

What about TV Acting?

Steven Peacock, *School of Humanities, University of Hertfordshire*

Studies of television drama have, in no small part, explored and accounted for the medium's affordances of time. Whereas a feature film is finite and self-contained, television allows, especially in the case of serial drama, for an extensive number of episodes and seasons. As a scholar of television drama, I most often attend to the significance of moments on screen, as they pass, be they seemingly inconsequential or dramatically demonstrative. What is it about just this instant, in this episode, in this season, which strikes me, intuitively, as meaningful? Equally, a series alert to the possibilities of significant patterning in forms of narrative and narration may rhyme or counterpoint moments from different seasons.

Of all the stylistic elements that comprise the dramatic object of television – camerawork, lighting, sound, décor, colour, setting and so on – acting and performance appear especially vital to getting us close to understanding the medium's complexities. Because of its temporal dimension, television allows for particular achievements in performative patterning and variation. How do we attend to these multiple, moment-to-moment shifts and overlaps of a performer's expressive significance, without pinning television actors down like butterflies? How do we avoid systematising and categorising TV performances, forcing them into fixed analytical positions? How could we allow for, evoke, and illuminate the fluency of a human character in motion across a scene, season, or series?

As I have written elsewhere, certain works of television, and screen performers, are particularly adept at capturing an aspect of ambivalence, a state between states. In working to find words to match such exemplary instances, perhaps we can move towards a critical vocabulary of interpretation and appreciation that celebrates the fluid achievements of actors on the small screen. Such an approach develops when we respond to a performer's relationship with the surrounding dramatic environment. Insights emerge when we attend to gestures, postures, expressions, and voice, and how they are situated. Expressive criticism can get us close to the contours of a dramatic display, without seeking to 'solve' the text, keeping its tensions and suspensions in play.

Here is an example of what such work could look like, accounting for a moment from the HBO drama *In Treatment*. Dealing with the intricacies and properties of psychiatric

conversations between therapist and patient, *In Treatment* is attuned to the potential significance of individual passing instances, thoughts, gestures, and words. In its third (and final) season, *In Treatment* presents the beguilingly cryptic case of reluctant migrant Sunil (Irrfan Khan). During his weekly sessions with Dr. Paul Weston (Gabriel Byrne), Sunil's behaviour and phrasing hint at hostile lusty intentions towards his daughter-in-law. Across episodes, the series builds to the moment when Paul must confront Sunil, articulating his concerns. In 3: 9, the dramatically charged instant is met and made eerily complex by the unexpected nature of Sunil's reaction. He finds the idea hysterically funny, tittering and hiccupping words in fits of giggles. A moment of relaxed abandon causes Dr. Weston to recoil, uncharacteristically at a loss of what to say or do. His intuitive response is to withdraw, even at the point of revelation. The tensions of the instant play out on his face, as shock, concern, and the desire to reaffirm control slide together in a performance of professional composure suddenly and silently unsettled. In the world of the drama, the carefully negotiated roles of these two men's performances in front of one another, developed over weeks, have now become troublingly undefined. Sunil has not acted 'as expected' by therapist and viewer alike, and our gradually advanced understanding of the man is called into question. A few seconds of silence and mumbled words bring the session to a close without satisfactory reconciliation. The effects of Sunil's brief burst of laughter hang in the air and across subsequent episodes.

The intrinsically theatrical (or perhaps tele-visual) nature of the therapeutic set-up - two chairs, primed handkerchiefs, the tea-service - is in place to draw out hidden truths in a safely self-contained environment. However, Sunil's turn tips the balance, highlighting instead the risky fraudulence of such a circumscribed scenario. Without recourse to point-making, this moment explores the relationship between artifice and reality in the filmed drama. *In Treatment's* handling of even minute emotional, physical and psychological adjustments of its characters, through exact, effortlessly achieved movements of camera, faces, and bodies, is exemplary. The moment, to *In Treatment*, can be simultaneously momentary and momentous, as a point in which information is contained, revealed, and absorbed in precise measures. Without appearing forced or contrived, the series' investment in and engagement with the processes of psychotherapy - in which a casual or accidental comment or gesture, caught and gone in an instant, may hold great significance - points up inherent expressive possibilities of the filmed medium. There is perhaps no better example on the small screen of the brief, temporary and transitory combining to create the whole. Acting and aspects of professional

performance are at the heart of this TV drama, and holding attention there opens it up in new ways.