BRAZIL LECTURE - MASTER CLASS SIR RICHARD EYRE

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As a child I wanted to be an actor. I wanted the gift of fluency, and I wanted the gift of love. The search for approval, for requited love, is the sustaining force behind all actors; it's what sustains the bad ones and often spoils the good ones. Insecurity is their fuel and I wasn't lacking in insecurity.

What I lacked was the talent that has to be more than a facility to observe your elders and imitate them, more than a readiness to be the comic turn at parties, more than a knack for dazzling the class when reading aloud, and more than a simulation of self-confidence. If you don't have it, no amount of effort or education will compensate for the injustice of having no talent. Actors are born, not made. It took many years for me to accept that this might be true.

Like many actors I was shy, I was reserved, and I was more comfortable speaking in any voice but my own. The English get a lot of practice at this. We're coded in our class from birth by our accents, and it's often more comfortable or more liberating to pretend to be what you are not. I acquired a skill as a mimic, partly as a passport, partly as a weapon. I was able to mimic my friends and my teachers.

I went to university to read English literature, but spent most of my time acting. Most of us in the student theatre were cocky, immodest, self-regarding, ostentatious, vain and self-important. Some of us may even have been talented.

As a student I became aware of a kind of acting that's all architecture and no heart, assembled by an intelligent mind

conscious of meanings, of content, of style, of history - over-conscious, in short, and giving an editorial commentary that runs parallel to the performance, telling the audience what to think about the character - and that the actor is more intelligent than the character he is playing.

Intellect, like beauty, is no bar to great acting, but beauty, unless it's animated by the breath of real talent, will seem gauche and plain, and intellect alone will make an actor seem stupid, describing a performance rather than giving it. I don't know a good actor who is not intelligent, but this intelligence is like a musician's, to do with timing, rhythm, hearing, sensibility, physical co-ordination rather than with cleverness and the ability to express ideas.

I don't know that directors should be that much different. It has taken time in my case to learn to say "I don't know" before rushing to rationalise, and I've learned to defend instinct against intellect.

Good acting embraces a number of paradoxes: actors have to be conscious of themselves, but not be self-conscious; they must know themselves, but they must also forget themselves when they're performing; they must be self-less, but will undeniably be selfish; and they must find the balance, while acting, between the heart and the head, between reason and instinct. It's an impossible prescription - to seek attention for oneself but not be narcissistic, to perform but not to show off, to communicate, but in someone else's voice.

The best actors have much in common. They know how to use a space and invariably make the space they occupy onstage or in the frame of a film seem expressive. The bad ones just stand

there. The best actors need to communicate with each other and with an audience; the bad ones never make contact, or make themselves heard. Courage is essential to the good actor; in the bad it's mere folly.

To express anything an actor has to have a physical technique. It may be latent, but it must be trained. The training will always be empirical – that's to say learning by doing - and adding to that by watching other actors, listening to them, copying them, stealing their tricks, and re-inventing them for yourself. It's mostly common sense, and in his teaching Stanislavsy was trying to give shape to an inchoate process; his 'Method' is a vast concordance of common sense. The fact that few, if any, good actors invoke his work is not to say that they don't recognise and follow most of his pragmatic precepts.

To codify Stanislavsy's precepts as Lee Strasberg did is to make the means, the end. The Stanislavsky 'Method', and the schools derived from it is not a technique out of the practice of which one develops a skill – it's a cult. There are as many 'methods' of working as there are actors and most actors work like scavengers, picking up ideas, images, actions, jokes and what we call 'business' – dealing with props. During the rehearsal period some gifted actors seem exasperatingly slow, some bewilderingly stubborn, some alarmingly quick, leaping from conclusion to conclusion like scaffolders on rooftops.

There is one inviolable rule of acting: you have to play with your fellow actors. Strong actors can appear, often unfairly, to dominate a rehearsal and a stage at the expense of other actors. They radiate an energy that has an almost physical heat, and, like poultices, they draw the heat from the actors who surround them. Being combative, impatient, irascible, and frustrating, is often an implicit demand to be challenged and

stimulated, to be given competition by their fellow actors. Even accounting for this, some actors seem to need to make it difficult for themselves, even painful. It's as if they are fighting to achieve a mystical dimension by suffering, when that dimension, which unquestionably exists, is achieved only by practical means.

I became a professional actor much as I might have become a soldier in the Nineteenth Century: I didn't seem to be fitted for anything else. Anyone can become an actor, all you have to do is to find someone to conspire in your delusion by offering you work.

For four years I worked intermittently in theatre, television, in one feature film and then I was offered the opportunity to settle for a few months for a season at a regional theatre.

It was there that I realised that I didn't have the will to continue as an actor. It was more than a lack of talent; I felt as if I'd been cushioned by a combination of exhibitionism and vanity, fuelled by sufficient confidence for the audience to supply the missing part and put it down to inexperience and there had been enough co-conspirators in my fiction to encourage me to think I could earn a living out of acting. Confidence is nine-

tenths of the business of acting, and when my cushion of confidence deflated I was left with nothing but despair.

To salvage some self-esteem I persuaded some of my fellow actors to be in a production of a play, which we rehearsed on the days that we didn't have a matinée and played for one performance on a Sunday Night. After the performance the director of the theatre said this to me: "If you want to be a

director, you can become one. I'm not sure you'll ever be an actor. But you must choose." And I did.

I'm often asked what is it that directors do in the theatre? it's not a naive question, and it's not paranoia that makes me avoid answering this question. Let me make a start: directing is a matter of understanding the meaning of a scene – and for that matter a play - and staging it in the light of that knowledge. It's your choice of actions and adverbs that constitute the craft of directing. By which I mean: get up from that chair and walk across the room....slowly. Or quickly. Or brightly. And so on. If you add to this the nouns: 'detail', and 'patience', and the maxim "Always remember tomorrow is not the first night", and you have said more or less all that can be said of the craft of directing in the theatre.

Of course all this has to be underwritten by clear view of <u>what</u> the play is trying to say, and <u>why</u>. And the "why" is as important. It's impossible for a director to stage a play without revealing something of his politics. Even the most innocent of

comedies reflects a view of the world that a director can endorse or criticise in a number of subtle or indiscreet ways. By making choices about casting, design, costume, and

performances it's impossible not to be taking a view about how people live, how they behave, and how they are influenced. You have consider: what they earn, where they were born, what they believe in. To affect a lack of interest for these matters is no less a political position than that of the Queen of England, who claims to be 'above politics'.

Many of these choices are made with the designer, and working with a designer can often be the most satisfying and enjoyable part of a theatre production. You advance slowly, day by day, in a kind of amiable debate, helped by sketches, anecdotes,

photographs, and reference books. The production starts as a tone of voice and of colour; at the beginning it has a shape as formless as a shadow on a sheet on a washing line. Through reading the play and discussing it and illustrating it, it starts to come off the page and acquire a clear and palpable shape. It's at this stage that the director's and designers ideas begin to gather physical shape and it's also at this stage that there's the danger of imposing a specious order and meaning on a play. You have an urge to impose something on the play that tidies it up. But the questions that the director has to keep asking of every moment in the play and every element in the design are these: "What does this mean?" and "What is this for?"

A director is like an anxious parent or midwife, hoping that the play will live, now, in performance, in the present tense, for a live audience. Spontaneity – or the appearance of spontaneity –

is everything and yet to get there you have to go on a methodical, prolonged and uncertain journey, sometimes through weeks of rehearsals. A rehearsal is an exploration - the writer provides the territory, and the director draws the map as the journey progresses. At the start of rehearsals the actors view the landscape with the innocent optimism of new settlers,

sharing a common aim and bound by the same social rules. They are stridently individualistic, and yet have to bury their egos for the good of the whole; they have to work to a common pulse, even if each chooses a different tempo; they are of uneven abilities and yet they have to subscribe to a democracy of talent, underwritten by a generosity of spirit. It is – or it should be - a kind of model society.

I like the way this little model society mocks the real thing; it's come together not to change the world or feed the hungry, but for pleasure, to 'play', and this usually generates a special gentleness and generosity to the business of working together. It often survives the entire rehearsal period and then it's

threatened by coming in contact with a world that owes no favours to its buoyant optimism. In the rehearsal room a spark has bred a flame, which may turn out to be as fragile as a candle in the wind.

A rehearsal has to be a time when actors can experiment, invent, explore, discuss, dispute, practise and play, and it is the job of a director to create a world - private and secure - where this activity can go on without fear of failure. There is no method that guarantees a good rehearsal. It's as hard to know why some highly articulate, learned and intelligent, directors

seem unable to animate a cast of actors, as it is to understand how the same orchestra can be inspired by some conductors, and seem commonplace in the hands of others.

I've learned that, as a director, it's better to be more like the pupil than the teacher. The mistake is to pretend that you have all the answers. You need to learn the importance of having the

courage to admit ignorance, and to welcome silence, not as a herald of despair, but as an ally.

It's often said, sometimes by themselves, that directors are like gods, manipulating the destinies of lives. Occasionally, and only very occasionally, they are, but only if they are tyrants. Every director, at heart, wants to be God, or god-like - to be the 'maker', the primary creator, but however inventive, however imaginative, however inspiring, the creative pulse will always be derived from the people who are on show, whose souls are at stake: the writer and the actor. In the theatre directors are the negotiators, the diplomats, the translators, the mediators, suspended between the writer's need to impel the play forward, and the actor's desire to stand still and create a character, obliged to interpret the blueprint, not to re-draw it. They are the builders, not the architects.

And it's not so different with directing film.

The view that writers are at best a necessary evil in film has been bred by the vanity and self-aggrandisement of directors.

It's rare that film directors have a singular vision of the world, rather than merely a point of view, and those that do are writers themselves – like Pedro Almodovar or Quentin Tarantino. The director, Orson Welles, was - as in most things - the exception. Never a writer himself, he appropriated, and swallowed whole the writers who worked for him. Many directors try to emulate his behaviour but still prove the almost-truth that there are only three things that make a good film - the script, the script and the script.

I don't know any theatre director who hasn't wanted, at some time, to direct films. When you're in a rehearsal room for weeks

on end fretting about the snail-like pace of improvement of the performances, the size of the auditorium you're moving to, how to get an actor offstage, how to get an actor onstage, how to move a piece of furniture, how to get rid of a piece of scenery, how to cope with the physical bulk of everything, the apparent fluency of the cinema seems irresistible.

Film seems like a magic carpet which transports you across barriers of time and place without being bound by the unanswerable logic of real time and physical reality. It's a false allure, of course, there's a literalness about anything that appears on film; for all the its apparent capacity to represent the landscape of dream (particularly in black and white), there's always an inescapable context of social reality that can't be dissolved even by the most expressionistic or surrealistic approach.

It's an illusion of course: film tends to be literal – if you're in a street, then you have to show the street. In theatre, it's all

poetic, it's a metaphor. Show us the lamppost, we'll imagine the street. In the theatre an actor can move from Ancient Rome to the Moon by changing a hat, picking up a prop, uttering a few words.

But film has the wizard's gift of transforming scale: a face becomes as large as a house, an eye the size of a car; objects can threaten you, landscapes can engulf you. It's solitary, dreamlike, sensuous; everything conspires to draw you in, to make you feel, to defy thought.

Theatre is in some ways the worst training for directing films. A film director friend of mine says he doesn't like going to the theatre because it's all in wide shot. It's true but the privilege of

a theatre audience is that you have the opportunity to choose what you're looking at. Is it that side of the stage or this one – that actor or this one? In film the director chooses the point of view. Each camera set up involves a decision about how you look at an actor, a scene, a landscape. And each cut changes the point of view.

That's the most important initial thing I learnt – from a cameraman: don't look at everything from the front, you have an infinity of points of view. Change the lens, the composition, move the camera, move the actor.

In theatre we tend to look at the person who's speaking. In film you often play a scene on the listener rather than the talker. And you can expand and contract time in the editing. There are two aspects of theatre that you can carry over into film-making:

the ability to tell a story and the ability to work with actors. And above all the necessity to make the piece of work come alive.

Truffaut directed a comic fantasy about making a film called *La Nuit Americaine*. There is only one moment in the film, enjoyable as it is, that strikes me as real, observed from life: the director of the film within a film, played by Truffaut himself, lies awake, tormented by fears for the work. "Let it live," he mutters to himself like an anxious surgeon, "Just let it be alive."

Acting in film is altogether different in the theatre and in cinema. In film what's alluring in an actor is the ability to appear to think slowly, so that the audience feel that they're being admitted to the intimacy of the thought processes and

embraced as conspirators in the emotions. Stage acting demands a radiant energy, a quickness of wit, a lightning ability to change thought and speech, and a virtuosity which, on screen, often makes them look like vulnerable show-offs. In the movies, they say, you keep everything in, in the theatre you let everything out.

I'm going to show a few clips from some of my own films.

I started to make films in the early 1980s for television. In 1987 I made a film about the Falklands War, which was highly controversial and the government and the army tried to stop it being made. It was about the cost of war – the human cost. Everyone involved in battle is affected by it. This was Colin Firth's first big role.

1. TUMBLEDOWN

I was Director of the National Theatre from 1987 for 10 years. So for 10 years I made no films. In 2002 I made a film about an English novelist dying of Alzheimer's Disease called *Iris*. The film was about the relationship between a celebrated English novelist, Iris Murdoch, and her husband, and her decline and her death from Alzheimer's Disease. The film isn't a biography, nor is it a film about illness that claims the sanctity of victimhood for the suffering Iris. It's a love story, a story of a relationship in which love is challenged and yet endures; a love story which explores the paradox of how it is possible to remain separate in a marriage and yet for the sum of that marriage to be greater than its parts. It stars the great Judi Dench, in this scene wordlessly expressing herself with great clarity.

2. IRIS

We talk of loneliness, like disease, as if it's something that happens to other people. All the lonely people, where do they all come from? Oh, they're just as likely to come from offices, night clubs - or even film sets - as they are from bed-sitting rooms and basement flats. They say that no one is more lonely than the person who loves themself, but it's not true; that prize goes to the person who hates themself. That's true of the main character in *Notes On A Scandal.*

I recoil rather again the Hollywood dictum that your leading characters HAVE to be sympathetic. Something of my obdurate

desire to keep faith with the audience by not making the leading character sympathetic was in my mind when making *Notes on a Scandal*. Judi Dench – again - plays an acerbic school teacher called Barbara, who lives alone with only her diary (the "notes" of the title) and her cat for company. She becomes obsessed with a younger schoolteacher, Sheba, played by Cate Blanchett, who is in her turn obsessed with a 15 year old boy who she teaches. In this scene, Barbara's cat has just died.

3. NOTES ON A SCANDAL

I few years ago I was asked by my friend Sam Mendes, if I would be interested in directing Shakespeare's *HENRY IV PARTS 1 and 2* for BBC television. It took me at least two nanoseconds to agree. I love the plays and any of the usual difficulties of adapting Shakespeare for film are absent. Much of the plays is in prose, and Shakespeare's device of cutting between the worlds of the low life in the tavern and the high life in the palace is eminently filmic. In the theatre the battle scenes

are usually wholly lame and unconvincing. On film – even with a very limited budget and very few extras, it's possible, I hope, to do something convincing. And we were lucky with the snow. You can spot Jeremy Irons and Tom Hiddleston in the middle of the fight.

4. HENRY IV PART 1

It's often said that if Shakespeare was alive today he'd be making films. I think what's thrilling as well as going from low life to high life, his narrative has a contemporary filmic

momentum to it. Falstaff is one of Shakespeare's greatest creations – if not the greatest. In this scene he learns that his young friend, Prince Hal, is about to become King and meets him at his coronation.

5. HENRY IV PART 2

Most of my films have been made for TV. Television drama used to influence the way we thought, and spoke, and felt: it helped to define the way we looked at the world. If that's rare nowadays it is not the fault of the TV institutions, or of the programme makers, but of a wholesale social revolution. Making good television used to be much easier. Expectations were low, and there was an amiable chaos which made for a warm relationship between the programme-maker, and the public. There's been a flight in recent years from the idea of a regimented culture where we sit down in front of the TV at a particular time, or turn up at a theatre, or put ourselves passively in the hands of any artist.

While the writer, or film-maker becomes increasingly concerned about controlling the conditions in which their work is displayed, the audience becomes increasingly reluctant to concede this control. If you make a film for television you are powerless to do anything but deliver the film to the best of your ability, and nothing in the world will prevent your audience from answering the phone, attending to the baby, kicking the cat or talking loudly during what you regard as the crucial and indispensable scene.

But I hope that no one could turn away from the two actors in the next clip.

6. THE DRESSER

How do you learn to be a director? There's a poem called Garden Hints by a poet called Douglas Dunn, which begins with

the line: "Only a garden can teach gardening." Directing is like that: only working with actors in a rehearsal room can offer a real insight into the craft. The catch is this: to start directing you need to find someone who is prepared to trust you, to give you licence, to give you the opportunity to make mistakes at someone else's expense and that takes a bit of luck and a lot of persistence.

If you ask me "what do you need to be a director"? I'd have to say this: you need to be somehow assertive and yet self-effacing, to be dogged and yet pliable, to be demanding and yet supportive. And if this sounds like a prescription for a perfect marriage partner, it's because directors are ever hopeful of making a successful marriage of actor and character, of text

and design, of play and audience, and perhaps if they look hesitant, doubtful, and diffident, it's because they know just how difficult it is - as in real life - to make a marriage work.

I can't give you any recipe for success as a director. And if you fail, you have to get up – and as Samuel Beckett said - fail better. As a professional necessity, theatre doesn't condone nostalgia: when a show is over, it's over; the set's dumped in a

skip, the costumes are sent to a store, and a new show makes its demands on your attention and your affections. With film your crimes live forever.

What I do know is that what's indispensable for any piece of theatre or of film are the virtues of faith and hope and charity - faith that what you're doing is worth doing, hope that this faith will be corroborated by the public, and charity – in the sense of affection and support - from those who you depend on to continue to practise the medium.

Sir Richard Eyre, film and theatre director.