

# A PRACTICE OF FAITH: ACTORS AND REHEARSAL (A TRAGEDY IN ONE ACT)

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*Man (Paul) Moore and Woman (Kate) Rossmanith presented the following transcript as a paper during the A.D.S.A. conference 2006. Elements of this presentation were performative. In order to capture the spirit in which the work was delivered, we have presented the work on the page as one might a piece of scripted theatre. Those sections spoken in the first person are simply assigned to either Woman or Man. Where characters were adopted we have printed our names and that of the character. Some use of stage directions is also made.*

## *Dramatis personae* (in order of appearance)

- Peter Andrews:** A trained actor with high hopes, played by Man.  
**Agent:** Peter's professional representative, played by Man.  
**Suzy:** His once supportive girlfriend, played by Woman.  
**Sociologist:** An academic, played by Man.

**WOMAN:** THIS PAPER IS BASED ON THE EXPERIENCES of a young trained actor I knew eight years ago. Paul Moore read the story and saw how closely it resonated with many of the actors he'd interviewed over the years. And so we created a role, the role of Peter Andrews, the median actor:

[Man reveals a framed 'head-shot' of 'Peter Andrews']

**Woman:** We will follow 'Peter' on a typical journey and experience what an actor might experience while looking forward to rehearsing a show. We draw upon my work in rehearsal studies including my field study of professional theatre rehearsals in Sydney in the late 1990s, and upon Paul's experience both as an actor, teacher, and as an academic with a particular interest in actors.

In the paper we discuss the concept of 'faith' and how it contributes to an actor's expectations and experience of rehearsal. Reflecting upon these experiences, we will use 'faith' in terms of the idea of 'belief', or *illusio*, as developed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

**Man:** The term *illusio* is useful when considering the faith trained actors place in rehearsal. Rehearsal

involves many of the practices that actors learn to value and that are often very difficult to access following training. Any work is difficult to come by, work that actually involves gradual and collective preparation is extremely rare (Moore, 2006). Under such conditions, occasional involvement in rehearsal takes on particular significance in terms of the actor's sense of purpose. *Illusio* implies hope, faith and notions of illusion: *illusio* distracts us from the essentially arbitrary nature of existence. Further, and necessarily, *illusio* incorporates an element of risk. (Indeed, the term is derived from that used by Aristotle, referring to the 'chance' elements of life, and is linked to the Latin *ludere*: 'Illusiones' is an Aristotelian term referring to the odds of life, the chances, and in this context is linked to the Latin *ludere*: to play) Attempting to maximise what we gain through involvement and belief we invest in particular 'games', diversions experienced as enterprise or purpose. When considered an adjective the term 'game' simultaneously infers the nerve or spirit necessary to take a chance. Bourdieu describes *illusio* as "the fundamental belief in the value of the stakes and of the game itself" (2005, 9). We cannot be sure that our investments will lead to returns; however our past experiences may encourage us to believe they shall, while a degree of uncertainty propels us to continue, saving us from an awareness of Beckett's 'waiting' by giving us 'something to be done'. We seek pastimes that, quite literally, allow us to pass time. In this respect, trained actors are high rollers who invest a great deal in the hope of gaining professional inclusion. In the harsh realities of professional life, paid employment and involvement in structured rehearsal have become major signifiers of professional success.

Actors, not surprisingly, find value in acting; they believe in—have faith in—the value of acting. The value of this belief, however, can only be experienced in practice if the actor in question is recognised as being legitimate by others who share this sense of what matters. In particular, the trained actor aims to impress those with established reputations as creators and consumers of performance: those who are able to, as it were, sanctify the actor as an actor.

**Woman:** In June 1998, Pete Andrews, a 28-year-old Sydney actor, landed a paid job. After auditioning, and making the shortlist, his agent rang with the good news, the words actors ache to hear:

**Agent** (*Man* on phone): Peter, You got the part!

**Woman:** It was just that: a part. Not a grinning head on the T.V. selling canned soup; not a three-liner on a soapy, but a character to develop and share over weeks and weeks of rehearsal. It wasn't the most prestigious gig—Peter had never heard of the producers, 'Make-Believe Productions'—but his fellow cast members were known faces about town, the script was interesting, there would be a long, touring run; and, very importantly, it was paying more than co-op theatre scraps: the producers were promising the award wage: \$567.50 per week.

**Man:** Peter was no stranger to the grind of auditions and go-sees. After each unsuccessful casting, and in the face of Peter's increasing despondency, his girlfriend had been a paragon of support. Each time, she would tell him:

**Suzy** (*Woman*): "You have to have faith!"

I believed in the value of acting and in Pete's successful future. I knew he had been to the National Institute of Dramatic Art—the most prestigious and certainly the best funded drama school in the country—and I knew that he had been approached by more agents than anyone else in his graduating year. I certainly had faith, and was willing to invest in Peter, paying his rent until he 'got on his feet'. In doing so, I was participating in—propping up—Pete's belief that he could achieve his dream. And now the pay-off had arrived!

**Woman:** The prospect of the show—the colleagues, the generous rehearsal time, the tour, the chance to perform regularly, a legitimate wage—restored Pete’s flagging hope: his faith in his own talent, in his choice of career, in an industry that had completely overlooked him since he graduated from acting school 18 months earlier.

**Sociologist (Man):** Why, we may ask, would somebody with a solid H.S.C. score and prospects in other areas—why would someone at the beginning of their young life—take a path that is likely to offer them, at best, an intermittent and meager income? My research into the working conditions of recent acting school graduates—research that included a sample of over one hundred trained actors—indicated that their annual median wage from acting alone stood at approximately \$2000 (Moore 2004, 202).

What belief system—what faith—is in play here? Certainly the stakes are high, and this may be part of the attraction to this game, to life as an actor, where both the risks and rewards are potentially huge. In part, it has to do with idealism and youth. People who pursue acting not only want to play at the big table; more, they purposely attempt to escape the mundane and practical. They are, perhaps, the antithesis of those students who take vocational courses with the assurance of a career path and low-risk financial security: dentistry, economics, law, and medicine.

Our culture values these qualities in the actor; the charismatic rather than practical; belief as opposed to skepticism; the playing-out of our collective wish to escape history. This is a form of ‘social flight’, a desire to ignore the historical constraints in which we live and which form our very perceptions of life. In other words, we want the actor to escape on our behalf.

**Woman:** Pete had been waiting for this outcome, and had, in the interim, been quite prepared to take demeaning employment hosting rides at a fun park. While the chance of future success still existed, this impoverished position actually encouraged his faith. There was something laughable about the world in which he found himself, a world which, he believed, his faith would help him transcend.

After almost two years with little acting work for Pete, and after many months of paying his rent, Suzy voiced the unthinkable:

**Suzy:** Would you consider going back to uni and studying for a vocation? Just to have a fallback position . . . something to do in-between acting jobs?

**Woman:** They argued.

**Peter (Man):** I was angry and hurt. She wanted me to re-enroll at uni in law or medicine. To admit failure! *I am an actor!*

**Sociologist:** Indeed, part of the actor’s faith involves ignoring the objective chances of success.

**Woman:** Perhaps the most profound effect of Pete’s job—the one that was glowing brighter by the second—was the restoration of his sense of purpose. The very prospect of doing the work—of rehearsing for the show—gave him meaning. It felt ‘right’: as though at last he would be doing what he had hoped to do for so long. He hadn’t given up, and his calculation—or lack of calculation—had proved correct. His faith had paid off.

Pete spent the following days feeling the excitement rise. After all he had gone through, he was, indisputably, palpably, *really* an actor. He allowed himself to wander off into daydreams, and the feeling

of despair that had accompanied him for months now subsided. He even made fun of himself . . .

[Peter laughs]

**Woman:** . . . laughing out loud at how he had almost—but never completely—doubted himself.

**Sociologist:** What was it that felt so right to Pete about this job? All his training—and therefore all his professional expectations—had led him to believe in the process of rehearsing; of practicing physical and mental exercises in a considered manner in order to create a role. Pete had developed an embodied sense of knowing how an actor should practice technique. This was the first time since graduating that he would walk into a rehearsal room and engage in a shared respect for practices developed over his three years of training.

In recent years, structured rehearsal has increased its value, that which Bourdieu terms ‘symbolic value’, because as a practice it has become increasingly rare (Moore, 2006). When actors in my research sample did find work, approximately seventy percent of this was gained through work-to-camera for which collective rehearsals are often reduced to little more than a line run (Moore 2004, Table 2.2., appendix C). In one of the very few sociological studies of actors, *Stages of Identity*, Sharon Mast describes changes in screen production since the 1950s (Mast 1986). At this time, television crews literally followed actors through live performances, which were rehearsed and performed in the same manner as those for the stage. Since then, the ratio of technical personnel to actors has greatly increased, along with the role of editing and the director. The developments Mast describes are based on observations made during the 1970s. The reduced rehearsal period she describes actually lasted two weeks. Rehearsals for scenes currently shot on Australian television are likely to last minutes, if they occur at all. Rehearsal for film and television—and often for theatre—involves the actor working in isolation and bringing the results of this work to the site of production on the day.

**Woman:** Now, however, Peter had a real theatre job with four full weeks of rehearsal. Pete’s peers marveled, he was a legitimate player, a contender.

**Man:** In the simplest terms, of course, an actor gravitates towards rehearsal because an actor wishes to be involved in creating performance.

**Woman:** Any performance?

**Man:** No. Actors struggle to be involved in performance that is judged to be meaningful by audiences.

**Woman:** Any audience?

**Man:** No. Actors want to be involved in creating performance that is capable of attracting an audience that they and their peers regard as being important. This audience must share the actor’s faith in rehearsal, and in the processes that have become associated with rehearsal. These include the intricate exercises and applied techniques that one can only replicate if one has invested sufficient time and energy in acquiring skills through formal training, and an ongoing commitment to their maintenance between jobs. This investment earns one legitimisation as a co-producer of ‘quality’ performance (and as something other than simply a celebrity).

**Woman:** For Pete, there was also a sense of anticipation that this process would involve experimentation and play. In part, this also appeals to the desire to avoid the practicalities of everyday life; to revisit childhood, a phenomenon Moore observed in his sociological research (2004, 253) and Rossmanith observed in her ethnography of rehearsal processes in late twentieth century Sydney (2004, 138-9).

The idea of rehearsal as something of a playground pervades accounts of directors at work: Benedetti records Michael Leiberto's advice to would-be directors: '[y]ou may want your actors to be as uninhibited as children, but you must treat them like the adults they are in order to avoid the 'summer camp' mentality' (1985, 110); a journalist observes Australian director Lindy Davies encouraging actors to "play like children" (Adamson 2001, 15); Ariane Mnouchkine explains that 'there is something in the actor's work that obliges him or her not to fall back into childhood but to enter childhood' (in Feral 1989, 94); Australian director John O'Hare describes his cast members as facing 'the inevitable trauma of delving into childhood' (Jinman 2001, 3); and the most compelling trope that Susan Letzler Cole invokes in order to understand directors in rehearsal is that of 'maternal gaze' (1992).

**Man:** Before we rush to condemn the apparent infantilising of actors, we should acknowledge that these discourses and tropes also, perhaps simultaneously, signify that the actor has, on occasion, the potential for rare phenomenological insight. The actor's practical knowledge of the body and its transformation might be usefully understood as phenomenology in practice, and not simply its theory. Actors, dancers and sports people know things about their being in the world through practice in a way that they often find difficult to explain (see Moore 2004, 43-46; see also Bourdieu 2000, 144, and Rossmannith 2006, 75). This sensitivity to bodily ideas is a form of knowledge encouraged through engagement with the processes of embodiment. An actor aims to internalise a part: that is, to absorb a character's thoughts and desires until these are experienced on a precognitive level. Absorbing the will of the character through objectives, stratagising to obtain what one desires through actions, fantasising over the future and recalling the character's past, these are the rehearsal practices which literally allow one to embody the history of another.

**Suzy:** With the job on the horizon, Pete was living and breathing again. I couldn't believe that my man returned . . . and how!

**Woman:** And then . . .

[A phone rings]

**Agent:** Peter, Douglas here. Spot of bad luck. It seems that the producers of the work we confirmed for you didn't secure any backing.

**Woman:** The producers had cast the show, booked rehearsal spaces and venues, but their shaky funding had collapsed.

**Agent):** Unbeknownst to Pete, as his agent I was more than pleased. Now I could be sure that Pete would be available should a caster request him for a commercial or other fast-earning enterprise. I understand the business of acting: ten percent of several thousand dollars for one day's work as compared to ten percent of five hundred per week excluding rehearsal. I'm all for art, but at a price.

[Suzy takes hold of the framed photograph of her ex-boyfriend Peter.  
She peers at it suppressing her tears]

**Suzy:** Pete's life collapsed again. He sank; he drank, deep and dark under the covers of his Bondi bed, where he stayed until I pushed him out. Out of bed, out of the house, out of my life. No weekday coffees with actor mates at cafes to discuss work prospects; no parties; no optimistic meetings with his agent.

**Man:** And what of Pete's future, or rather, lack of future? Could Pete go on investing at great cost

in a gamble that repeatedly failed to return any reward? Without others sharing his faith, believing in him, legitimising him, Pete faced the cruel realisation of his failure to belong. Like the chronically unemployed, the aged, the poor, like all who fail to gain social recognition, Pete would become painfully aware of the meaningless of his existence. In the words of Bourdieu:

[d]oomed to death, that end which cannot be taken as an end, man is a being without a reason for being. It is society, and society alone, which dispenses, to different degrees, the justifications and reasons for existing; it is society which, by producing the affairs or positions that are said to be ‘important’, produces the acts and agents that are judged to be important, for themselves and for others—characters objectively and subjectively assured of their value and thus liberated from indifference and insignificance. There is, whatever Marx might say, a philosophy of poverty, which is closer to the desolation of the tramp-like and derisive old men of Beckett than to the voluntarist optimism traditionally associated with progressive thought. Pascal spoke of the ‘misery of man without God’. One might rather posit the ‘misery of man without mission or social consecration’. Indeed, without going as far as to say, with Durkheim, ‘Society is God’, I would say: God is never anything other than society (Bourdieu 1990, 196).

The young actor, who invests so much in the ‘art’ of acting, who has sought legitimacy through training and who pins his hope on professional success, can hardly retain faith if this is not socially reinforced. The very society that produces the possibility of the exceptional in terms of experience and status more often denies this. Failing this attempt to escape the mundane, the actor may fall into depression and/or escape into fantasy. The world as facilitating meaningful enterprise grows dull.

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Following training in acting and writing **Paul Moore** became a co-founder of Brink Productions. He has worked as a performer and creator across Australia, in Asia, America and Europe and currently teaches and produces in Ireland. Gaining his Ph.D. through the University of Sydney in 2005 Paul is particularly interested in a sociological perspective and has focused research on performing arts graduates, professional orientation, Australian, Asian and Irish performance.

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