

## *Phil Davis: the process of acting*

Article

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## **Phil Davis: The Process of Acting**

Gary Cassidy and Simone Knox

### **Abstract:**

British actor Phil Davis has had a long and distinguished career across film, television and theatre. He has received widespread acclaim for his 'invisible' acting and 'unshowy' performances. This article provides insights into Davis' approach to and view on the process of acting via a transcribed interview that was conducted as the closing keynote of the 'Acting on Television: Analytical Methods and Approaches' symposium hosted at the University of Reading on the 8 April 2016. This material is framed by a contextualising introduction that provides an overview of Davis' work and proposes that John Flaus' (1992) concept of *lamprotes* is useful for understanding Davis' acting. The interview itself is structured by four case studies that explore Davis' work across a range of medium and genre contexts: the feature film *Vera Drake* (2004), docudrama *The Curse of Steptoe* (2008), drama serial adaptation *Bleak House* (2005) and crime drama *Sherlock* (2010-).

### **Keywords:**

Phil Davis; acting; invisible acting; lamprotes; *Vera Drake*; *The Curse of Steptoe*; *Bleak House*; *Sherlock*.

## Phil Davis: The Process of Acting

Gary Cassidy and Simone Knox

Born in Essex in 1953, Phil Davis has had a long and distinguished career spanning film, television and theatre. Interested in acting from a young age, he did not attend drama school, joining the National Youth Theatre and having his formative learning experience with Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop. His early roles include smaller parts in series such as *Angels* (BBC1, 1975-1983) and *The Professionals* (ITV, 1977-1981). More high-profile success came relatively quickly, with one of the leads in *Gotcha* (BBC1, 1977; a reprisal of his performance in the 1976 stage play) and the role of mod Chalky in *Quadrophenia* (dir. Franc Roddam, 1979). Part of *Play for Today*, *Gotcha* was the first of several professional involvement Davis has had in anthology drama series, with further appearances in *BBC2 Playhouse* and *Screen 2's The Firm* (1989); the latter directed by Alan Clarke and co-starring Lesley Manville and Gary Oldman.

A long association with writer and director Mike Leigh began with *Play for Today's Who's Who* (1979), which has further included films such as *High Hopes* (1988), *Secrets & Lies* (1996) and *Vera Drake* (2004). Further film work has included parts in *Alien<sup>3</sup>* (dir. David Fincher, 1992), *In the Name of the Father* (dir. Jim Sheridan, 1993), *Nicholas Nickleby* (dir. Douglas McGrath, 2002) and *Notes on a Scandal* (dir. Richard Eyre, 2006). With the majority of his professional experience lying in screen- rather than stage-based acting, his professional theatrical work includes productions at the Royal Court (e.g. *Restoration*, written and directed by Edward Bond, 1981), the Donmar Warehouse (e.g. *Tales from Hollywood*, written by Christopher Hampton and directed by John Crowley, 2001) and the Royal Shakespeare Company (e.g. *A Christmas Carol*, adapted by David Edgar and directed by Rachel Kavanaugh, 2017-2018).

Since the late 1990s, Davis' career has developed most extensively in television, with notable success across a range of genres. He has been cast probably the most regularly for roles in crime and legal dramas, with major parts in *North Square* (Channel 4, 2000), *Rose & Maloney* (ITV, 2002-2005), *Whitechapel* (ITV, 2009-2013) and *Silk* (BBC1, 2011-2014). Period dramas and literary adaptations also have multiple entries on his CV, with significant roles in *White Teeth* (Channel 4, 2002), *Bleak House* (BBC1, 2005) and *Poldark* (BBC1, 2015-). In more recent years, he also made notable guest appearances in telefantasy programmes such as *Doctor Who* (BBC1, 2005-), *Merlin* (BBC1, 2008-2012) and *Being Human* (BBC3, 2008-2013). His work thus far has been less centred on comedy and mostly been located within a fiction context; however, many of his performances have been infused with a sense of humour, such as his Smallweed in *Bleak House*, his Jud Paynter in *Poldark*, and his portrayal of actor Wilfrid Brambell in docudrama *The Curse of Steptoe* (BBC4, 2008).

With additional professional experience of directing (including *Prime Suspect 5: Errors of Judgment*, ITV, 1996), his acting has received widespread acclaim. His accolades include being nominated for a BAFTA for best actor in a supporting role and winning the British Independent Film Award for best actor for his work in *Vera Drake*. Daniel Day-Lewis, with whom he worked on *The Bounty* (dir. Roger Donaldson, 1984) and *In the Name of the Father*, has cited him as one of his key inspirations (see Gilbey, 2013). Film critic Ryan Gilbey has referred to him as 'the largely unsung hero of British screen acting' (2013: 18), whose 'unshowy thoroughness' (ibid.) and 'dependable, vanity-free' (ibid.) approach to performing deserve more recognition. Davis has described himself 'the nose and teeth man' (cited in Burrell, 2012: 28), articulating that he, as he sees it, is 'a character actor [...] not a leading man' (ibid.). We agree with Gilbey, not simply because we think it is important to attend to Davis' significant contribution to British film and television over the last four decades, but also because the broader scholarship on acting stands to be enriched from more in-depth engagement with the kind of 'invisible acting' that Davis so often delivers. In contemporary Western contexts, 'invisible' acting is frequently judged superior to 'visible' acting. This is 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: 20) However, especially within the context of award ceremonies, public recognition tends to pay attention to performances located at the more 'visible' end of the 'invisible acting' spectrum; and the type of 'unshowy' performances Davis has repeatedly delivered can get overlooked or come to be taken for granted.

We suggest that Davis' achievements may be usefully understood via the concept of *lamprotes*, which John Flaus (1992) introduces (albeit briefly) in his seminal essay 'Thanks for your heart, Bart'. Literally translating as splendour or brightness, *lamprotes* is invoked by Flaus in contrast to the notion of aura (Benjamin, 1968), which is defined by uniqueness and unrepeatability. This distinction allows him to identify the particular qualities of different types of artistic practices and performances: where (although Flaus does not say so explicitly) the auratic may dazzle, the lamprotic has a different effect on and relationship with the viewer, marked by repeated engagement across time. As he puts it, the 'repeated scrutiny of the filmic text is akin to the burnishing of an object – an urn, a medal, a boot – until it acquires a kind of radiance, a glow which merges from the object by virtue of the buffing of it, and forms a special bond with the one who buffs.' (Flaus, 1992: 206)

Flaus' interest in this concept stems from his desire to better appreciate not only particular individual performances, but also specific actors (citing examples including Fredric March, Philip Ahn and Anne Revere). In particular, he wants to understand the achievements of character actors and bit players; 'actors whose names we may not learn after seeing them in numerous films' (Flaus, 1992: 207). Such actors' performances have a 'patina-like radiance [...] [that] outshines any one particular performance – a quality that can be better appreciated with cumulative and repeated viewing' (Chung, 2006: xxi). More a 'household face' than a 'household name,' Davis' work is marked by such lamprotic qualities; as the four case studies below will bear out, his 'presence and technique repay scrutiny' (Flaus, 1992: 207), eliciting radiance through nuance and inflection without drawing viewers' attention to him as a performer. (The exception here is *Bleak House*, and so it is not surprising that, as Davis recounts below, people to this day approach him via referencing his performance of Smallweed.)

The interview with Davis below was conducted by us as the closing keynote of the 'Acting on Television: Analytical Methods and Approaches' symposium hosted at the University of Reading on the 8 April 2016. Brett Mills rightly notes 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: 152) However, Davis' subjective experience is precisely what we sought to gain insights into, keen to capture the knowledge and views of a practitioner who has acting experience of notable breadth and depth. The interview is part of our ongoing research on acting, which, by bringing together the scholar and practitioner perspective, focuses on acting in terms of process and experience, including preparing, rehearsing, performing and the broader lived participation in screen culture.

This focus informs both the choice of case studies we selected for our discussion with Davis, as well as our questions for him. His extensive list of credits inevitably prohibits comprehensive coverage, and there is more to be said about him and his professional experience. For example, Davis' working-class background emerges implicitly in the interview and deserves more consideration, especially in light of the current high-profile debates about acting and social class. (A 2017 inquiry launched by the Labour shadow government has investigated issues of access and diversity in the performing arts in Britain; see also Friedman, O'Brien and Laurison (2017).) However, the inevitable limitations of space notwithstanding, the interview draws on examples from a range of medium and genre contexts, and it provides space for a nuanced discussion of interesting ideas

concerning acting. The first case study, *Vera Drake*, explores Davis' working relationship with Mike Leigh, a director with a very particular approach to rehearsals and the use of improvisation. The remaining case studies focus on Davis' television work, reflecting some of the determinants of television acting identified by Roberta Pearson (2010), such as pressures on schedules. *The Curse of Steptoe* considers the layered acting challenge of playing a real-life actor performing a well-known role. The third case study, *Bleak House*, examines Davis' striking use of physicality and voice; and *Sherlock* (BBC1, 2010-) concludes the interview with a discussion of the importance of reacting and stillness.

Finally, it is worth noting that our interview is anchored in particular moments from the case studies, and the transcription below follows the original chronological order, with each case study framed with supplementary information on the scenes that were screened during the keynote. It was important to us to have our questions driven by the material detail of the selected scenes, to help provide detailed insights into process, uncover nuances of performance and add specificity to our discussion. In this way, our discussion with Davis differs to more broadly conceived interviews such as can be found in, for example, Cantrell and Hogg (2017) and Sexton (2015), which provide a number of benefits, including useful overviews of actors' work and views. We hope our work will encourage others to adopt our chosen methodology, not least because it helps to bring out the lamprotic qualities of actors such as Phil Davis, whose approach to acting does not seek to dazzle audiences in the way that performances at the more 'visible' end of the 'invisible acting' spectrum may, glowing instead with a radiance that withstands and rewards in-depth critical engagement. When previously asked about acting, his response was:

I've never been able to talk properly about it, I just do it. It's like asking a painter about painting. They dip the brush and put it on the canvas. All I know is that if something isn't brilliant, there's no reason that you can't deliver it to the best of your ability. (cited in Gilbey, 2013: 18)

Hopefully encouraged and supported by our approach to interviewing, Davis was certainly able to discuss acting with considerable insight and thoughtfulness, as readers will be able to see below.

### ***Vera Drake***

#### Figure 1

Written and directed by Mike Leigh, this 2004 film is set in London in the 1950s. *Vera Drake* (Imelda Staunton) performs abortions to help women in need. Vera's husband Stan (Phil Davis) does not know about this until after she is arrested. In the selected scene, Vera has recently been taken into custody for questioning, and a shocked Stan returns to the family home from the police station, disclosing the news to his brother Frank (Adrian Scarborough) in a long take.

**GC:** How did the approach to rehearsal and improvising that Mike Leigh adopts inform these scenes from your perspective?

**PD:** Well, first of all, in case you don't know, Mike works without a script. Sometimes he has a very clear idea of the film he wants to make. I'm sure he did with this; he knew that he was going to make a film set in the 1950s about an abortionist. Sometimes he only has a vague idea of the kind of area he's going to look into. But with this particular film, we knew we were making a film set in the 1950s and we were playing characters born at the turn of the century.

And so, you start work with Mike individually building up this character, inventing a character from scratch. Obviously, if you have family members, like his relationship with his brother, you can draw

on that. And you build up this fictional world, like digging a well of experience from which you can draw. And that takes months and months. By the time we got to the improvisation that this scene became, when it was distilled down and organised, I think it was about four or five months work. So, you are very clear about who the characters are, what their family situation is, where they live and what they do and everything. And so, we'd invented this family: post-war, living in London; a working-class family. Stan was working with his brother as a motor mechanic, was married with a family and very much in love with his wife Vera.

And we were doing this improvisation one day where his daughter was getting engaged. And this improvisation had gone on for, I think about five or six hours. With Mike, you do an improvisation and you stay in character until he says 'come out of character,' and then you stop. If he doesn't say 'come out of character,' you just keep going. If it means you sit there reading a book, you sit there reading a book. There's no urgency to try and make something happen, or engineer anything.

Anyway, on this particular occasion, suddenly there was a knock at the door. We were rehearsing in an old cottage hospital in Crouch End, and we had our own front door, it was like a little flat; we'd made it. And I answered the door, in character as Stan, and there was an actor called Peter White all dressed up as a policeman standing there saying: 'Does Vera Drake live here?' And I knew he was in the film, but I hadn't met him in character or anything. And they came in and they arrested her. And I, Phil Davis, and Stan, the character I was playing, had no idea why she'd been arrested. She was an honest woman, we presumed there had been a mistake, maybe something had gone missing and they were accusing her of stealing it. And they took her away and we carried on improvising in the flat this big event.

And Mike came to me, pulled me aside and said: 'Come out of character for one minute.' He does this thing where he says: 'Keep it on a low gas.' So, I came out of character, and I'm Phil now, and he said: 'What would he do?' I said: 'Well, he'd go to the police station.' And he said: 'Well, walk round the block twice and go to the main hall, that's the police station.' I went back into character and I walked around the block and it had been transformed into a police station. There was a man on the desk in a police hat. I had no idea that these actors had been called that day because we'd been up in the flat. And I waited there for about three and a half hours before they let him (Stan) in to see her (Vera). And she told him what she'd been doing, she told him she'd been doing these abortions. And meanwhile they'd been doing all the other scenes that preceded the one you've just screened, where they were interviewing her and she owned up instantly. And then he (Stan) went home and he had to face the kids.

This ended up to be a ten or eleven-hour improvisation from which a great chunk of the scene was – at a later date, we re-investigated those events and they were distilled down – scripted into the film. None of what you saw in the scene itself was improvised, but it was based on an improvised occurrence. Of course, when you film it, there's all the things that you nearly said and didn't, wish you'd said and hadn't. All those subtextual things that in a scripted drama normally you have to sort of weave into the script; they're all there for you. You know everything about what Stan's feeling at that time. So, the acting of it becomes easy, because you're only kind of skating on the surface of this great big iceberg of emotion and stuff. And that's the great advantage of working like that. I've been, incidentally, working with Mike since the 1970s, and this is my sixth or seventh film with him. They're all very different, but the process is always exactly the same. It's fantastic, it's very releasing as an actor. You get the chance to do the sort of things, perhaps if it was a scripted drama, that you wouldn't be cast in.

**GC:** You touched upon the backstory that you discovered during the process; how significant was that to your actual performance?

**PD:** Well, it's the bedrock of the character, the lives they lead. The amount of work we did... None of this film is set in war time, but I can tell you everything he did. Everything Stan did during the war was all assiduously researched. We went down to the Imperial War Museum and found out what a man like that might have done. Stan says at another point in the film: 'If I'd been twelve and not thirteen when mum died, I'd have had to go to an orphanage.' This was a man who was orphaned at the age of thirteen and was too old to go into an orphanage. So, he was on his own, living in lodging houses and scraping a living around the marketplaces. So, that whole kind of fictional world is as rich as you can possibly make it, and the bits that we film are just sort of dancing on the top. There's a whole fictional universe before you get to film anything. So, it's very, very easy to make what you do real and organic and convincing.

**GC:** Your character in that scene was very noticeably quiet, which really gives a sense of the immediate shock that he's in and feeling. How did you work out what he is feeling in the shock; did you approach it physically, psychologically, intellectually, or a combination of these things?

**PD:** Well, you know, he was shocked, I was shocked, so it's easy. You don't work this stuff out; the thing about acting is that it tells you what to do. He was shocked, he didn't know how to respond, he loved this woman, he was appalled that she was giving abortions to these young girls. Later on, she explains it, and he has a bit more sympathy. But at the time he was in a state of shock, he was confused, he didn't know what to think. He didn't know whether to tell the kids; is she going to go to prison? This was a great big bomb in the middle of their lives. What you don't do is say [adopts an RP accent]: 'Well, I think in this situation he would probably do this, so I'll play it like that.' You just do what seems to be right. The thing about all this character work that you do, is that when you come to improvise a scene you can respond organically and truly as somebody else; not what Phil would do, but what Stan would do. And over the months you develop a way of trusting it, so you know when it's true. And if you sound a false note, you can hear it in the back of your head, and you go to Mike and say: 'Wipe that from the history books, because he wouldn't have done that.' That happens more often early on in the rehearsals. By the time we get to doing a scene like that, one is secure, we're all secure. So, yes, it happens organically, and you respond to what you're given. The other thing is what we call the 'official secrets act.' Nobody knows anything that their character doesn't know; you only know about my plan to kill you when I try and kill you. So, you're responding as if for the first time. And in that improvisation, that was the first time after all those months that he found out that she was an abortionist. And, of course, along the way you find out what the film is going to be about; it wasn't going to be about tea parties and getting engaged.

**GC:** You could really see that things were organic and that you were 'in the moment'. There was a biological thing going on with you, your cheek was shaking, your voice was quavering.

**PD:** Yes, I was trying to hide it from the kids, not wanting to give the game away initially. All those things, they're all happening emotionally and not intellectually.

**GC:** What difference does it make for you when you're being filmed in a long take? Was this scene any different because it was a long take?

**PD:** One of the difficulties of making any film is repeating it; making it fresh for every take. And sometimes if you're doing scenes where they might do a wide shot and close-ups all the way round, you might be doing the same scene all day. And it's hard because it gets to turn into gobbledygook. By and large, the longer the takes, the easier it is to get properly into it and submerge yourself into it. But, you know, the job is that you have to repeat it, you have to do it exactly the same when it's your close-up and when it's mine. You know, the usual rules of filming apply, if I pick up a cup up on

a particular line, for continuity, so they can cut the film afterwards, I have to pick it up on the same line. And if I get that wrong, we have to go again. So, the normal rules of filming apply. But it is easier if you're doing long takes when it's a very emotional thing like that scene; yes.

### ***The Curse of Steptoe***

#### Figure 2

Part of a BBC4 season on the lives of television entertainers, this 2008 one-off drama was written by Brian Phyllis and directed by Michael Samuels. Its narrative centres on Harry H. Corbett and Wilfred Brambell, the actors who respectively played the father (Harold Steptoe) and the son (Albert Steptoe) in the very successful BBC sitcom *Steptoe and Son* (BBC1, 1962-1974). The drama explores the relationship between Corbett (Jason Isaacs) and Brambell (Phil Davis), as well as their broader life experiences, including Brambell's struggles with his homosexuality. In the first selected scene, Brambell is sitting in a make-up chair, talking to the costume designer (Ken Oxtoby) about his approach to acting, until the costume designer obliquely invites him to a gay pub. In the second scene, captured mostly via a series of two shots that somewhat mimic multi-camera aesthetics, Brambell and Corbett are on the (fictional) *Steptoe and Son* set, performing an argument between Harold and Albert Steptoe about their deceased wife/mother.

**SK:** How did you approach playing a character that's based on a real person, and this particular person? Where there any particular challenges for you in that process?

**PD:** It was a challenge. I grew up with *Steptoe and Son*, I loved it, my mum and dad used to watch it. I'm not much of a mimic, and I thought: 'Oh god, how do I approach this?' But, of course, most of the drama was Wilfred Brambell, not old man Steptoe. The first job was to find out as much as I could about Wilfred, who was a rather secretive man. I think when he was out with his gay friends in a club, he was very different to the man you see me playing. But I spoke to some people who knew him, like the actor Murray Melvin, who knew him very well. And I sought out some footage of him. After Harry had died, there was an interview with him on the television and collecting an award; something we replicated in the programme. But to anyone who knew him individually, I'm sure I was a tremendous disappointment, because I had to make him up. We had this drama, and there was this relationship in it. And that's what I had to play, I did as good an impersonation of Wilfred Brambell as I was capable of.

But it's an uncomfortable thing when you're playing someone who's real; he's dead now, but there are people around who have known him. And as far as doing the old man Steptoe bits was concerned, we had the tapes on Jason's computer, and we just watched them and watched them, and then did our best to replicate them as accurately as we possibly could. But the drama was really about the nature of fame. Harry was a really well thought of young actor, something of a young Albert Finney. They really thought he would go on to be a major classical actor. He worked with Joan Littlewood, who I worked with, in the 1960s, and he played Richard II. And he got this little job, and it turned into a series, and then another series and so on. And suddenly they were both tremendously famous. But his acting career had a lid on it, all people wanted from him was Harold Steptoe. So, it was a kind of double-edged sword for him. It was slightly different for Wilfred, who had been a working actor and had never been a star. He enjoyed the money, the nice flat and all that, but he hated the notoriety. He was a very private man and didn't like being famous. And that was the thing that the drama was really about. I loved this piece of work. We had no rehearsals, so we turned up on day one with Jason with his computer going 'oh we've got to do that,' and we just sort of muddled through. But it is a tremendously uncomfortable thing to be playing someone who



really lived in the world and who one might have met. And I'm sure, as I said, for his friends and family I was a tremendous disappointment. But we just did our best really.

**SK:** What we have here is a three-tiered process: we have an actor – you – playing another actor who is playing a character. Did you approach playing Steptoe as you playing Steptoe? Or did you approach him as you playing Brambell playing Steptoe?

**PD:** The latter. I copied as far as I could what Wilfred Brambell had done. Everyone knows about *Steptoe and Son*, everyone of a certain age anyway. So, that's what they were expecting, not Phil Davis' *Steptoe and Son*. Interestingly enough, the BBC are doing this thing working with lost scripts. And they are doing a *Steptoe and Son*, one of the scripts that never got made and they asked me to do it, and I wouldn't. Because, what do you do? Do you do Phil Davis doing Steptoe? Everyone will be disappointed. Or do you do Phil Davis doing Wilfred Brambell playing Steptoe? In which case, what's the point? So, no, we were just trying to replicate as accurately as we could the thing. But interestingly enough, later on in this drama, there's a scene where Harold joins an amateur dramatic society. And there's an exchange between the two of them where the old man goes: 'You'll never be...an actor. You?' And Corbett was doing this Marlon Brando thing: 'I could have been a contender!' And that again was a double-edged sword, because this man was destined for greatness, and then suddenly he'd become a rather tacky sitcom star. [Joking] It was an uncomfortable piece of work for us 'thesps.'

**SK:** Were you very aware of that layering of performances of people? Was that something that was with you, or were you trying to re-perform it?

**PD:** Well, both. Both. If I'm honest, one was conflicted some of the time. You thought: 'Am I getting him?' Then again, you've got to get what you can get, and play what you can play, and do that. I did speak to the writers, Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, about it. They were very generous, but they said it [Davis and Isaacs' on-screen relationship] was not a relationship that they recognised. So, some of it is artifice. They did a season of them. They did one about Tony Hancock battling with his alcoholism. And these two, Brambell and Corbett, didn't get along terribly well. But they worked together for about fifteen years on *Steptoe and Son*, so it couldn't have been that bad. So, you take a little bit here, a little bit there, and make a drama out of it. It's a drama, a fictional version of true events, not fact. All dramas like this are fiction not fact.

**SK:** Your use of voice in the first scene, where you are playing Brambell when he is not performing as Steptoe, is really interesting. Of course, when you're playing Brambell playing Steptoe, there's a point of reference for you – you said you grew up with *Steptoe and Son* and that you and Jason Isaacs were watching it – so there is something for you to work with. But when you were playing Brambell himself, presumably you had a bit more latitude in terms of what you could do with it?

**PD:** It's interesting, because he was from Dublin, but you wouldn't know from listening to him. He affected a kind of 1950s accent that actors might have, which was as far away from his real voice as you could get. So, we had to guess what he was like when he was 'just himself', which we of course never saw.

**SK:** In the first clip that we saw, when your Brambell responds to a comment from the costume designer, with the line 'Is it.' That line is very clipped; it kinds of drops down. That's a very modulated delivery. Is your use of voice here something that you are consciously aware of, or does it happen more organically?

**PD:** Yes, it's a result of playing him. If it was a fictional character, perhaps it would have been different. But I'm quite interested in that 1950s and 1960s actor's voice. I remember watching Albert Finney – one of my working-class heroes – being interviewed for a television programme, and [physically and vocally impersonates Finney] being rather grand talking about the theatre. It was not the Albert Finney that I expected to see, I expected to see the firebrand. And there was something about actors of that period, in that era, who were like that. And of course, Brambell is talking to a dresser, so there's a kind of class thing going on there. He's the star, and the dresser is here suggesting to him that he might have a night out and go to a gay pub. And Brambell's thinking: 'How does he know?' So, it's an uncomfortable scene for him, and he doesn't know whether to be flattered. He does actually go to the pub, and he has to run out, because they clock him from *Steptoe* and he can't do it. So, he is a trapped character, and of course you couldn't come out then; it was illegal. It's a tragedy really.

### ***Bleak House***

#### Figure 3

With a screenplay by Andrew Davis, and directed by Justin Chadwick and Susanna White, this BBC1 adaptation of Charles Dickens' nineteenth century novel was first broadcast in 2005. In the selected scene from episode eight, law clerk Mr Guppy (Burn Gorman) visits moneylender Smallweed (Phil Davis) and his daughter Judy (Louise Breely), trying to retrieve letters containing sensitive information for his client. Irascible and chair-bound, Smallweed agrees, but already starts to scheme to profit from the situation. During the scene, Smallweed also instructs his daughter twice to 'shake him up' (i.e. loosen up his spine), filmed in medium shots.

**SK:** When you started to prepare for this role, did you go back to the novel? Were you interested in any of the existing adaptations?

**PD:** Well, first off, I read the script. Obviously, they sent me a big pile of scripts, and the character came bounding off the page; he's so vivid and bold and big. And then I had a look at the book, and it was kind of difficult, because there were discrepancies. In Andrew Davies' version, it was just him and Judy; in the book, he has a whole family. He's sort of a bit watered down in the book. So, I put the book aside. A lot of the other members of the cast were walking around with the book under their arm, dog-eared copies. I just stuck to the script. And, it was a challenge with Smallweed, because he is so vivid, and there was a little voice whispering in my ear: 'Be careful.' It would have been very easy to go over the top with this character. But I wanted him to be as bold and vivid in my performance as he was on the page. So, it was a tricky one.

But you know, looking at it, this was a man who was disabled, really quite seriously disabled. He needed to be carried around all the time. He didn't have a wheelchair, he had a sedan chair, and he hired people to carry him around. So, he's very vulnerable, and he's a moneylender. So, he's got enemies everywhere. So, that kind of ferocity was his armour against the world. And I motivated it from that; it's very important that you don't just do these things as affectations. You know, behind that mask was a very vulnerable, frightened man. And life was harsh: he keeps on about money, every penny he can get is to keep him and Judy safe. So, he's not a monster, he's a product of his time. But, it was risky, but I held my nose and jumped and did it. Because, I think to have tried to underplay him, or try to water him down, would have been a tremendous disappointment. And I have to say, it's one of the characters who caught the imagination of people; people still shout 'Shake me up, Judy!' in supermarkets.

It was sort of weird for me: there were about 15 half-hour episodes, and I did four of them; then I went off to do something else, then I had to do all the others when I came back. I went away for several months, so it was tricky. And the other thing there was about this, is that normally I do this thing before I start work, or start a read-through, or start rehearsals: I got this little room at the top of my house, and I go and lock the door and I just pretend to be the character that I'm being, on my own, without the script or whatever. Sometimes, I go for a walk in the woods, but I couldn't do that with Smallweed; [laughs] I couldn't go roaring around and upsetting all the family and neighbours. Of course, he couldn't walk. And so, I wasn't really quite sure what I was going to do. It came to the read-through, and there were all these actors, these very distinguished actors, and they were going through the script – he (Smallweed) didn't come in until episode six – and I was sitting there thinking: 'Oh, it's my bit in a minute.' And I took a breath, and this voice came out, this guttural voice. And in the first scene he is whipping the guys who are taking him to see the solicitor, I found myself doing it [the character voice], and suddenly it was there: I had him (Smallweed).

And it was just like I'd pulled it out of the air. You can make all these decisions about how you're going to play something, do all this historical research and everything, but there comes a time when you actually have to do it. And quite often you find yourself doing things that you never expected yourself to do. You know, it's partly panic, partly something else and partly just what you do when you're an actor. You can stand up having made all the decisions, and then your feet are taking you in a different direction. All this stuff happens, and you surprise yourself as much as anybody else. And that sort of happened with Smallweed at the read-through. And I hadn't met the director (Justin Chadwick) and I'm thinking: 'Oh, god, what's he thinking?' He came up to me afterwards and said 'That's great Phil; that's just it, what we were after.' So, I thought, 'all right then, I'll go with that.' But it really was a high-board jump; I just took the chance and did it.

The golden rule I have is that I always think of the characters as separate from me; it's always him and not me. And while I don't judge the success of the performance by how different he is from me in real life, I do like to think of him always as different. Maybe it would be the voice. With Stan in *Vera Drake*, there was a very different timbre to the voice, he spoke very quickly, which gave a different rhythm to the dialogue. You get these little things and they become like hooks that you hang your hat on just to start off; it may be a little physical thing. Sometimes I have little things; I don't wear jewellery, but I might have a little thing around my neck for a particular character that I only put on when I'm acting him. It's these little things for me. I always think that if you can't convince yourself that you can pretend to be somebody else, how are you going to convince anybody else? So, I do little games with myself and pretend to be him on my own.

**SK:** How did the physicality of this character emerge? Did it reveal itself?

**PD:** Well, again, we had no rehearsals with the sedan chair and these two poor blokes... I'm a bit portlier than I used to be, and I'm whacking them with the stick. So, you sit on the chair, you do the thing, and that's what comes out. Then you look at it and you adjust; you think: 'I'll do a little bit more of that and a little bit less of this.' It was sort of trial and error. It's like a painter I suppose; you splash the paint on the canvas, you have three or four goes at it, and then you commit yourself. So, it's like that. It's not that you decide intellectually to do something a certain way; the real test, the real joy, the real nuts and bolts of acting is in the doing of it.

**SK:** The physicality is particularly noticeable here in the clip when Judy shakes you up, and your tongue's lolling about...

**PD:** [joking] Yes, she was a brute! The shaking up was interesting; we asked ourselves: What's the shaking up about? And we decided, the director [Justin Chadwick] and I, that he had some kind of

bone disease or something; so every so often he just had to be adjusted, otherwise he'd get stuck in a certain position. And if you listen, they put clicks and certain things on the soundtrack, as if his old bones are moving around. I don't know if it's medically accurate, but it was a hoot. I didn't know that this ['Shake me up, Judy'] was going to turn into a catchphrase; it just did. Apparently, you can get it as a phone ringtone! But the first time Smallweed says it in the show, he asks Mr Tulkinghorn's servant, 'can you get you man to shake me up'. We were aware that it was amusing obviously, but I didn't know that it was going to turn into a sort of catchphrase. We tried to vary it as well, because we didn't want it always to be in the same timbre. Once or twice he just said 'shake me u...', he couldn't be bothered to finish off the sentence.

**SK:** You're touching upon voice again there and that's something we would like to come back to. There's a certain musicality and rhythm in your delivery of some of your lines, like here in the clip, Smallweed's 'I'll have it, cos I'm owed it, and it's mine.' And in *Poldark* your character does something not dissimilar with the line: 'It ain't right, it ain't proper, it ain't fair.' Is that sense of musicality and rhythm something that is quite apparent to you?

**PD:** It seemed to me that it was there on the page: [beating the rhythm with his hand] 'I'll have it, cos I'm owed it, and it's mine.' And with *Poldark* too. And when it's there, you jump on it, enjoy it and make the best of it. Just recently I did a speech from *The Comedy of Errors*: an Egeon speech in verse. And I've never done a Shakespeare play professionally, and I loved it, going through the iambic pentameter; it's the heartbeat. And I love music, so maybe it's something that I hook on to. I mean, you have to be careful that it doesn't become an affectation, that it's still a man expressing himself in the way that he would express himself. You're pretending to be this other person, and you want it to be convincing that it's real. But of course, you are aware that some things he does will be funny and make people laugh. So, you just nudge it a bit in that direction, so long as you don't leave the sphere of reality. It would be a terribly dull thing if nothing was funny and nothing was slightly eccentric.

**SK:** What contribution did costume and makeup make to you performing this role?

**PD:** A tremendous contribution. In Stanislavski's book *An Actor Prepares*, a character in the first chapter starts to find his character when he gets the wig on and all that. And I went down to a wigmaker, and we were trying on various things. And a very good and hard-working hair and makeup man did some tests. He painted the teeth black and got all that, and the little fez-style hat. And I'm not an actor who spends a lot of time looking in the mirror, but I used to have one glance every morning, 'there he is', and off I'd go. It was great and with a character like that, you feel disguised, and it helped me stay sort of half in character all day, staying in the same voice.

## ***Sherlock***

### Figure 4

'A Study in Pink' is the first episode of the contemporary adaptation of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes detective stories, loosely based on the novel *A Study in Scarlet* (1887). Written by Stephen Moffatt and directed by Paul McGuigan, this 2010 episode revolves around a series of apparent suicides, which are actually crimes committed by a cab driver (Phil Davis). His character plays a murderous game with his victims, forcing them to choose between two pills (one lethal, one harmless). In the selected scene, Davis' character has driven Sherlock (Benedict Cumberbatch) to an empty building to play this game, during which, seated across a table, Sherlock deduces that the cab driver has an inoperable aneurism and is committing these crimes to provide for his children.

The scene is mostly rendered via close-ups in a shot/reverse shot pattern, with most of the dialogue being delivered by Cumberbatch, who is scrutinising Davis' character for tells, while Davis' performance is for the most part comprised of listening and reacting to Cumberbatch's probing.

**GC:** In a previous interview with *The Big Issue* in 2012, you expressed your belief that the best acting is reacting. Your performance here lies all in your acting off the line. What does reacting entail for you?

**PD:** Well, you want to convince everybody that what is being filmed is happening for the first time. And so, it's difficult when you're acting, because you set it up, you rehearse it, you do it again and again. So, the skill is in minting it afresh, somehow wiping the slate clean. Here we are, we're sitting here and Sherlock is saying these things to him, and you react. Now especially on film, if you think it, the camera will see it. You don't need to demonstrate. The worst sort of reacting is [mimes big theatrical gestures]: 'Wowrrrrhh.' All you have to do is show a flicker of doubt crossing your eyes, and the camera will get it. Especially when it's in close-up, like here. You don't need to move. So, you're not trying to do too much, you're not trying to do anything. You're just putting yourself in the character's shoes and doing what the character would do. This is a tremendously intimate scene: this is a man who believes he's almost as clever as Sherlock; he believes he's his match. And there's Sherlock unzipping him, showing him to himself, and getting everything right. And he has tremendous admiration for Sherlock.

So, reacting: it's the business of acting, it's the doing of something as if for the first time. You don't have to do it the same, you don't have to do it different, to do it. If you're relaxed, if you're in that state where – it's like jazz musicians – you don't think about it, it just happens. If you're relaxed and comfortable with yourself and on the set, then it can happen. And they're glorious times when you just know – whatever you did – that it was the truth, it was organic. You just know, and you just know when you get it wrong, and you get it wrong frequently.

**GC:** How important is listening to you?

**PD:** It's crucial, you know, when I used to do amateur dramatics when I was a kid, somebody would be talking and everybody would be going like that [looks into the distance vacantly], then their line would come and off they'd go. In life, we're all listening to each other, all responding to each other and all this stuff is happening. So, listening, reacting, all that is the nuts and bolts, the business of being a good actor. If you don't listen, then you can't do it. Sometimes when I'm directing, I'd say to an actor – just to wake everyone up – I'd whisper to them: 'Just say no this time instead of saying yes, to see what the other actor does.' And the ones that were awake respond accordingly. And the ones that are asleep, just respond as if the actor had said yes. The idea was to wake everyone up.

**GC:** In this clip, you manage to make it look as if you're doing very little, and you've expressed in a previous interview [Graham, 2012] that you would like to be more still in your acting. So, what do you do when you're doing little or being still?

**PD:** The thing about wishing I was stiller: when I look back on my early work in *Quadrophenia* and I'm [Davis jerks around as if being electrocuted], I want to tell myself: 'Keep still.' And it was partly exuberance, and it was partly because I was less than comfortable on a film set when I was younger. And of course that character was on drugs all the time. But the thing of just looking into somebody's face and listening to what they are saying without planning a response is the business of acting. You're not doing nothing. I don't know if I was doing a lot, or a little, but there was stuff going through the back of my mind like you wouldn't believe. But of course, this was a man who wanted to

look as if he was in control of the situation, as if he was Sherlock's equal. So, that's the game that was being played and that was the motivating factor in what I was doing. It's interesting that, because this was the first episode of what turned into a tremendously successful series of this great detective who does all this stuff. But what happens; he doesn't catch this guy. This gut comes to him and goes 'I did it. Now I'm going to do it to you.' And he takes him away and they have this scene, and he's just about to swallow the pill when Martin Freeman comes in and shoots him. Otherwise, he'd be dead and we'd have no Sherlock Holmes.

**GC:** As the last question, we'd like to go full circle back to the beginning, and consider backstory again. Your character here is a criminal whose backstory is revealed in this scene; so how did you engage with the backstory that emerges in the script?

**PD:** Sometimes I do more work on the backstory than others. And this was not a story in which I did a lot of backstory research. My feeling was that this man was mentally ill. And that he had a compulsion to impose himself on his victims. And he's telling himself that he's not killing them, but that it's a game which he is winning because he's cleverer than them. But I think he was a monstrous psychopath, but I wanted to play him as if he was a really nice guy. So, I did a chirpy sort of cockney accent, he smiled a lot and he was nice. There's a scene when he persuades him to come into the cab and he says [in his character's voice]: 'You call the cops if you like, to take me down. But you're not going to do that.' And Sherlock says: 'Why is that then?' And he says: 'Cos I didn't kill those people, they killed themselves. And if you don't come with me, I'm not going to tell you what they said.' And he dangles it in front of him, and it's very clever, because he knows that Sherlock Holmes will not be able to resist finding out.

**GC:** And as a quick follow-up: What do you do when there is no backstory in a script or a rehearsal process?

**PD:** Make one up. I mean, it's not something you discuss with anyone. I don't go up to the director and say: 'Excuse me, I think he had a bad experience when he was thirteen.' No one is interested, you know. It's just for me, because I think if you're playing a character in a drama, and you can believe in the character outside of the drama... I always think where does he go on his holidays? What's his favourite pop group? Has he ever heard of Beethoven? All those questions, everything is just adding to the stuff. So, when you come to act it you forget all that about that stuff. But it's all still there swirling around inside you. So, what damage can it do by adding all this stuff to make it as rich and complicated as you possibly can. It just seems to me a no-brainer: why not, if you've got the time; what else am I going to do?

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