employment he has achieved since leaving drama school. This success is elusive for the majority of professional actors, and made more remarkable within the context of the current high-profile attention given to the working conditions for actors, which have been highly precarious in Britain for some time. Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt have noted that creative workers experience 'short-term, insecure, poorly paid, precarious work in conditions of structural uncertainty' (2008, p.2); and actors (in Britain and elsewhere) are no exception. Recently, the actor's union Equity has estimated that 'around 90% of trained and qualified actors are out of work at any one time' (The Stage Castings 2015). Equity has furthermore articulated its concerns around low pay, as 'almost half of respondents in our most recent survey earn less than £5,000 per year from their professional work' (Equity 2015). In light of

[1] For further discussions of Stanislavski, realism and naturalism, see Gordon (2006), Carnicke (2010) and Hewett (2015).

these figures, it is not surprising that Sam Friedman, Dave O'Brien and Daniel Laurison have likened being an actor, especially for anyone from a non-privileged background, to 'skydiving without a parachute' (2016, p.10). From a poor working-class family, Curran's very decision to become an actor is perhaps the most compelling proof of the commitment to risk-taking that we identify across his career.

And secondly, Curran's career is unusual because the roles he has been cast in have been noticeably diverse. On television, since his first breakthrough as gay Scottish plumber Lenny in *This Life*, his roles have included villainous Orlick in the literary adaptation *Great Expectations* (BBC1, 1999), an SAS soldier in ITV1 action series *Ultimate Force* (2002-2008), a Russian torturer in US action serial *24* (Fox, 2001-2010), Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh for British SF series *Doctor Who*, a medieval king in TV mini-series *Pillars of the Earth* (Starz, 2010), British politician Robin Cook in comedy-noir *The Hunt for Tony Blair* (C4, 2011), an Irish immigrant labourer in 'quality' drama *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO, 2010-2014), second in command of a biker gang in gritty drama *Sons of Anarchy* (FX, 2008-2014), an alien in SF series *Defiance*, and a sadistic overseer at a slave plantation in the recent remake of *Roots*. This range is remarkable, especially considering the reality of typecasting that affects the working lives of many actors. Trevor Rawlins notes that it is 'far more usual in television production to cast actors close to their age and physical type out of economic necessity. […] The logical conclusion of this industrial reality is that actors will increasingly tend to play within their own age and type range.' (2012, p.212) Given that certain forms of typecasting may be in effect at different levels of the casting process (including producers, casting directors and talent agents, both individually and accumulatively), that Curran has played so many different roles reflects a very positive working relationship with Scott

Marshall Partners, which continues to this day. It also suggests a wider recognition within the creative industries of Curran's aptitude for variety.

To begin with our first case study, *This Life*, a drama series about a group of flat-sharing twenty-somethings in London, marked an important turning point in Curran's early career. After signing with his agent and making the (to some extent, inevitable) move to London, the roles Curran secured in the mid-1990s reflect many British peers' curricula vitae, namely one-off roles in long-running television genre programming such as *Taggart* (ITV, 1983-2010) – almost obligatory for emerging Scottish actors – and *The Bill* (ITV, 1984-2010). Having amassed a number of roles that were relatively non-descript, as reflected by the character names given in the credits (e.g. 'Travel Agent' for *Shallow Grave* (Danny Boyle, 1994), 'Police Officer #2' in *Grange Hill* (BBC1, 1978-2008)), Curran was cast as Lenny in the second season of the high-profile drama *This Life*, which would prove to be his first breakthrough. This part was actually written for him by scriptwriter Eirene Huston, an unusual occurrence for an actor at this stage of their career. It happened because Huston was a personal friend of Curran's; however, she experienced resistance from the producers and Curran underwent a rigorous auditioning process. Curran has a high 'strike rate' with auditions, not only because he prepares thoroughly, but also because he is adept at sight-reading, having enjoyed improvising since drama school. Thus, his casting here reflects ability, historical contingency and the significance of the social culture within which actors' careers do (or do not) develop. Much of what Tom Kemper has argued in his work on the rise of Hollywood agents from the late 1920s to the 1940s evidently still applies to the present-day creative industries (including in the UK); especially his following point:

> Crucial to my argument here is my conception of Hollywood as a business world embedded within a *social network* (and vice versa). This may not be big news, but it adds

> an important perspective to understanding the business, which […] cannot be extracted from the *social culture* in which it is rooted. (2010, pp.ix-x; emphases added)

Curran has long been aware of the significance of the social culture – he calls it a 'big circus' – within which acting is located, and he takes a very disciplined approach to this, especially as far as his emotional labour is concerned. Emotional labour here does not refer to the emotions with which actors engage in terms of the roles they play, but to the work they undertake in terms of managing their own feelings during the processes of auditioning, rehearsing and acting, such as the already mentioned pressure of feeling like an outsider when joining a long-running show. Elly Konjin points out that '[e]motions on the level of the actor-craftsman are rarely considered in traditional accounts of acting, except incidentally in relation to stage fright.' (1995, p.133) Nevertheless, as David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker insist in relation to creative work in the television industry, such emotions 'cannot be detached from an understanding of the specificity of cultural production' (2008, p.103). They form a significant part of the professional working lives of actors such as Curran, whose disciplined approach to his emotional labour includes him striving to cultivate positive working relationships without taking notes and feedback personally. This benefits his work on two levels: firstly, as Eric Hetzler has found in his study of actors and emotions in performance, if actors do not manage their emotions, especially any negative feelings, these may hinder them from connecting 'better to the task and thereby be "in the moment"' (2007, p.75). By managing his emotional labour effectively, Curran avoids such a detrimental impact on his acting. And secondly, as he avoids creating negative, unproductive atmospheres on set, he aids his future career prospects. As Hesmondhalgh and Baker further note, emotional labour is 'involved in developing working relations with team members that lead to those very important enduring contacts – contacts that lead to further contracts.'

(2008, p.114) Aware of the difficult working conditions for and the firm limits on the agency of actors, Curran is one of many (if not all) members of the acting profession who knows that the perceived mismanagement of emotional labour could damage his career prospects within the precarious social culture of the creative industries.

A scene from *This Life* episode 'From Here to Maternity' (2.15) demonstrates two of the reasons for Curran's breakthrough and why he is such a versatile actor: his willingness and ability to take creative risks, and the attention he pays to the methods of production and exhibition. In the scene, which consists of a number of different shots, Curran's Lenny, who has only recently arrived within the story world, is having a post-coital conversation with Ramon Tikaram's Ferdy about the fatal accident of a friend of Ferdy's. Curran's risk-taking is apparent in the fact that he chooses to play a gay character here completely naked. Whilst this is not entirely evident on the screen, as within the wider framed shots Curran lies on the bed diagonally across the frame with his leg pulled up, he decided to forego the modesty pouch for the purposes of realism and intimacy. That he chose to play the scene naked might at first not sound that noteworthy, but consider the facts that Curran, a cisgender and heterosexual man himself, was only a few years out of drama school by this point, and still a relative newcomer to the *This Life* set (his character had only appeared in two earlier episodes). Entering and being new on a set is an anxiety-inducing experience for many (if not all) emerging actors, and this anxiety, Curran points out, still revisits him to this day (as it does for many of his peers). Trevor Rawlins (2012, p.144) has noted that temporarily joining a long-running television show where the crew and regular cast are familiar with each other can present a number of challenges, especially the pressure of feeling like an outsider.[2] These

[2] See also Moore (2004). This links to issues concerning status, which Roberta Pearson (2010) has discussed in some detail and to which this chapter will briefly return.

are precisely the sort of parts which emerging actors tend to secure; and in the case of *This Life*, a comparatively inexperienced Curran found himself on the set of the second season of the at the time perhaps most high-profile British drama series. Thus, Curran's decision to be entirely naked is a striking example of his commitment to risk-taking, demonstrating that his focus in the scene lies very much with creating and supporting a sense of intimacy, which has particular significance for the domestic medium of television in general (see Newcomb, 1974, pp.245-8), and which the audio-visual style of *This Life* sought to evoke (see Cooke, 2015, pp.191-5).

This sense of intimacy is further facilitated by the fact that Curran underplays the scene. By 'underplaying,' we mean that he delivers his lines softly, and his physical actions and facial expressions remain restrained. Called for by the scene as scripted, this 'invisible acting' (within practitioner discourses on acting also known as 'small acting') whilst naked and playing against one's sexual orientation requires considerable confidence from actors, as it can feel like one is not actually doing much at all. This links to one of the paradoxes concerning acting in a contemporary Western context – where 'invisible' acting is frequently judged superior to 'visible' acting – summed up by Brenda Austin-Smith as follows: 'If you can see it, it isn't working; if it works, you can't really see it.' (2012, p.20) To 'do nothing extremely well', which Alfred Hitchcock (in Naremore, 1988, p.34) famously cited as one of the hallmarks of an accomplished screen actor, requires perhaps especial confidence from emerging actors, who are often understandably keen to make the most of a given opportunity, and demonstrate that they can act and 'do *something*'. Curran has been a noticeably self-assured performer since his early years, having built his belief in his abilities at drama school, which was a 'very helpful' experience for him. His desire to 'make an impression' notwithstanding, Curran's confidence to 'do little' shows not only in his restrained use of

body, face and voice, but also in the fact that he takes time to respond. For example, when Tikaram's Ferdy tells him 'All it takes is for some arsehole to forget to check his mirror and you're dog meat.', Curran lets the line land and considers it for a moment before replying with 'Did you see it?' Supporting the sense of intimacy marking the scene, Curran's listening and lack of self-consciousness here[3] help to efficiently establish his character as insightful and empathetic, as well as demonstrate his commitment to creative risk-taking.

In this approach to the scene, his risk-taking is not only informed by his confidence, but also both aided by and responding to the particular production methods employed for *This Life*. These, as Lez Cooke (2015) has discussed, responded to both the economic and ideological concerns of Tony Garnett, whose World Productions produced the programme on digital Betacam. As Garnett has noted:

> So we create a style which allows us to be very flexible in what we shoot […] and we'll do everything we can to facilitate an actor being 'in the moment', in character. So actors are not put on marks and it's the camera's job to find them and to catch them. So that means, with that amount of time, there's no tracks, there's no dollies, it's steady handheld because then you can just adjust for the movement of the actors. (in Cooke, 2015, p.193)

Curran's experience concurs with this summary, and one of his preoccupations as an actor is to pay attention to the methods of production and exhibition, down to the level of detail as to what type of lens is being used for shooting. The scene under scrutiny is somewhat atypical for *This Life* in that it is quite static, with both characters lying on a bed; and the shifts between wider and tighter framings are realised through cutting instead of camera movement. However, it resonates with the more dominant filming methods for *This Life* in that the actors

[3] Self-consciousness (which is to be distinguished from self-awareness) has long been identified as a hindrance to (good) acting, if not a signifier of bad acting, in both actor and actor training discourses.

here do not have to be concerned about marks, camera framing and microphones. As a result, Curran was aided in his risk-taking here by his knowledge that the production methods were privileging the actors and his 'invisible' (or 'small') acting, and not vice versa.

With his profile receiving an important boost from the success of *This Life*, Curran's career developed to include being part of the main cast for *Ultimate Force* (ITV, 2002-2008) from 2002-2003, as well as being cast in parts of different sizes in US high-budget films (including a bigger role in *The 13th Warrior* (John McTiernan, 1999), a minute part in *Pearl Harbor* (Michael Bay, 2001) and a substantial role in *Underworld: Evolution* (Len Wiseman, 2006)). This reflects the career currents of many professional actors, whose employment paths rarely follow a linear trajectory. Another professional milestone for him was the Scottish BAFTA and British Independent Film award that he received for his performance in independent film *Red Road* (Andrea Arnold, 2006). This high-profile industry acknowledgment aided his relocation to the USA during the 2000s, when he started getting cast for a by now substantial list of high-profile and/or acclaimed US television series.[4] Since 9/11, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services has required foreign actors who apply for a work permit to provide a file of evidence for a high level of accomplishment in the creative industries,[5] and Curran's prestigious awards for *Red Road* have certainly helped his transatlantic career. Like many of his fellow British and Irish actors who have established careers in the USA, he has combined this with selected projects in the UK. One of these has been his guest role as van Gogh in the *Doctor* Who episode 'Vincent and the Doctor' (5.10, first broadcast in 2010), in which the Doctor (Matt Smith) and his companion Amy Pond (Karen Gillan) travel in time to visit the Dutch painter and fight an invisible monster with

[4] In addition to those already mentioned, these further include for example *Medium* (NBC/CBS, 2005-11) and *Elementary* (CBS, 2012-present).
[5] For further details, see Knox (2017).

him. As van Gogh, one of his few roles so far based on a non-fictitious person, Curran demonstrates his versatility through delivering a very expressive, emotional performance in marked contrast with his restrained work in *This Life*, in ways that draw on unconventional preparation and interestingly support the production methods.

Very aware that this role needed a sensitive approach, especially as *Doctor Who* is a show watched by families, Curran began preparing for the part through more conventional means: he researched van Gogh's life and in particular his struggles with mental health, reading van Gogh's letters to his brother Theo and visiting museums in Austria (where Curran was shooting at the time) to see some of his paintings. Research and preparation form the backbone of Curran's approach to acting:

> There's always research to be done, and I research as much as possible. […] Then, when the cameras start rolling, you need to have looked into all that backstory for any character, and then you just have to start playing what you've rehearsed. I always say: 'if you fail to plan, you plan to fail', so I prepare as much as possible for a character.

Once production in Croatia had begun, he made use of a more unusual preparation method for the scene when the Doctor finds a distraught van Gogh in bed, unable to cope with the thought of having to say good-bye to his new friends. As Curran recalls:

> There was actually a night when I slept on the set and I drank some absinth and went and slept on the bed in Vincent's room where we actually shot one of the scenes later, when the Doctor comes in and asks him if he's ok and I come round and I scream at him and he's all emotional and upset.

Spending the night before shooting the scene on set in the bed, Curran used affective memory techniques[6] that involved drawing on his own fears and painful memories concerning his family to help him access 'that place', namely the emotional and physical state required for the scene. This preparation shows itself in the shots that begin the scene, in that Curran is genuinely crying, his eyes puffy and his tears dripping off his nose. This is an emotionally truthful performance of van Gogh's distress, and with Curran's night prior to shooting bearing some resemblance to his character's night of painful thoughts, Curran's performance successfully meets one note that directors often give to actors: 'Where has your character just been?'

For his preparation for the remaining shots in the scene, in which van Gogh rejects the Doctor's efforts to cheer him up, Curran's attention shifted to the needs of the production methods, which are quite particular, in that the set of van Gogh's bedroom is modelled after the painter's famous 'Bedroom in Arles' paintings, and the camera frames Curran on the bed in a long shot in order to place the character in his distress within the iconic image. The practical consequence of this for Curran was that, with his customary awareness of the methods of production and exhibition, he needed to ensure his performance in these shots would be 'big' enough in order to be sufficiently visible within this particular framing and backdrop. This meant that he had to use his whole body for any gestures, which is difficult when lying on a bed (especially a narrow one, as is the case here), as one's own body weight and mass work against this. Having plotted out the use of his body during his preparation, Curran uses his core muscles to twist and turn on the bed, while stretching out his arms in a flat semi-circle, a gesture somewhat reminiscent of Greek tragedy performances, to convey

[6] Lee Strasberg has defined affective memory as 'the basic material for reliving on the stage, and therefore the creation of real experience on the stage. What the actor repeats in performance is not just the words and movements he practiced [sic] in rehearsal, but the memory of emotion through the journey of thought and sensation.' (1987, p.113)

van Gogh's despair. There is a certain theatrical quality to his movement, but this reads as believable, as it helps to convey the force of van Gogh's rejection of the Doctor's insistence on hope and his mental distress, further linking to the common perception of van Gogh as a tortured genius struggling with intense feelings. In a very different working context to *This Life*, in which the production methods privileged the work of the actors, Curran's acting successfully supports the particular needs of the scene and production methods.

Curran's acting in *Doctor Who* received positive feedback, not only from critics but also from viewers: a number of fans have subsequently approached Curran at conventions to express their appreciation of his sensitive portrayal of a character with mental health issues, which is why Curran considers this his most rewarding role to date. Curran continued to focus on work in the USA, signing with US agency Domain Talent and manager Tammy Rosen, and after several call-backs was cast in his longest-running role to date: *Defiance*'s Datak Tarr, a scheming Castithan alien who ruthlessly works to obtain legitimacy, status and power for his family. This role presented a number of acting challenges presented by the genre of telefantasy, such as frequently speaking some lines in the alien language that was created for the show and held no resonance for the actors, or balancing the more heightened acting style the programme employs with wishing to make the characters believable. As we have earlier noted the pressures on schedules and rarity of formal rehearsal time, it is now opportune to consider one of the determinants of television acting as identified by Roberta Pearson (2010, pp.167-8) and confirmed by Richard Hewett (2015, pp.74-7), namely time. We are specifically interested to examine how Curran responded to the opportunity to

develop a character over an extended period, which television especially may afford.[7] As Curran notes:

> For me, the journey of a character in long-running television can be really interesting for an actor, because of the many different situations and many different experiences they have in their life; you can map the arc of that individual. And once the boxset comes out, you can go back over it, and you can see the arc of that individual. So, for an actor to play that is quite satisfying.

A good example of how he maps that arc can be found in episode 'The Cord and the Ax' (2.3), in a scene when Curran's Datak, currently imprisoned, is unexpectedly visited by his teenage son Alak Tarr (Jesse Rath), and they discuss the running of the family business. Positioned at an upright rectangular opening in the wall and costumed in white body make-up, a wig and coloured contact lenses, Curran displays a weariness in his character during the opening shots of the scene, pausing frequently to gather his strength to respond, and only gradually building his character's energy across the subsequent shots. A less experienced or less skillful actor might have either started at, or moved too quickly into, too high a level of energy for the scene, leaving them 'nowhere to go' and skewing the dramatic development of the scene. Gradually building energy levels is a particular challenge for screen actors, as they need to ensure continuity and coherence in their performance within a given sequence. Curran gradually raises his character's energy during the shots, as Datak becomes agitated to hear of his son's wish to withdraw from running the family business.

[7] Time in combination with another determinant of television acting identified by Pearson (2010, pp.169-73), namely status, afforded Curran with the experience of the *Defiance* writers' increasing attention to the main cast influencing the scripts. For example, Curran's Scottishness is playfully referenced in his character's use of the words 'wee one' when dealing with his grandchild in the third season.

As part of this process, Curran uses a sibilant delivery for Datak's response: 'Out of the queStion, there muSt be a Tarr at the head of the table!' This sibilant quality links phonetically to Castithan, the guttural, rasping alien language formulated for the show, and can also be found, for example, in the vocal performance of Datak's wife Stahma Tarr as played by fellow British actor Jaime Murray. What distinguishes Curran's approach to his vocal performance is that he develops the sibilant quality of his character's voice to a pronounced hiss for moments of particular dramatic significance. This is the case in this scene, when Datak begins to suspect that his wife may be plotting against him. Curran signals Datak's increasing agitation through moving his body and head purposefully with less control, bulging his eyes, and pushing his nose repeatedly through the narrow gap in the wall, prefiguring the forward movement that is about to occur. Datak's anger climaxes when his son angrily rejects Datak's threats towards Stahma and insists that Datak has himself to blame for his current predicament. Curran's angry hiss involves a quick movement of his head temporarily retreating from the narrow gap to allow his right hand to strike forward towards Rath, followed by an aggressive, hissing breath from the back of his throat, with his teeth bared, spit flying from his lips and his nose pushing through the gap. This aurally and visually evokes the strike of a snake, a feral animal trapped and ready to attack when threatened or provoked.

Within the context of acting, Curran's decision to draw inspiration from animalistic properties is certainly an established approach within actor training. As Vanessa Ewan and Debbie Green note, making links to animals can be a useful 'staging post' in the difficult process of characterization, because animals not only have limited and clearly defined qualities, thus demanding 'consistency on the part of the actor' (2015, p.127), but also because they live in the present tense, 'an essential skill for the actor.' (2015, p.128) Related

exercises can be found in many acting text books.[8] For example, James Penrod instructs the reader in his chapter titled 'Developing the Role Through Movement' as follows:

> Another approach to characterization is to use animal imagery. While reading your playscript, think of an animal that might behave in a manner similar to that of your character. […] If you want to use the chicken as a point of departure for gestural and movement patterns, first try to mimic as precisely as possible the movements and apparent attitudes of the chicken, so as to get these rhythms 'in your body.' Then you can try to simulate the hen's movements *as a human being might make them*. (1974, p.147-8)

Usually, such an approach is a step within the preparation and rehearsal process, one that can help actors develop their imagination, range of physical movements and engagement with their usual sensory perception. As Ewan and Green have put it in their movement handbook for actors: 'The animal itself presents the actor with inspiring choices about the way a character operates in the world: the motivation for movement, the rhythm of life and the way it sees the world can all be taken into account.' (2015, p.159) Of course, this methodological tool can and does also feature in finished performance, such as Curran's work here, who draws on serpentine properties to enrich his characterization of Datak Tarr

As with his work for *Doctor Who*, Curran is concerned to use his careful preparation to build a system for his performance: the animalistic hissing is not a convenient one-off, but located within a motivated pattern. Only here, this has a more pronounced diachronic dimension, as Curran develops the system across the three seasons of *Defiance*. He first uses

[8] Ewan and Green advise against choosing snakes for a first study, as these 'are limbless (the actor must invent too much)' (2015, p.128).

the snake-like hissing in episode 1.9 and then subsequently deploys it to map key points in his character's narrative trajectory. One of these is the confrontation with his son, in which his acting choices signal that, his character's aspirations towards upward mobility notwithstanding, Curran views Datak as closely linked to the instinctual and primal. His decision to produce such a pronounced hiss – the strongest deployment of the system across the three seasons – also demonstrates and reinforces his character's strong concern with disloyalty by his family and the threat of emasculation.[9] (Curran also delivers a hiss when, playing Datak's father in a flashback in episode 3.7, he lectures a young Datak (Peter DaCunha) about being a man.) What merits particular mention is that Curran uses the serpentine hissing quite sparsely: it occurs only a handful of times across the three seasons, at judiciously chosen moments. Curran has the confidence, discipline and judgment to place firm boundaries on his use of such animal-related, attention-drawing physical movements and sounds. Indeed, the effectiveness of Curran's systematic approach, both here and in his other roles, partly depends on him balancing the particulars of the system against his overall concern to (appear to) 'do little'.

Following the cancellation of *Defiance*, Curran successfully auditioned for the final case study in this chapter, namely the part of Connelly, a cruel slave plantation overseer in the recent remake of *Roots*. This is another role that presented him with some particular acting challenges, and Curran's meeting of these relied upon his ability to combine the physical demands of the scene with aesthetic concerns, including his attention towards rhythmicality. Our focus lies with the scene towards the end of Part 1 when Curran's character viciously whips Kunta Kinte (Malachi Kirby) following his attempt to escape, well remembered from the 1977 iteration. On-screen, the scene in total runs for roughly five

[9] Curran was re-watching *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007) when preparing for this role.

minutes, containing a multitude of shots. The script, however, was left open so the actors had the freedom to develop the scene on their own terms, drawing partially on improvisation, and took two days to film. Despite the fact that the violence is of course simulated (aided by some quick cutting), the filming of the scene was demanding for those involved. While press and audience responses to this scene and similar projects, such as *12 Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen, 2013), have quite understandably been more concerned with the performance/experience of the actors playing the victim, it is important to stress the demands this scene places on the actors cast for the role of perpetrator. Curran found playing Connelly to be 'one of the most challenging things I've done. I think *Roots* was just psychologically and emotionally very intense, […] pretty visceral.'

As with the case study from *Defiance*, Curran builds the intensity within the scene gradually. Before the whipping commences, Curran holds himself still in both wider and tighter framing, even avoiding blinking within close ups. Once the flogging begins, his voice remains quite calm as his character orders Kunta to accept his slave name, Toby. This restraint by Curran indicates not only that this cruel act is a regular occurrence for his character, but also that he expects the situation to be resolved quickly. Curran shifts his energy after ordering Kunta Kinte to 'Say it' for the first time, as Curran has Connelly's exertion and outrage build in tandem. The exertion is only partly performed: as Connelly starts to stagger and sway with jerky movements, and gets somewhat out of breath, so Curran has to use the whip. Benefitting from his long-standing emphasis on maintaining his physical fitness, Curran carefully practised handling the whip in preparation for the role. One of the challenges of simulated on-screen violence is to deal technically with hitting the mark (here, where the whip lands), while delivering an emotionally truthful performance. The emotional truth Curran is here concerned with lies in the growing outrage his character is experiencing,

unsettled by the unexpected level of resistance by Kunta Kinte, who refuses to accept his slave name. That Curran develops this emotional response gradually links to the performativity of the act of whipping, which Connelly delivers in front of the plantation owners and other slaves, and which Curran visually highlights by pointing at the watching slaves. The building of the outrage by Curran signals that Connelly becomes aware that he is not delivering a successful performance as overseer and that his status (both with regard to his bosses and the slaves) comes under threat, which would mean an end to his career at this plantation at the very least.

An additional (and carefully rehearsed) thread that Curran weaves into his performance here concerns the use of repetition in the script, which has Connelly order Kunta Kinte to 'Say your name.', 'Say it.' and 'Toby's your name. What is your name?' Having already demonstrated his skill at prosody in his vocal performance in *Defiance*, Curran here brings variation in terms of pitch and delivery to his vocal performance, and uses the whipping to punctuate his lines, thus infusing the scene with a distinct rhythm. His breath control merits particular attention, for Curran's diction remains precise throughout, even when becoming slightly breathless from the physical exertion. Of course, it is important to be mindful of Pamela Robertson Wojcik's argument concerning the significance of sound technology for screen acting, that 'the voice must never be considered as emanating in any simple way from its visual source.' (2006, p.75) As she points out, vocal performance is deeply intertwined with sound technology (in production, postproduction and exhibition), in such a way that manipulation and design are effaced and disavowed. Curran's work is no exception, and his performance here needs to be understood as 'existing within, for, and through mediation' (Robertson Wojcik, 2006, p.78) within the show's sound design. However, just as it is important not to efface the role of technology, so it is crucial to

sufficiently recognize the significance of actorly craft, skill and labour within the nexus of vocal performance and sound design. If Curran delivered his vocal performance (mostly) on set, then he contended with the physical effort of using the whip without loss of diction; if ADR was involved, then Curran had to act being physically exerted whilst keeping the diction crisp during post-production. Either way, Curran here delivers technical and creative skill, bringing together the physical challenge with emotional truth and a strong rhythmic quality across the cuts in the sequence.

To conclude, across the course of his career thus far, Tony Curran has played a range of very different roles with particular challenges: some restrained (*This Life*), some much more expressive (*Doctor Who*, *Defiance*); some marked by particular genre demands (*Defiance*), production needs (*Doctor Who*) or physical and/or emotional challenges (*Doctor Who*, *Roots*); and some privileging the needs of the actors over the production methods (*This Life*, *Roots*). Curran's approach to acting has not changed during the course of his professional experience; rather, there is a somewhat cyclical process, whereby, following his positive experience of drama school, Curran's confidence and skills have helped him get cast for such diverse parts, and in turn, his experience of such a variety of roles has helped him maintain and develop his skills and confidence. As this chapter has demonstrated, Curran's versatility is closely linked to his confidence and thus willingness to take creative risks, his discipline and emphasis on careful preparation, especially as far as the development of systems is concerned, his skill to combine technical and practical specifics with aesthetic concerns, and his enduring awareness of the significance of the methods of production and exhibition. His versatility is furthermore informed by the positive, productive working relationships he has with both his long-term British agent in Britain and his agent and

manager in the USA, as well as the reputation he has built within the industry's social culture for being not only a good actor, but also a good actor to work with.

Some pertinent ideas and critical issues have emerged over the course of our analysis in this chapter that deserve to be taken forward in more depth in further discussions of acting and performance. Two strike us as particularly noteworthy: first of all, there are the emotions that actors experience, as highlighted by Curran in the interview. The emotional labour that actors undertake in tandem with their performance work should be given more serious consideration, as the latter is inseparable from the former. And secondly, it is our contention that the burgeoning field of writing about television acting will benefit from further diachronic studies of individual professional actors' work. These will help to further move discussions of acting beyond the prism of stardom, and locate those professional actors' work within the specific stages of their career against which achievements ought to be mapped (e.g. some acting choices become more noteworthy when delivered by emerging actors). Such studies will bear out the ways in which actors' careers develop chronologically but not linearly, and allow us to see actors' agency as both facilitated and dependent (with Curran getting an early break partly via the help of a friend, and later the high-profile US show in which he was a lead getting cancelled). Most significantly perhaps, they will uncover the richness of their work across different projects and contexts.

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