

# Max Stafford-Clark



## Education Resource Pack

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## Aim of Workpack

Max Stafford-Clark's career as a theatre director is one of the longest, richest and most influential of any of his peers at work in the British theatre today. His style as a practitioner has been recommended as one students may wish to emulate as part of the new AQA GCE syllabus. As such, this workpack is aimed at A level students.

The Stafford-Clark method can seem elusive as it is an amalgamation of many influences and does not follow a set theory like Brecht or Stanislavsky. As Max says, "I'm not aware of having evolved any particular philosophy. I really believe in the pragmatic solution of specific problems by any method that works."<sup>1</sup>

This workpack breaks the method down into two sections – the workshop and the rehearsal. It would be impossible to cover the range and depth of techniques that Max uses. As such it explores some of the most common techniques; namely the workshop process, actioning, cards, research, improvisation and Max's work with designers. Where possible the techniques are illustrated with examples from plays Max has directed.

Out of Joint hopes that you and your students find this a useful introduction to the Stafford-Clark method.

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1 Max Stafford-Clark, Letters to George: The Account of a Rehearsal, (Nick Hern Books, London: 2004), pp.xv

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## Biography

Max Stafford-Clark was born in 1941. He attended Trinity College Dublin and his directing career began when he graduated in 1966. He became Associate Director and then Artistic Director at the **Traverse Theatre**, Edinburgh.

In 1974 Max founded the influential theatre company **Joint Stock** with Bill Gaskill. Joint Stock pioneered a new way of creating theatre working with writers and actors in a workshop environment. At Joint Stock, Max directed the work of many of the most important writers in contemporary British theatre, including Caryl Churchill, David Hare, and Howard Brenton.

From 1979 to 1993, Max was the longest serving Artistic Director of the **Royal Court Theatre**. He developed many influential new writers including Sarah Daniels, Andrea Dunbar and Jim Cartwright. He worked with Caryl Churchill again, directing her seminal play *Top Girls*. Timberlake Wertenbaker's masterpiece *Our Country's Good* was also commissioned by Max at the Court.

In 1994 Max founded **Out of Joint** Theatre Company. Out of Joint is a national and international touring theatre company dedicated to the development and production of new writing. The company has premiered plays from writers including April De Angelis, Sebastian Barry and Timberlake Wertenbaker, as well as launching first-time writers such as Mark Ravenhill and Stella Feehily.

In addition Max has directed classic texts including *The Seagull*, *The Recruiting Officer* and *King Lear* for the Royal Court; *A Jovial Crew*, *The Wives' Excuse* and *The Country Wife* for The Royal Shakespeare Company; and *The Man of Mode*, *She Stoops to Conquer*, *Three Sisters* and *Macbeth* for Out of Joint.

Max's Academic credits include an honorary doctorate from Oxford Brookes University and Visiting Professorships at the Universities of Hertfordshire, Warwick and York. His books are *Letters to George* and *Taking Stock*.

# Workshops

*"It's a real democracy in the room  
where everyone's opinion counts  
and it all goes into the work."  
April de Angelis*

## What is a workshop?

*"A workshop isn't exactly rehearsal, nor is it journalistic investigation, nor is it academic research and yet it contains elements of all three of these."*<sup>2</sup>

*"The purpose of any workshop is to stimulate the writer: a by-product is that it invariably begins to stimulate and enthuse the actors too."*<sup>3</sup>

The workshop process was developed by **Joint Stock**, a theatre company founded by Max and Bill Gaskill in 1974. Joint Stock pioneered a new way of producing plays. Rather than there being a hierarchy of director and writer, producer, then actors, the whole company was considered equal and a play was developed by the group. Several of the Joint Stock workshops were inspired by books, including *The Speakers* and *Fanshen*. This is how Max describes the process:

*"The starting point was a three- or four-week workshop with the actors and the writer, in which the themes of the book were researched and explored by the whole group. But although we intruded dangerously into the writer's creative process, Joint Stock's success was in knowing when to stop. The four-week workshop was followed by a nine- or ten-week gap during which the writer wrote the play, free to draw on whatever aspect of the research they chose. Towards the end of this period the first draft would emerge, and the dialogue with the rest of the company would begin again. During the more conventional rehearsal period that followed, the play would often go through several drafts before emerging in its final form. It's a hazardous and demanding way of working. Hazardous for the writers because they have to surrender a certain degree of autonomy and because their work is constantly open to question and examination. For the actors, it's alarming because they commit to the workshop and endure the unpaid gap without ever knowing what part they will play, how large it will be and how rewarding. And for the director it is nerve-racking because there is no script; no map of the journey he is making. But it is also thrilling. The commitment of the whole group is powerful, and there is a heady excitement as the actors discover previously untapped researching and interviewing skills."*<sup>4</sup>

Nearly every play Max has directed has started with a workshop. In his book 'Letters to George' he writes to the restoration playwright George Farquhar as it was over fifteen years since he had been in a rehearsal room without a writer.

Sometimes the workshop is initiated by Max; he will approach a writer with a book or an idea for a play and ask if they are interested in writing it. This is how *Our Country's Good* and *The Permanent Way* were written. Sometimes Max will receive a play from a writer that he likes but feels it needs work, for example *Shopping and Fucking*. And at other times there is no play at all and the workshop is designed to find one, which was the process with *Some Explicit Polaroids*.

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2      Stafford-Clark, *Letters to George*, pp.24

3      Max Stafford-Clark & Philip Roberts, *Taking Stock: The Theatre of Max Stafford-Clark*, (Nick Hern Books, London:2007), pp.150

4      Stafford-Clark, *Letters to George*, pp.xiii



## Verbatim Theatre – The Permanent Way



Max has been a pioneer of verbatim theatre – a type of documentary theatre, where many people are interviewed and their stories told verbatim in a play. Max directed his first verbatim play with Joint Stock - *Yesterday's News*, a play about mercenaries in Angola. At the Court Max directed *Falkland Sound* and with Out of Joint, *The Permanent Way*, *Talking to Terrorists*, *A State Affair* and *Mixed Up North*.

*The Permanent Way* addresses a subject that has long interested Max – the privatisation of Britain's railways. He read the book, 'The Crash That Stopped Britain' by Ian Jack, that investigated the Hatfield train crash of 2000 in which four people died. Max approached David Hare about making it into a play.

A workshop was organised with Max, David, and a group of actors. They interviewed people related to the train crash including union bosses, a survivors group, a victim support group, relations of people who died in the crash, the head of Rail Track Gerald Corbett, and Richard Branson.

Actors also went out and interviewed people in pairs or groups. Instead of recording the interviews they returned to the rehearsal room and assumed the role of the interviewee while the rest of the group asked them questions. Using this Stanislavskian technique of observation, improvisations would emerge and characters were developed. Two of the actors went so far as to get jobs in the railway for a few months to immerse themselves in the industry.

### The Role of an Actor-Researcher

Bella Merlin played the Second Bereaved Mother in the National Theatre production of *Permanent Way*. Here she describes how an interview she and Matthew Dunster did made it into the production.

*"In 2003, I was one of nine actor-researchers recruited by Max and the playwright, David Hare, to collect and collate material for what became The Permanent Way. Each day we were sent out to interview people who had been involved in various ways with the privatisation of the British railways and the ensuing series of train crashes. One afternoon, I travelled out to Cambridgeshire with fellow actor, Matthew Dunster, to interview a mother whose eldest son had been a victim of the 1999 Paddington train crash.*

*The lady in question was a wonderful woman, whose courage in the face of her overwhelming grief was striking. She talked very openly and honestly about her family, her experience of the day her son died, her rage at the lack of openness in the subsequent public enquiry, and the way in which her experience had changed her from a 'normal' mum just bringing up her family, to a politicized member of society.*

*During the interview, Matt and I suddenly struck a nerve in our questioning and our interviewee stopped mid-sentence, with the words, 'I'm sorry, this is very difficult for me...' Her voice cracked and she couldn't speak. She took a moment to compose herself, then she blew her nose, and continued with the interview with the unflinching courtesy of a hostess.*

*When I came to play the character in the production of The Permanent Way, I asked Max for a couple of props.*

*As a director, Max is terrific to work with from an acting perspective: (1) he loves actors to be collaborative; (2) he looks for the human touch and the brush of tragicomedy where appropriate; and (3) he likes quirkiness and the unexpected when backed up by honesty and artistic truth. When I asked if I could have a roll of kitchen paper to blow my nose on, rather than a tissue or a handkerchief, he recognised that this was an authentic action that I had observed with my interviewee. When I then suggested that it would be great if, as I composed myself, I took the lid off a box of biscuits and munched on chocolate cookie, he again recognized the reality of this action and the strange juxtaposition of grief and normality.*

*If my action as the character was 'to reassure you' that I'm alright (by calming myself down), Max's action as the director – i.e. the arch-storyteller – was 'to remind you' that these were real people in real kitchens doing real things such as eating real biscuits. It was a moment of hyper-realism in an otherwise 'epic' (as in Brechtian) style of theatre-making."*

Actors Ian Redford and Lloyd Hutchinson who were part of the workshop discuss how they felt part of a wider political process:

Ian: Max does seem to choose a topic that becomes the news. He has an uncanny eye for the zeitgeist. It's a political thing rather than an artistic thing.

Lloyd: It was interesting that we all woke up one morning during *Permanent Way* to see that the Tory Party had asked David Hare to advise them on transport policy, to which David Hare replied, 'you can't talk to me, I'm far too busy, but talk to any one of the actors and they'll be able to help.' That's the first time I've ever done a play that you felt involved in what was going on; it was overtly political.

Ian: What was interesting was that it became a microcosm of what was going on in the country as a whole – management and the whole sloppiness of government at the time. It struck a cord beyond the story.

### **Discuss**

What do you think of verbatim theatre?

What are the advantages/disadvantages and possible pitfalls?

What are the ethical implications of staging real people's stories?

What do you think would make an interesting piece of verbatim theatre?



## Play with no Text – Some Explicit Polaroids

*Some Explicit Polaroids* was Mark Ravenhill's second play with Out of Joint. It was unusual in that Max and Mark did the initial workshop and then had a break for Mark to write the play before rehearsals; but by the time it came to rehearsals, there was still no play. As Mark says, "We had a workshop based on no play. We began rehearsal still with no play."<sup>5</sup> Mark had the unappealing task of writing a play in four weeks.

Mark discusses what he liked and disliked about the process with Ian Redford, an actor who was in Mark's first Out of Joint play, *Shopping and Fucking*:

MR: I felt *Some Explicit Polaroids* was very, very stressful and I couldn't do that again. But I was proud of what we finished up with. It wasn't the way I would really like to write a play but when we actually had the actors in the rehearsal room and there was something concrete to do I was able to write a play. There isn't anything in *Some Explicit Polaroids* where they've done an improvisation and I've written it. It was more a question of time and having the actors in the room; you could write for specific people and you only had three weeks to come up with a finished play, and that was great. I felt Max was very sensitive and had an understanding and sympathy for what I wanted to do with the play and we were basically in accord. You do feel with Max that there's an integrity about the work that ultimately what you're doing is for the play.

Ian: With *Explicit Polaroids* were there any exercises that you felt were useful? There was one where you put the story board out, working out who the play was going to be about. Was it about Nick? Was it about Nadia? And everybody's journey was charted.

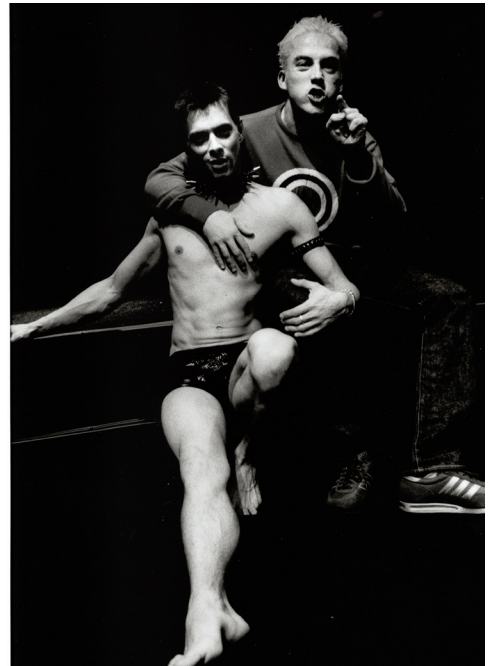
MR: I remember it being a bit more desperate than that! By then I'd gotten in such a panic about it that Max just said how many scenes do you think it has; twenty-five? And I said, 'no too many!' We negotiated for twelve scenes. He said, 'ok what scenes have you got? That can be scene one, that's probably scene three.' We were able to label the scenes we had as scenes 1, 4, 9 and then we said, 'what are the missing scenes?' I'd say, 'well something like this geographically would happen in...' One morning or afternoon we just did that on the wall in that funny, water-logged office building round the back of Out of Joint.

Ian: In 'Taking Stock' it says that Max asks lots of questions about back-story; when did Nadia get all new-agey? When did Victor arrive?

MR: For me as a writer it's not that useful. For me characters only exist within the play. They don't have any real back-story; they are just what they do in the play, there isn't anything else. I think British actors and British directors find that absolutely frightening so they have to find back stories as well. That's fine but it doesn't actually have any interest or impact on me as a writer. The thing I really learnt masses about in my rehearsals with Max was finding the stress in the line, the key words to stress. It was about putting the energy on the line and through the line and finding the stress often at the end of the line. Very technical notes that I hadn't come in contact with as an adult, and I thought you can hear Bill Gaskill directing Maggie Smith in *The Recruiting Officer* in the National and probably Bill and Maggie Smith got that from John Gill in the 30s. You can feel this tradition. That I found revelatory because I read all the 'Letter to George' stuff so I knew about actions and through 'Letters to George' I went and read all the Stanislavsky stuff. But that technical awareness of how to play text; playing on the line and through the line, that speed of thought and that physical energy you need to play that.

Actor Russell Barr was involved in the workshop. He has fonder memories of the process:

RB: I don't remember anything being out of control. But the problem was there was nothing to action. We spent two weeks improvising. The stuff about socialism was at the heart of it. There was a lot of stuff about self-help because Mark had read a book by Louisa Haye, 'You Can Heal Your Life' and that's where his characters came from – Happy, New. There was also the theme of socialism not working any more, we've moved on. When Mark clicked on that the play pulled itself together. The day before the first preview he gave me two pages of dialogue to learn! It was like being on a rollercoaster but there was never a crack, the actors were completely secure.



## Relationship with Writers – April de Angelis

April and Max first worked together at the Royal Court on *Hush*. Then Max founded Out of Joint and commissioned April again. She wrote *The Positive Hour* which went on at Hampstead Theatre in 1997. They collaborated together on *A Laughing Matter* in 2002.

OJO: *A Laughing Matter* really is a writer/director collaboration.

AA: Yes, the way it happened was Max wanted to do an eighteenth century play and he wanted to write a contemporary play alongside it. We read a lot of eighteenth century plays and discovered how awful they were! What they wanted to do in sentimental comedies, which was the kind of plays they were writing, was to banish sex and politics from the theatre. Then you haven't got anything left! That's what theatre's about – sex and politics. Then we read *She Stoops to Conquer*, one of Sheridan's plays. It seemed really funny to me and we said 'what about that?' And there was a story that Garrick had refused to put it on; the only play we found palatable was the one he refused to do! That seemed to be a story and that's what we went with in the end. I went away and read lots about Garrick and his illegitimate son, and that became part of the story.

OJO: Max has a history of doing double-headers; *The Recruiting Officer* and *Our Country's Good*, *The Libertine* and *Man of Mode*. He was fond of the process of using a classical play to inform a new one.

AA: Absolutely and he also said to me to sell a play on tour, you can sell a contemporary play on the back of a classic much more easily. He had his money head on too. He gave me a lot of room for research. That's a big thing for Max, he does a lot of research. We all read a lot of plays and stuff on Garrick. We did two workshops at the National. The first one was a reading of the first draft. We played some games with cards like how 'important is success to you?' The whole point about Garrick is finance, security and survival over artistic integrity, and Max activated that debate through exercises he set the actors.

OJO: The relationship with the director is somebody who is trying to tease out of you what you want to say. It's quite a delicate relationship.

AA: You have to have a really good sensibility with writers and Max obviously has an incredible sensibility with writers, not to overwhelm them but to draw something out. I had a tendency to write things and throw them away. I never kept my drafts; I always do now. He kept every draft and I'm so glad. Because I would sometimes rewrite something and actually throw out something that was really good. There was one scene that I am so glad is in there where Garrick is interviewing Mrs Cibber. They have an illegitimate child together and never talk about it. She plays a character who loses her son and says she wants to practice the scream with him. She just goes 'aahhhh!' And he goes 'very good, thank you.' I'd thrown that out and Max said you can't throw that out. He kept all the drafts and he made me recuperate things.

OJO: Actors, writers and director are all collaborators in this method, even though each has a job.

AA: That's another thing I learnt from Max - don't be precious. The thing I pride myself on that I learnt from him is being open about things. You look at something and say 'is this working?' That's what you base everything on. I don't get hurt about cutting things or changing things now, that's what he taught me. Like with the actors, they're prepared to take notes.

## Politics

Nearly every play Max has directed is political. Plays have dealt with themes of **Marxism** and **socialism**, **feminism**, **sexual politics**, **capitalism**, **poverty** and **class**.

Max wrote in 1989:

*Theatre is “veering towards entertainment rather than to provocative debate. Plays that take on public issues may no longer carry the public with them. But as a political solution to the Left’s problems seems increasingly remote, so the voice of theatre becomes more important. Its value in illuminating different corners of society and in explaining ourselves to ourselves has never been more needed.”<sup>6</sup>*

### Discuss

1. Read Max’s quote from ‘Letters to George’ again. Do you think this is still true?
2. Is political theatre still relevant? What is its value?

**OJO:** Why do you choose to direct political plays?

**Max:** I wouldn’t say I’m political with a capital P but I think I am socially curious and I take the theatre as a tool for investigating areas of our society that have possibly been neglected by journalism. Having said that I think the theatre has learnt more from journalism in the last fifteen years than any other source like ballet or opera. It’s a way of investigating both history and contemporary events.

# Rehearsals

## Units and Actions

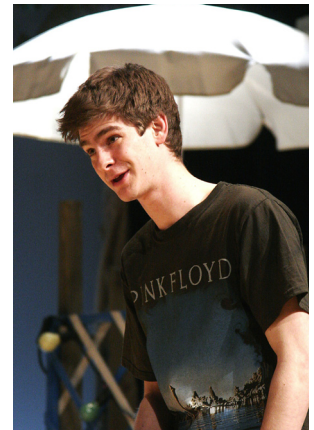
*“A unit is determined by what the character that runs the scene wants. An action is the tactic the protagonist takes to achieve that objective, and it has to be described with a transitive verb.”<sup>7</sup>*

### Units

Each scene is divided into units. A unit changes when a different character takes the lead in a scene. The unit is what the character wants to achieve. It is a full sentence.

Look at this text from *The Overwhelming*:

GERARD: May I respectfully ask what this book is?  
GEOFFREY: American history.  
It's called independent study.  
So I can graduate.  
GERARD: You are in school?  
GEOFFREY: Yeah.  
GERARD: You are a school boy?  
GEOFFREY: Well. I'm a senior.  
GERARD: Here you teach yourself?  
GEOFFREY: Sort of.  
GERARD: Then you are a smart man.  
A smart man is a good thing.



The unit could be called ‘Gerard wants to find out about Geoffrey.’

### Actions

Once a scene is divided into units it is actioned i.e. each line is described using a transitive verb.

#### What is a transitive verb?

A transitive verb takes a **direct object**. For example:

*Incomplete sentence*

The drawer contains.  
subject                  verb

*Complete sentence*

The drawer contains some pencils.  
subject                  verb                  object

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7                  Stafford-Clark & Roberts, *Taking Stock*, pp.99



### Incomplete sentence

Max pursued.  
subject      verb

### Complete sentence

Max pursued Lloyd.  
subject      verb      object

By contrast, an intransitive verb does not need a direct object. For example:

Max is sleeping.  
subject      verb

Love hurts.  
subject      verb

### How does this apply to actions?

An action explains what the character *wants to do to* the character they are speaking to. The subject does something to the object, which is why you use a transitive verb.

Look at the text from *The Overwhelming* again; the actions describe what the characters are trying to do to each other:

GERARD:	May I respectfully ask what this book is?	TESTS
GEOFFREY:	American history.	EDUCATES
	It's called independent study.	INVOLVES
	So I can graduate.	TEACHES
GERARD:	You are in school?	QUIZZES
GEOFFREY:	Yeah.	LEVELS
GERARD:	You are a school boy?	CHECKS
GEOFFREY:	Well. I'm a senior.	IMPRESSES
GERARD:	Here you teach yourself?	PROBES
GEOFFREY:	Sort of.	DEFLECTS
GERARD	Then you are a smart man.	COMMENDS
	A smart man is a good thing.	TEACHES

## Actioning from an Actor's Perspective

Actioning can be difficult for students to grasp. It can also be difficult for the actors in Max's productions. Lloyd Hutchinson has worked with Max on *A Jovial Crew*, *Shopping and Fucking*, *The Permanent Way*, *Talking to Terrorists*, *Three Sisters* and *Break of Day*; here he discusses how he got to grips with actioning and its use.

OJO: How does actioning work?

Lloyd: Actions with Max are very much how the working day is organised or how the rehearsal period is organised. You take the play and you sit down and go through it line by line by line and every line you say has an action. And what you do is take a transitive verb from a huge list and apply that to each of the lines.

OJO: Did you find it difficult at first?

Lloyd: Well yeah, because nobody knows what a transitive verb is!

OJO: So what is it?

Lloyd: All verbs are doing words but transitive verbs are the most doing of the doing words. They're active verbs. Basically they mean that you're doing something to the other. On stage you're doing something to the other character as a means of provoking a natural response. So in a sense the drama is always kept active and never gets airy-fairy or over-subtle.

OJO: It's pokes or prods or binds...

Lloyd: But never informs. As Max says, the worst actor in the world can inform. Any actor can inform.

OJO: A lot of students incorrectly come up with -ing words.

Lloyd: It's a skill. As soon as you learn how a transitive verb works you build up a repertoire. After working with Max just one time I realised how much impact actioning has. If someone's drunk they do 'drunk acting' or if someone's angry they do 'angry acting', especially in the classics. If you could just pinpoint in each of those lines what you're trying to do in them, whilst being drunk, it would make for much more interesting acting. I've carried it through to almost everything else I've done.



## Stanislavsky and Actioning

*Bella Merlin is the author of several books including Beyond Stanislavsky (for which Max Stafford-Clark wrote the Foreword) and The Complete Stanislavsky Toolkit. She is Professor of Acting at the University of California, Davis.*

Having worked as an actor with Max Stafford-Clark on four productions, I've found the technique of 'actioning' to be invaluable for (1) focusing on your partner, (2) being precise in your acting choices and (3) expanding your range of choices. Basically, with 'actioning', you pinpoint (very specifically through an active verb) what it is that you want to do to your on-stage partner. For example: 'I excite you', 'I challenge you', 'I woo you', 'I belittle you'.

The process of actioning clearly has its roots in Stanislavsky's own rehearsal practices, particularly in his later years with the process known as the 'Method of Physical Actions'. Stanislavsky insisted that actors could create reverberant and exciting psychological and emotional experiences by carrying out very precise, concrete actions. Say my psychological objective is to encourage you to fall in love with me, I may (1) dim the lights; (2) put on some soft music; (3) serve you a delicious supper; (4) top up your wine glass; and (5) flutter my eyelashes at you. These are actions that I either do or I don't do: I either leave the lights up bright, or I dim them. I either put on some soft music or we sit in silence. I either flutter my eyelashes at you or I stare at you stonily. They are easily achievable tasks.

'Actioning' is clearly connected to the principles of the Method of Physical Actions. It can also be traced to the actress, Stella Adler, who spent time with Stanislavsky in Paris in the 1930s, before traveling back to America and sharing her discoveries with Lee Strasberg. In fact, 'actioning' could probably be considered one of the closest mergers of Russian, American and British acting practices.

## Practice Actioning – Duck

Duck was Stella Feehily's debut play, produced by Out of Joint in 2003. It follows Cat, an Irish teenager with a volatile boyfriend, Mark, and a middle-aged lover, Jack. At the start of the play Cat blew up Mark's car in her frustration with him. In this scene, Mark has discovered her affair with Jack and is trying to get her to confess to both misdemeanours.

Read the whole scene first (it continues on the next two pages), then read the first two pages again concentrating on the actions.



SCENE TWELVE 69

### Scene Twelve

*Lights snap up.*

MARK *is in the bath where JACK was.*

MARK. Spending time.

We never do that do we? *SADDENS*

CAT. I suppose we don't. *SUPPORTS*

MARK. You don't seem too happy about it? *FISHES*

CAT. No, it's nice. *CONVINCES*

MARK. Kiss me. *URGES*

*She does.*

Like kissin me ma. *CRITICISES*

CAT. I'm just a bit tired, that's all. *ASSURES*

MARK. Lie back. I just want to look at you. *COAXES*

*She lies back in the bath.*

You have got the most perfect tits I've ever seen. *SADDENS*

Big feet though. *LEVELS*

Big for a little girl. *TEACHES*

CAT. You say all the right things. *CHIDES*

*Pause.*

MARK. Give me that. *TENDS*

*He takes the cloth and starts to wash her.*

MARK. When I was a kid, *ENTERTAINS*

If me mother wanted to give you a belt over something,

You'd never get it at the time of the alleged wrongdoing

But at a later date. *UNNERVES*

70 DUCK

CAT. What do you mean? *PROMPTS*

MARK. Maybe half an hour later or could be a couple of hours later, *DRAWS IN*

Anyway it'd be when you'd least expect it.

She'd come up behind you and give you a box on the head

Or kick you a sharp one up the arse. *INTRIGUES*

*She laughs.*

MARK. I hate surprises. *UNNERVES*

CAT. I can imagine. *HUMOURS*

MARK. She didn't like me very much. *SOURS*

Do you like me? *GRIPS*

CAT. What do you mean? *STALLS*

Course I like you. *REASSURES*

MARK. What do you like about me? *PURSUES*

CAT. Hmm? *STALLS*

MARK. What is it about me that you like? *PENS*

CAT. Emmm. *EVADES*

I love your arms. *ALLAYS*

MARK. Oh yeah? *DOUBTS*

CAT. The way they curve. *SATISFIES*

MARK. Right. *CHIVIES*

CAT. The hairs on them. *TESTS*

MARK. Yeah? *CHILLS*

CAT. I think they are very sexy. *PLEASES*

MARK. So you like my arms. *SOBERS*

What else? *NEEDLES*

Personality-wise I mean? *GRIPS*

Add the actions in the box on the right to page 71 of Duck.

SCENE TWELVE 71

CAT. I like . . . I like . . . You're very kind. You have kind eyes.

MARK. Do you like me cos you think I'm a gobshite?

*Pause.*

CAT. What?

*He pulls her in close.*

MARK. Do you think I'm stupid?

CAT. No, of course I don't think you are stupid.  
You're hurting me Mark.

MARK. I'm hurting you?  
Are you making a laugh out of me Duck?  
A laugh with your stupid fuckin friends.  
(*Imitating her.*) 'Oh Mark's such a fucking gobshite,  
Watch me make a fuckin hole out of him.'

CAT. No.  
I wouldn't do that Mark, honest.

MARK. Don't you fuckin Honest me.  
Why d'ja do it?

CAT. Do what?

MARK. The Insurance company got back to me this morning.  
Do you know what I'm talking about now?

CAT. No, no I don't.

MARK. They reckon someone stuffed an item of clothing  
down the petrol tank.  
Cos amazingly some of it survived.  
A little purple bit with Top Shop on it.  
I seem to remember you having a little purple card.  
I remember, cos I bought it for your nineteenth birthday.  
Is it around?

CAT. I don't know.

Placates  
Entreats  
Demands  
Corners  
Suspects  
Challenges  
Mocks  
Challenges  
Shames  
Taunts  
Stalls  
Mocks  
Enlists  
Spurns  
Corners  
Shames  
Scares  
Entreats  
Grips  
Taunts  
Entreats  
Stops  
Taunts



Try to finish actioning the scene yourself. Go over it with your teacher or during the workshop.

72 DUCK

MARK. Ah yeah. Course. You don't know.

*He ducks her in the water*

CAT. Mark.

MARK. Why did ya do it?

CAT. Mark.

MARK. Answer me.

CAT. Wait. Please.

*He holds her down.*

MARK. We can ask the audience or phone a friend.

What's it to be? WHAT'S IT TO BE?

*He pulls her out of the water.*

CAT. I WANT YOU TO LEAVE ME ALONE.

*He holds her up and looks at her.*

*Silence.*

MARK. You want me to leave you alone?

*Silence.*

All you had to do was ask,

*Pause*

Cos what are ya?

CAT. What?

MARK. You're a fucking cunt aren't ya?

CAT. No.

MARK. Are you sure?

*He ducks her again. And pulls her up.*

SCENE TWELVE 73

CAT. I'm a fucking cunt.

*He ducks her.*

MARK. Again.

CAT. I'm a fucking cunt.

*He ducks her.*

MARK. Say it again.

CAT. I'm a cunt.

MARK. What have I done to you?

*Ducking her.*

What have I ever fucking done to you?

Why don't you love me?

*He pulls her out of the water, she is gasping for air and sobbing.*

CAT. You made me

You made me

Hate

Noth

No

Nothing.

MARK. Go on. You can laugh now.

## Further Reading

Actions: The Actors Thesaurus,

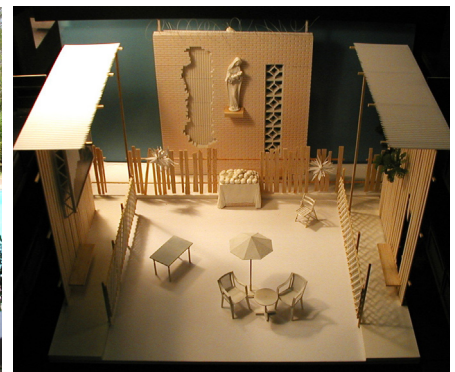
Maria Caldarone and Maggie Lloyd-Williams, (Nick Hern Books, London, 2004)



## Research – The Overwhelming

Max researches every play he directs and expects his Company to do the same. When directing *The Overwhelming* he even took a trip to Rwanda with writer JT Rogers to learn first-hand about the events of 1994. In Rwanda Max and JT met with the Mayor of Kigali, survivors of the genocide, and visited a survivors' village. This was facilitated by SURF, an NGO helping Rwandans recover from the trauma of genocide.

Here are some photographs that Max and JT took on their trip. The photographs directly influenced the set in terms of colour, ambiance, texture and cultural references.



## Research In the Rehearsal Room

### Presentations

The Company are expected to read around the subject of the play and give presentations to the group about what they have learnt. They use books, films, museums and any other relevant research material. Jessica Swale, Assistant Director on *The Overwhelming*, says,

*“On the first day we arrived in the rehearsal room to find a mountainous pile of books. To the surprise of those actors who hadn’t worked with Max before, we were each designated chapters from various books, and asked to prepare talks in groups of three or four.”*

### Experts

As well as presentations from the actors, Max invites experts to give talks to the Company. During rehearsals for *The Overwhelming* experts included journalists Lindsey Hilsum, Fergal Keane, David Belton, and Mary Kayitesi-Blewitt, and Steve Crawshaw from Human Rights Watch.

### Interviews

Max sends the actors out in pairs or groups to interview relevant people. Instead of taping the interviews the actors return and are interviewed by the rest of the cast as if they were that person. Questions include: What was the room like? How did the person sit? What was their story? This helps to build characters for the play.

As part of *The Overwhelming* research, three actors visited a Hutu refugee living in London. When interviewed by the rest of the cast, the three actors played the character simultaneously.

## Researching an Historical Play

How do you research a play from or set in the past? You can still use books, museums, and interview experts; however there are no primary sources. Instead, Max finds modern day equivalents to what the characters would have experienced. Actor Lloyd Hutchinson explains some of the techniques used for *A Jovial Crew*:

Lloyd: The story of the play was these rich, young people decide to cast off their noble origins and trappings, join a group of beggars and go out with a begging crew for the summer, so that life could open up for them. So we went out begging basically. Some people sat at Waterloo and begged, other people went out and washed car windows.

OJO: So the research, going out and experiencing in a modern context was useful for the play. It's a Stanislavskian thing isn't it?

Lloyd: You begin to feel what it's actually like. Some actors couldn't do it, just could not do it. Other people really enjoyed it.

OJO: Did you beg?

Lloyd: Yeah I begged.

OJO: How much did you get?

Lloyd: Something like £3.50. We brought it all back and put it into a kitty for biscuits.

**OJO: Why do you do so much research and how does it enhance your productions?**

**Max: Detail, detail, detail. I think if you give actors responsibility to research material it gives them ownership which is invaluable. They feel part of the process, so you're spreading the creative process from the writer to the actors as a research team. But also who knows what going to an exhibition about Convict hulks did to us in Sydney when rehearsing *The Convict's Opera* but at least Brian Protheroe who plays a forger was able to see moulds that had been made by a convict forger. You can research through books, through meeting people; it's invaluable for making you closer to the material.**

### Exercise

1. Take the play you are working on; what are the themes?
2. Divide your cast into individuals or groups. Send each person/group to research one theme.
3. Each person/group gives a presentation to the cast about their theme.
4. What have you learnt and how will this improve your production?

## Cards

Max is famous for using playing cards. Cards are used in workshops and rehearsals and can be used in any number of ways; for provocation, working out the dynamics of a scene, developing a character and for fun. The most important thing is that the use of cards is relevant to the scene or play you are working on. For example in the workshop for *Cloud Nine* in 1978, to explore sexuality Max initiated a 'Gay Afternoon':



*"A red card indicated you were gay and had to contact other gays (other red cards) in the group. Then we added a joker card which indicated policeman and which led to several arrests."*<sup>8</sup>

Two of the most frequent uses of cards are for determining *status* and *intensity*.

## Status

A person's status in a given situation determines how they will behave. For example, a Queen is high status and will walk, talk and act in a certain way (say she is a 10). A knave is a lower status than the Queen (he is a 7). A servant will be a lower status than both other characters (1). The knave will behave in a different way towards the Queen (lower status) than towards the servant (higher status).

*"The actor's sole objective becomes to make their status as clear as possible."*<sup>9</sup>

### Exercise

1. Choose ten people from the class. Each person is given a card from 1 to 10. They chat informally in front of the rest of the class for a few minutes. The watchers then place the people with cards in the order of their status.

How many did you get right? How do people of a different status behave?

2. Divide the class in two. Everyone gets a card. Half the class are in a lift and half are at a party. The people in the lift enter the party and have to find the other person with the same status as them.
3. Take two people. One is a parent and the other a teenage daughter or son. What is the status of each character? Improvise a scene. Now imagine that the parent disappeared when the child was very young and has recently resurfaced. How does that change their status? Try improvising a new scene.
4. Work out the status of each character in a scene from your play. Now give the actors cards with a different status. How does this change their performance?

8 Stafford-Clark, *Taking Stock*, pp.75

9 Stafford-Clark, *Letters to George*, pp.25



## Intensity

Cards can be used to determine how passionate a character is in a scene.

In a workshop, cards can help a writer determine how they want to portray arguments in the play. For example, the main debate in *A Laughing Matter* is financial security versus artistic integrity. April de Angelis explains how Max explored this with cards:

*“He would give you an unseen card. With a **red card** you had to argue for **artistic integrity** over financial security and **the higher the card the more passionate you are**. With a **black card** you have to argue for **financial security**. So the actors would go out and we wouldn’t know the card then we would ask them questions. If it was a black eight you might say, ‘it’s all very well doing work on the fringe but actually I’ve got a family, three kids and I want to do that advert.’ So we got to grips with how to debate the play in a contemporary way and how the characters might make arguments. That debate is the basic axis of the play and that brought it to life.”*

In rehearsals, cards can be used to improve a scene that isn’t quite working. Jessica Swale, Assistant Director of *The Overwhelming*, explains how:

*“Having rehearsed Linda’s conversation with Elise at the Milles Collines Hotel (Act 2 Scene 4), Max decided that it would be far more interesting if Elise was angrier with Linda for asking highly insensitive questions and assuming she understands Elise’s predicament. Max asked Chipo Chung (the actor playing Elise) to choose a card at random, and not reveal it to us. She chose a 4, so portrayed Elise as a little frustrated, but anxious to please. Chipo then picked another card – an 8. This time she played Elise as more and more frustrated at Linda’s offhand comments, until her speech blaming the West for ‘doing nothing’ was delivered with more vexation and intensity than ever before. The scene became infinitely more powerful, and the new dynamics were agreed upon.”*



### Exercise

1. a) Return to Scene 12 of *Duck*. Act the scene with Mark’s anger being a 4 and Cat’s fear being a 2.  
b) Now try the scene with Mark’s anger at 8 and Cat’s fear at 7.  
c) How do the dynamics of the scene change? Is it better or worse? Are there other levels of intensity you think would be better?
2. Take two students. They are on a first date. Choose cards. The higher the number, the higher that person’s passion for the other person.
3. Take a scene from your play that you are having difficulty with. Remove the face cards so you are left with cards 1-10 of each suit. Pick cards at random and play the scene at those levels of intensity. Try different cards. How have the dynamics of the scene changed?

*“Max uses real life or tricks. For example, when we did ‘A State Affair’ he engineered an argument between Matthew Wait and Gary which happened when we were having coffee and there was this row that was going on the hallway and I got really upset because I thought it was real. Max said that feeling is what we had to use in this improvisation. Sometimes you can’t improvise a feeling you have to engineer it.”*

Ian Redford, Actor

## Improvisation

Max uses improvisation in an infinite number of ways, however it always relates to the text. Examples include:

- Impersonating someone an actor has interviewed as part of their research
- Taking a theme from the play and improvising around it
- Using an actor’s personal story and creating a scene from it

## Writers

Improvisation can be used to help writers come up with scenes in workshops. For example, in the workshop for *Some Explicit Polaroids* there was no text, so Max initiated improvisations to inspire Mark Ravenhill. Russell Barr says,

*“The hospital scene – that was never written but we did an improvisation where Max said ‘you’re in a hospital, Tim’s dying and you end up having a threesome. Improvise it.’ So Mark was watching it and wrote a scene based on that. Max would come up with ideas and Mark would either dismiss them or take some of it.”*

## Actors

Improvisations can be used to help actors get into their roles. During rehearsals for *She Stoops to Conquer*, Max set up an improvisation where the entire Out of Joint office became Hardcastle’s house. Each actor was given a piece of paper with their objective on it: for example, Hardcastle’s objective was to keep out of trouble and Marlowe’s was to talk to Kate Hardcastle. The actors were given one hour to try to achieve their objective. The purpose was to see what it would feel like to be their characters in a modern context.

### Exercise

1. Take a scene you are struggling with. What are the objectives of each character? Write the objectives down. Improvise the characters trying to achieve these objectives (see Hardcastle’s House above). Now go back to the text. Does this help?
2. Is there a debate in the play you are studying? To understand it further, work out the two main opposing arguments. Choose cards. A red card means you are for the argument, black is against. The higher the card the higher your passion. Have a debate. Does this help your understanding of the play? (see pp.23 above or *Letters to George*, pp.24-26)



## Putting it on its Feet

The Stafford-Clark method is known for its detailed examination of the text in rehearsals. Students often ask what is different about how Max puts a play on its feet. The difference is that the actors have spent so long around the table analysing, actioning and researching that not so much time is spent blocking.

Lloyd Hutchinson explains:

*"The great thing about actioning is you know about all the relationships that are happening in the play, so you know what is going on exactly when you're round the table. So when you get on your feet, where you stand on stage and block it, all that is taken away."*

Actioning also means that the actors know how to play their parts physically before they get on their feet. Mark Ravenhill says:

*"I find his productions very physical because you're so committed to playing those actions that I don't know whether the actors even notice it, but it's not just their head and their mouth, they're always trying to totally do something to the other person and it enters into their whole body. So they might have decided in the rehearsal room to just write the word 'to seduce' or 'to bully' but actually once they get in there they so want to do it that their whole body enters that process, so actually they're very physically engaged performances."*

Unlike other directors, Max doesn't run his plays. Mark Ravenhill elaborates:

*"Max hardly ever runs anything. The work is always very much focused on the detail of the unit or the page of what you're rehearsing. Nearly every other director at the end of a morning or a day will run through the work, kind of out of curiosity because you just want to see what you've got; but he doesn't run. Quite often it'll just be in the last couple of rehearsals that he'll put together all the bits. But it genuinely doesn't seem to interest him; that's not part of the process for him. I think because he's quite suspicious of joining up the dots too early and making it all just connect up. He's trying to hold it back so that you keep on being focused on the moment."*

Max himself says, *"I prefer to creep up on a play rather than assault it."*<sup>10</sup>

### OJO: Why don't you run plays in rehearsals?

**Max:** A run is the sum total of what's in the account and it's best to get the account full before you run it. A run will only reveal what you have already done and if you haven't done enough then you should do more before you run. It's not true to say I don't run in rehearsal at all, I do; but I'm inclined to run much later than most directors because a run is a declaration of where you've got to and if you've still got further to get there's no point in running until you've got there.

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