

What about TV Acting?

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The 2016 Tony Awards ceremony included a brief comedic bit poking fun at the number of Broadway performers who have contributed minor performances in the New York-based *Law & Order* universe. Host James Corden's roll call of visibly embarrassed performers emphasized that, in some cases, actors reappeared on the same *Law & Order* franchise in different guest roles – six roles across fifteen years in the case of *Fiddler on the Roof* star, Danny Burstein (not to mention his four *SVU* and *CI* appearances). The bit creates a contrast between the honor being bestowed on stage performances and the unnamed and seemingly forgotten television roles, an implicit dig at television audiences for not noticing or caring how many times actors appear in guest roles. It also suggests the financial importance of television for actors, reinforcing time-worn associations of television as a commercial and low-cultural media form and hinges on the disjuncture between an inaccessible high culture (Broadway theater) and the ubiquity of popular culture (network television). This televised award show celebrating theater demonstrates that even though actors work across media, acting continues to be a vocation fraught with hierarchies. While acting on stage and in film is taken more seriously, television acting is seen as something to be embarrassed about, work that is less artistically significant, or perhaps simply a way to pay the bills. In an era when tickets to *Hamilton*, the most highly celebrated musical of the Tony Awards, cost upward of US\$849 (if you can get them), this cultural distinction is especially pronounced. How and why is an actor's work on stage looked at differently than his or her onscreen work? Are these differences between theater and television acting fundamental? If it is different, how can we begin to think and talk about television acting and actors?

These generalizations about television acting have historical roots. In the 1950s, the interest in and subsequent rise of method acting helped elevate the cultural and artistic capital of the screen actor. While actors like Marlon Brando were gaining more respect for their work and creative process, many character actors were dropped from studio contracts, leading them to seek (less lucrative) work in the nascent television industry. The perception of artistic hierarchies between film and television persisted, contributing to some of the challenges that the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA) faced as they tried to bring their unions together beginning in the 1980s. When the unions finally merged in 2012, the growing industrial and cultural importance of television contributed to SAG's ability to see AFTRA as an essential ally. Yet even in the rhetoric of this new alliance, television acting continues to be associated with financial gains rather than artistic achievement.

As cable programming has ushered in higher budgets, slower shooting schedules, and shorter seasons television roles have begun to be taken more seriously, and as a result, experienced, lauded film actors have increasingly worked in television. When actors take roles on premium cable networks, they often align television with higher cultural forms like film and note that good television is like a long film. Television is, however, a combination of episodic and serialized programs, and it is not simply serialized premium cable programming. While

television has generated performances worthy of critical acclaim, as scholars, focusing strictly on the “great” performances of Television’s Second Golden Age would produce only a limited study of television acting and runs the risk of reproducing cultural hierarchies. The majority of television performances, and the way most actors make a living on television, is through the accumulation of roles on long running series like *Law & Order*.

Questions of labor, industry, and economy have never been central to scholarship on actors or acting, but are crucial for understanding the breadth of actors on television. I would like to advocate for a more holistic understanding of television acting, one which seeks to understand its stars and series regulars, but also its guest stars and extras, an approach that draws on some of the strengths of television scholarship and its consistent attention to industry, economy, and textual meaning. As such, we should ask ourselves: How can we approach television acting in a way that accounts for the specificity of the television form and its conditions of production? What is the relationship between recurring characters and guest stars – and how do performers make adjustments to accommodate changing casts? How do actors provide important continuity for television audiences?