

Capacity for character: fiction, ethics and the anthropology of conduct

Method acting is one of the most popular theatrical rehearsal systems, according to which actors seek intense identification with characters. In this article, I draw on fieldwork with a professional contemporary German theatre to suggest an alternative view. Rather than training to merge with characters, actors understand characters as a ‘repertoire of fiction’ they freely draw upon to compose themselves. Training for characters thus facilitates the *capacity* to detach and appropriate traits of different, imagined and real, persons. It is thus an active and reflected stance that mends the gap between actor and character, rather than a passive and predominantly embodied taking on by actors of fictional characters and their traits. Informed by discussions on the notion of conduct in the anthropology of ethics, this article investigates how training the ‘capacity for character’ can inform anthropological understandings of detachment, reflexivity and personhood.

Key words anthropology, character, ethics, rehearsal, theatre

If I may be allowed to conjecture what is the nature of that mysterious power by which a player really is the character which he represents, my notion is, that he must have a kind of double feeling. He must assume in a strong degree the character which he represents, while he at the same time retains the consciousness of his own character. (Boswell 1929 [1770]: 17f.)

Introduction

Notions of integrity, authenticity and truth have for a long time shaped the understanding of character in professional European theatre, and continue to do so. James Boswell, the mid-18th-century Scottish diarist and biographer of Samuel Johnson, was not particularly known for his own work in theatre, and even less so for his career as an advocate. Yet, his late-18th-century essays on the profession of a player anticipate a tension that informs the anthropological discussion of character at the heart of this article. In his essays, Boswell writes of ‘a kind of double feeling’ that an actor ‘must have’ when representing another character – a strange feeling of balancing two rather than just one character. Yet, there is also uncertainty, since it is a ‘mysterious power’ that must be at work so that a player ‘*really is* the character which he represents’ (Boswell 1929 [1770]: 17f.; emphasis added), alluding to the strangeness of multiple characters. His double emphasis is telling: a player *is* not simply the character he represents; he *really is* it. Boswell continues, stressing the complexity of his own iteration, by suggesting that ‘the feelings and passions of the character which he represents must take full possession as it were of the antechamber of his mind, while his own character remains in the innermost recess’ (1929 [1770]: 17f.). The relation of a player to their character, we infer from Boswell, entails a complex interplay of

fore- and ‘backgrounding’, cognitive and affective work, as well as techniques of the self that address the subconscious, unfathomable and embodied experience of multiple characters. Another major 18th-century treatise on this subject, Denis Diderot’s *The paradox of acting* (Diderot 1883 [1773]), underlines this tension. It presents the reader with a conversation between two speakers (‘The First’ and ‘The Second’) who debate the nature of good acting, detachment and character. Throughout the dialogue, the first of two speakers is adamant that ‘a great actor ... must have in himself an unmoved and disinterested onlooker’ (1883 [1773]: 7). More than that, ‘[h]e has rehearsed to himself every note of his passion. He has learnt before a mirror every particle of his despair’ (1883 [1773]: 16). For Diderot’s first speaker, then, a good actor ‘is not the person he represents; he plays it, and plays it so well that you think he is the person’ (1883 [1773]: 17).

What Boswell and Diderot write about the negotiation of character and mimicry on stage sheds light on an important anthropological conundrum. They are both interested in acting as a way to dissect the multiple formations of character and their negotiation through rehearsed actions. Cognisant of the specific historical situatedness of their writings, I contend that we can think through the issues they raise in order to gain a more profound understanding of how humans relate to themselves and to others on and *off* the stage, and as such, raise productive questions for an anthropology interested in character, ethics and art. For not only is acting and performing among the oldest and most widespread artifices for relating to the self and to others through embodied techniques and practices known in anthropological and even archaeological literature (DeMarras and Robb 2013); it is also a highly reflexive field that has professionalised itself in variously institutionalised ethico-aesthetic traditions around the world. The subject of my own ethnographic research, modern German traditions of theatre, has seen an institutionalisation of acting theories that function as an archive of artistic ways of looking at human relations, notions of self and actors relating to fictional characters. Among other well-known institutionalised European traditions of theories about acting, such as the English and the French, the German one offers a set of peculiar variables relevant to an anthropology of ethics and character. Of particular interest for me is its tradition of self-cultivation (*Bildung*), for it is bound up with state patronage and nation-building ideals through the institution of the public municipal theatre, around which have coalesced a diverse range of acting theories and paradigms, technologies for work on the self, and ideas about character and authenticity. In particular, the relations and contrasts between the ideals of the Prussian and later Western German traditions of self-cultivation in theatre (Bruford 1975; Roselt and Weiler 2011) and the East German development of socialist realism and its relation to *Bildung* (Bogusz 2007; Boyer 2005) provide a rich soil for thinking about character; not as a broader category of German society or a reflection on variations of national character (Dumont 1994 [1991]), but as the focus or subject of practices of reflexive thinking and acting on the capacity for being in and out of character.

There are several obstacles, however, that have hindered a full development of this potential. With regard to the description of character, one is an equation of character with the social or moral, and the other a reduction of character to a notion of an authentic, genuine and singular self. These are iterated and repeated in many different guises and traditions, both in scholarship on theatre and in anthropology, as well as the social sciences and moral philosophy (Camfield 2015; Sennett 1998).

An influential tradition of thought that acts as a barrier to rethinking the fictional repertoire of being potentially offered by characters has been the association of character with social roles, and the prevalent conception of the social as an intrinsically moral or good entity, where ‘morality becomes a synonym for social structure, culture, ideology, discourse’ (Laidlaw 2014: 22). This conception has roots in the Durkheimian sociological project, but Marcel Mauss (1985 [1938]: 13f.) also underscores this genealogy, reminding us of the development of the concept of the person from static social role to moral phenomenon, at some point derived from the idea of a mask through which (per) resounds (sonare) the voice of the actor. More recently, the Scottish philosopher Alastair MacIntyre reframes this discussion by analysing the relation between practices of ethical reasoning and the moral dimension of character through a stable dramatic metaphor. Characters, MacIntyre suggests, are the ‘masks worn by moral philosophers’ (1981: 28). In his project committed to a reintegration of the lost conceptual vocabulary of an Aristotelian practical morality, characters are therefore not ‘marginal figures in the social drama of the present age’; rather, they mitigate the fragmented moral traditions of our modern liberal predicament (1981: 27). He means the dramatic metaphor with some seriousness, exploring it through the much-hackneyed examples of Japanese Noh plays and English medieval morality plays, for these contain ‘a set of stock characters immediately recognisable to the audience’ (1981: 27). This is central to his argument, since, in these traditions, both actors and characters are informed by similar intentions, meaning that ‘in the case of a *character*, the possibilities of action are defined in a more limited way’ (1981: 27). Characters are thus sort of quasi-exemplars that epitomise certain moral ideologies of a culture. They are stable and identifiable.

His analysis opens up pathways into thinking about the relation of ethical self-cultivation and characters to national and institutional cultural traditions (see Barker *et al.* 2013), which are significant and pervasive in the context of German public theatre. Yet, this line of reasoning in moral philosophy and his ideas about the fusing of character with role and morality hinders a dynamic engagement with the playfulness of character as capacity, and it is this interplay that I wish to underscore in this article. MacIntyre’s arguments build in part on an engagement with Aristotelian virtue ethics, but they also resonate with a canonised theatrical method, first inaugurated by the Russian director Constantin Stanislavski, whose central propositions act as a second backdrop and barrier hindering the exploration of what I call the fictional capacity for character.

Conceived as part of the Russian realist movements, this canonised theatrical method is articulated in a sequence of rather entertaining conversational handbooks – *An actor prepares* (Stanislavski 2015 [1937]), *Building a character* (2016 [1950]) and *Creating a role* (2015 [1981]) – and became popularised as ‘method acting’ when it rose to prominence in America in the 1930s through the acting teacher Lee Strasberg (1987). Stanislavski’s system has received a global reception (Aquilina and Pitches 2017) and has been described as ‘the most influential theoretical and pedagogical model of the twentieth century’ (Balme 2008: 22).

Method acting is a technique in which actors seek to achieve emotional identification with a character. Stanislavski ‘insists that acting should create an imaginary world as *if* it were real, and not rely on pretence, cliché and trickery’ (Gillett 2015: vii). The system thus describes a kind of re-experiencing of life by the actor, who is meant to use a series of ‘psychotechniques’, among them so-called affective memory, that is, ‘memory which resides in the actor’s feelings and is brought to the surface of his

consciousness by his five senses' (Strasberg 1987: 59f.). In the conclusion to *Building a character*, Stanislavski describes how 'piecemeal the "system" enters into the human being, who is also an actor, until it ceases to be something outside of him and becomes incorporated in his own second nature' (2016 [1950]: 248). This complicated training is eventually meant to turn into an unreflected routine, a masterful habitus: 'The difficult should become habitual, the habitual, easy, the easy, beautiful' (2016 [1950]: 248).

In this article, I draw on fieldwork with a professional contemporary German public theatre to suggest an alternative, non-representational, post-Stanislavskian view on the relation of character to self, and the cultivation of each during rehearsals. The material presented here does not exhaust itself in a peculiar case study, but seeks to extrapolate from this institution to a reflection on a broader set of problems and traditions engaging with the relation of character to self-formation. The group discussed therefore does not model a way of life, but constitutes an 'extra-ordinary' professional practice (Tinius 2017) that condenses reflection on personhood, sociality and ethics. This forms part of a broader argument I wish to establish about the ways in which artistic practices, specifically professional and institutionalised ones, may offer unusual and therefore potentially transversal ways of understanding ethical actions and traditions that can serve to complement seminal accounts in fields not immediately apparent in their adjacency, such as, for example, therapy and suffering (Mattingley 2014), activism and sexuality (Dave 2012; Heywood 2018), religion and performance (Hirschkind 2006; Pandian 2009), or new media avatars and virtual realities (Boellstorff 2008; Manning and Gershon 2013).

The word *Charakter* is used in German in a manner similar to the English one, that is, to denote recognisable moral traits that make up and render distinct, sometimes even quirky, someone's personality (*Persönlichkeit*) or the identity of a thing or experience. *Persönlichkeit* has the double-connotation of an admirable figure. In theatre, however, the notion that prevails is that of *Rolle* (role) and *Figur* (figure), both of which are used to describe nuances of abstraction and meaning with which actors (*Darsteller, Schauspieler*) engage, and which are intertwined with their capacity for understanding the complex character of a play's *dramatis personae*.

I derive these terms and this view from fieldwork conducted among German theatre ensembles and institutions, whose practices are situated on two levels of what I call ethico-aesthetic traditions. On a broader historic scale, German public theatres draw on a centuries-old tradition of state patronage and commitment to self-cultivation through the arts, whose legacy still informs cultural policies and the language deployed to describe how aesthetic experience 'forms' (*bilden*) a person's character today. On an ethnographic level, I followed the work of an institution, the Theater an der Ruhr (hereafter TaR) in the Western German post-industrial Ruhr Valley. This theatre reacted against and yet positioned itself within this tradition by creating a new type of institution structured to facilitate the slow collective crafting of a stable acting ensemble. Since this theatre maintained long rehearsal periods with an ensemble whose members worked together, in some instances, for over 20 years, a recognisable system for the rehearsal of conduct has emerged, allowing me to analyse the negotiation of ethical values through aesthetic deliberations. I take this institution to stand as an example for an intensified and reflexive organisation of practices and values for the deliberation of ethical conduct through artistic practices and aesthetic choices. As such, it provides pathways into further analysis of the conjunctures of ethical fields and artistic practices and institutions beyond theatre.

This ensemble's work on character relations was less oriented towards impacting the imagination of the audience than the development and entanglement of ethical with aesthetic capacities within the acting ensemble. Rather than training to lock themselves into specific characters, or to merge with a social role, actors understand characters as what I call 'fictional tools' in a 'repertoire of fiction', that is, as the capacity to draw on a stock of character traits to compose themselves. Training to take on a character thus facilitates the *capacity* to detach from and recombine different character traits. Being in character, then, is not a passive way of behaving or receiving, but an active, reflected and critical stance that minds the gap between actor and character. This article explores the value and complexity added to our understanding of ethical practices and thought by such a perspective drawn from the arts. As such, it complements my broader argument that artistic practices and institutions can be fruitfully considered and analysed as ethical fields and traditions.

Reflecting on character: post-Stanislavskian theatre today

Aimed at creating alienating effects for actors and audiences alike, the early 20th-century German playwright Bertolt Brecht's ideas about acting techniques are widely regarded as 'a counter-model' (Balme 2008: 24) to Stanislavki. Brecht's writings have strongly influenced German post-war theatre and served as a precursor to late-20th-century director's theatre (*Regietheater*) with its critique of notions like psychological realism and catharsis. My argument about characters as fictional tools for the composition of an acting self, and as a repertoire of fiction used by actors to train themselves, builds on a Brechtian critique of the Stanislavskian and Aristotelian models of theatre. German post-war director's theatre has reacted against a conception of theatre still popular on European stages since the 1960s, which essentially boils down to Eric Bentley's tongue-in-cheek formula: 'A impersonates B while C looks on' (1965: 150). This idea of theatre as impersonation with the aim of inducing in the passively onlooking audience a 'suspension of disbelief' builds on one of Aristotle's principles of theatre; audiences are meant to experience a cleansing catharsis through identification with the truth-effects of a stage-play. Brecht's approach to alienation, the *Verfremdungseffekt*, distanced itself from that suspension of disbelief. For Brecht (1964: 138ff.), role-enactment was a practice in detachment and critical consideration of the actions on stage, both for actors and for audiences. Such attempts to rethink the approach to character have proliferated in post-war German theatre, and it is to one exemplary institution for such a critical stance that I now turn.

The TaR is a professional public ensemble and repertoire theatre in the post-industrial Ruhr Valley, founded in 1980 and since directed by the Italian director Roberto Ciulli and the German dramaturg Helmut Schäfer. They strongly opposed the idea that either its audience or its actors should unconsciously 'identify' with a character. Quite the opposite, ensemble members and the directorial team frequently stressed to me that 'acting and thinking about acting' go hand in hand.

The reflection on the process of relating to roles usually begins as early as the so-called *Konzeptionsgespräche* or concept-conversations, which initiate most rehearsal processes. These usually involve the entire ensemble, plus administrative and other

staff, as these are the discussions during which different approaches, interpretative angles or theoretical frameworks for a play are decided. The prevalence of such theory-laden pre-discussions, during which a dramatic source text would not infrequently be radically altered and secondary artistic sources (films, novels, artworks) consulted, is a feature of post-war, post-dramatic German *Regietheater*. As the name suggests, director's theatre emphasises the marked presence and frequently also the charismatic and not unproblematic authority of directors (often male, white, European, aged over 50) that emerged in the rejuvenation of post-war German public theatre. Additionally, it marked a shift away from the authority of the text towards the social negotiation of meaning during rehearsals.

This form of production is tied to the extensive public funding of German theatres, and these public theatres' ensemble and repertoire systems. The former describes a fixed number of more or less permanently employed actors, seamstresses, craftsmen – an ensemble – who don't come together just for a production, as is common in the UK or the USA, but work together for years, even decades. This model is closely tied to the second key aspect of German public theatres, the repertoire. It describes a number of stock plays a theatre ensemble has rehearsed and is ready to perform repeatedly and in different locations. This makes it both an aesthetic and an economic model. Recognised by UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage in 2014, German theatres build on a tradition of public funding on national, federal and municipal levels that dates back two centuries and has facilitated an extensive grid of such institutions. Subject to contracts and municipal negotiations, certain ensembles may therefore re-perform the same roles for years, in a few cases even decades, allowing for long-term relations between actors and their roles to develop. Yet, this structure also means that actors are able to draw on a repertoire of characters they have studied, creating a sense of tradition, apprenticeship and maturation in relation to roles and skills relevant to each play.

For over 15 months I studied the institutional, social and aesthetic features of a German theatre in which the maintenance of a closely knit ensemble and repertoire system is one, if not *the*, *raison d'être*. The TaR is one of few theatres in Germany that negotiated a public funding contract as a quasi-city theatre, but maintained the same creative directorial team of dramaturg, stage designer and director; in this case for 35 years, with an ensemble in which several members have been active for over two decades.

Rehearsals are the *modus operandi* of the theatre and the means to cultivate artistic conduct. What is more, Ciulli and Schäfer mobilised rehearsals as an economic principle of 'slow cultural production', where rehearsals are not efficient means to an end, but constitute a craft that requires apprenticeship, with theatre conceptualised as a quasi-academy. The limited production runs of only one or two productions per season allow the theatre to extend rehearsals to up to 12 months. Public performances, then, become just one step in the long cultivation of an acting career. I thus spoke of an ethico-aesthetic tradition because what the TaR rehearses is a transmittable system of ethical values about acting and good conduct.

Rehearsals therefore have a particular *telos*, which is not achieved with the staging of a play, but addresses primarily the cultivation of ethical conduct – a practice my interlocutors called *Haltung*. *Haltung* is a German concept denoting posture, attitude and conduct with roots in Brechtian alienation theory (Barnett 2014). Of the anthropological attempts to theorise rehearsals in theatre (McAuley 1998), few have attended quite to the ways in which this mode of practice informs such different conceptions

of conduct and self, though similar issues arise in rehearsals of non-artistic practices of self-making (Keenan and Pottage 2017). At the TaR, posture refers to the corporeal dimension of *Haltung* (as in the posture one cultivates during rehearsals for a particular character or setting); attitude refers, somewhat less comfortably in English than in German, to the political and emotional aspect of a character, that is, the particular reasons for acting one way or another. And lastly, perhaps the most complicated but also important dimension of *Haltung* is the conduct of conduct, or ‘rehearsed detachment’ (Tinius 2016). This refers to the reflected practice and capacity of relating to a character.

Rehearsing capacity for character

One Monday afternoon, after over four hours of deliberation, the ensemble had just stopped this morning’s concept-conversation for their take on Shakespeare’s *The winter’s tale*. Ciulli’s directorial assistant stood up and loudly announced: ‘Tonight 7 p.m., rehearsals, Ruhroterstraße, O’Neill.’ ‘Ruhroterstraße’ was a reference to the rehearsal stage in the nearby post-industrial harbour, where the TaR prepares most of its plays, while ‘O’Neill’ signalled Eugene O’Neill’s *Long day’s journey into night* (1956), a Pulitzer Prize-winning drama that problematises a single day in the life of the Tyrones, a family of actors paralysed by drug-addiction and mutual blame for each other’s misery. It was the second play Ciulli and Schäfer decided to rehearse that year.

Around 7 p.m., the ensemble arrived on the rehearsal stage and settled in the circle of chairs. Ciulli addressed the group, reminding everyone of their conceptual approach – a term used to describe the set of interpretations about content, characters and overall interpretative framework that the ensemble collectively works out for every play.

This play deals with the ghostlike eeriness of a family deadened by their social apathy, their hatred for each other. So we developed the conception that all characters on stage are basically already dead. This will be difficult to negotiate on stage.

Elisabeth Strauss, the costume designer, had introduced the ensemble to her idea of covering the costumes in rust by immersing them in water and iron filings, creating the impression of wear and age. Marco Leibnitz, an actor in his early thirties, who had joined the professional ensemble in 2008 after acting in its youth section for several years, raised his hand to ask a set of questions about the horizons of awareness of each character, signalling his own literary reference points for more calibration: ‘So do the characters know that they are dead? Are we going to stage this as a sort of post-mortem hell, like Sartre’s *Huis clos?*’, he added, making reference to the well-known phrase from the play, ‘Hell is other people.’ Several members nodded, underlining the question’s relevance. Ciulli responded, with an eye to the dramaturg, who had been working closer than most others with the dramatic source of the text and sat, smoking and dressed in his typical long-black coat, at a slight distance from the group:

Not entirely. Most passages in the text seem to suggest that they are alive. But when you perform, it becomes clear that death is central to their daily experience. What we intend to do with this play is to contrast the text of the

play – which is about life – with a crassly different kind of corporeality. We need to develop a posture [*Haltung*] that manages to convey and enact death. We are asking: Are the characters still alive, or are they already dead? What is life after death? Can this liminal state and ambiguity make us more conscious of life itself?

Ciulli paused again to let the actors think, asking me and several interns to come a little closer in the circle of chairs, before adding: ‘It therefore becomes absolutely crucial to distinguish between internal and external images that we need to construct in our and the spectators’ minds.’ He explained that by internal images he means one’s training, work or conduct as an actor. With ‘external images’, by contrast, he meant what one says and what people see. ‘This means that we’re basically producing two plays’, he said, explaining that the actors have to create the difficult situation in which they enact what O’Neill writes in the text, but act as if every statement could also refer to a different situation, to a kind of liminal purgatory in which all actors are suffering while aware of it. This presented a complicated scenario to act, but it contrasts starkly with Stanislavski’s idea about actors bringing into accord their internal psycho-emotional memories with their external gestures; rather, the director, dramaturg and costume designer were discussing with the actors how to keep the different layers of the play – the costumes, physical appearance, text and acting – tangible, perhaps even at odds with one another. After more discussion about the source text, Ciulli responded to an actress’s concern over acting this properly. ‘Cultivating the right corporeality [*Körperlichkeit*],’ he noted, ‘requires intense bodily work [*Körperarbeit*].’

These deliberations in the foyer of the rehearsal stage concerned the issue of translating a conceptual hypothesis into acting. The ensemble worked closely together on details of this transition and each actor responded with particular queries. It was obvious that they began reflecting on their bodies and the form of conduct they needed to cultivate for this play – some finding it harder to transition from the discussions on Shakespeare in the morning to O’Neill in the evening (the two casts overlapped almost entirely), since they needed to juggle a set of different characters. Others disagreed, suggesting that it was this shift between and the drawing on each different character’s traits that trained the skills for engaging with other characters. This capacity was subject to much discussion among the actors over what constituted a good actor: a bad one was unable to break away from their own unconscious *habitus* to move into new situations through their own training and reflection.

Actor Klaus Herzog, a slightly eccentric albeit scrupulous actor in his early sixties, former ballet dancer, musical singer and counter-tenor who joined the TaR in 1992, interjected that he found the task of performing liminality helpful in thinking about the mingling of worlds: ‘I mean, what kinds of human beings are we portraying? These are fundamental questions for us’, he said, pointing to a way of thinking about characters that differs strongly from the unconscious memory work advocated by Stanislavski. Rather, the ensemble spoke about crafting ‘images’ of ideas, or atmospheres, alongside lighting moods, sound and props, which operated as complementary aspects for the audience. ‘They are just suggestions, motives’, the dramaturg commented. ‘I also cut all these interpersonal addresses by personal name’, he continued, ‘that’s typical author-prose, where a playwright like Shakespeare feels the need to remind us constantly of who is on stage.’ This provoked giggles from

the interns and agreed murmuring among actors and actresses. Ciulli added that ‘we don’t want some kind of ping-pong sort of dialogue where all we hear is text. That would be Virginia Woolf. You are conveying your awareness of the social situation through your overall comportment, your phrasing, your *Duktus* [ductus/conduct], your movements.’

Eventually, the ensemble resolved the discussion and began to reread the first act. Some had already memorised it, while others were still looking at the script. After a few sentences, Ciulli interrupted and addressed Herzog, who tended to overemphasise the spoken word and his bodily gestures as others occasionally remarked. This time, however, Ciulli was pleased:

Klaus, the way you just said this sentence – ‘Why are you staring at me like that?’ – is perfect. You’ve said it *entirely without spontaneity*. That’s exactly how it has to be said by you, the lethargic father figure of the family. In this piece, there is no eloquent communication or dialogue. In O’Neill, nothing is said without intention. That’s why we’re deleting so much text: everything has to be a provocation. You all have to internalise that kind of conduct [*Haltung*]!

In response to Ciulli’s remarks, actor Albert Bork, in his late forties and at the TaR since 2001, interjected: ‘I noticed that in the original version, this sentence is said in the past tense – “Why did you look at me like that?” Would that not be more apt?’ Another actor responded by suggesting that it makes more sense to keep the present tense in all speech, since the characters are stuck in a liminal state of suffering. The present tense, the others agreed, signalled this ambivalence better than the past tense.

Such discussions exemplify the complex reflections that go on even before a text is properly enacted. This scene also illustrates how intensely actors anticipate their bodily conduct on stage, translating from Ciulli’s conceptual reflections to their later *Haltung*. Instructions for actors, for instance to internalise a self-conscious form of conduct, also show the potential tensions, perhaps even the contradictions, of habituating a self-reflexive form of conduct. Moreover, it illustrates that learning to be capable and aware of this approach to character-rehearsal does not preclude reflection; on the contrary, it contains and shifts both habituated and reflected aspects that are crucial to rehearsing as an actor. The most crucial aspect of the discussions was that actors should not become one with their roles, but to reflect on and know why they are doing something. The real ‘through-line’ of what actors should address is not to be found solely in the words attributed to a role, and certainly not by the stage instructions in the play, but rather in the ensemble’s collective work on certain central themes, such as liminality, life after death or violence. How each actor addressed these aspects was therefore not strictly encapsulated in character A or character B, but in a complex set of aspects and references, theories and concepts brought into the discussions at all points of a rehearsal: each actor, despite Ciulli’s and Schäfer’s frequent interjections, was to find their own way of approaching these themes, and to develop a capacity for character rather than a perfecting of a single character-study. ‘What we understand by directing’, an experienced actor told me later as we walked out of the rehearsal, ‘and what Ciulli stands for’, he added, ‘is the capacity to allow for chance to happen. Nothing is absolutely set in stone, we are all just facilitating a sensibility, training our ability to recognise a useful moment, gesture, idea that addresses this idea we work on at that moment.’

At around 10 p.m., the ensemble decided to move to the preliminary stage set that the late designer and TaR co-founder Galf-Edzard Habben had created based on the conceptual conversations. Two large shallow pools of water were supposed to create a sense of in-between-ness, the stage designer explained: ‘When still, a mirror of these wretched characters we’re talking about, and yet also possibly a deep pond with unknown depths.’ Fabio Menéndez, a core actor in his early forties who has been with the ensemble for over 10 years, enacted a dialogue between himself and ‘his father’, Klaus Herzog. Herzog, acting the father of the family, gesticulated and shouted at Menéndez. Ciulli watched the scene from a distance, before he intervened. His statement exemplified the intense commitment he expects his actors to develop. ‘Reflection’, he remarked, ‘complements the corporeality of acting’, before he instructed as follows:

Klaus, you are acting as if you really believe what you said. But your conduct [*Verhalten*] should be calculated and detached. You cannot convey that through an unreflected rage. You must think. Just to play an aggressive alcoholic is shallow – it doesn’t pick up the subtle dimension of the mutual hatred and self-destructing demeanour [*Verhalten*] that is so important for our hypothesis about this play.

After a few more readings and dialogues that took another hour and a half, the ensemble called it a day at nearly midnight. I walked into the foyer with Ciulli and an actress, who underlined the difficulties of training to *act* detachment. Herzog recounted that the difficulty here lies in drawing on character traits from two different states of being (life and death) at once. ‘Indeed’, Ciulli interjected, iterating implicitly a clear distinction to the Stanislavskian positions I outlined in the introduction. He asked everyone to sit down briefly before we’d all disperse into the night:

The key to acting is being aware of your character. To form a *Haltung* is not to become routinised and mechanical, quite the opposite. You have to interrogate yourself the entire time: What does it mean to be in a liminal state? Never just be one, always remember that as actor you are actor, character, and observer.

Conclusion: ethics of character

In contrast to Stanislavski’s idea that actors ‘merge’ actor with character, rehearsals of the kind I recounted above train actors in a continual process of detached reflection on their characters. During these exchanges, actors would be routinely instructed to rehearse their *capacity* to reflect on characters. But this training also offers ways of crafting one’s own idea of character, by learning to conduct oneself otherwise, physically, intellectually and psychologically. In short, it is the cultivation of a *capacity* to take on characters which is the telos of rehearsals, and not the habituated enactment or unreflected embodiment of that character itself or their lines of text. This capacity of relating to characters is what my interlocutors refer to as the cultivation of *Haltung*. Cumulatively, this capacity for character is similar to but at the same time more than a skill set; it is a reflected disposition that varies from actor to actor, since each approach to a character is strongly dependent on the affordances of each person. At the same

time, the rehearsal of new roles occurs in parallel to the continued performance of a stock of characters that have entered the theatre's repertoire, and as such similar concerns for types of skill, such as gestures and speech, but also intellectual input and critical reflection, emerge across the acting ensemble.

The aim of these rehearsal processes, ensemble members frequently expressed and I managed to observe, was to draw on the fictional capacities implied in characters. To rehearse a proper acting conduct meant *not* imitating a role as perfectly as one could, or suggesting that actors were somehow morally identical with their roles, but that they were creative agents capable of playfully negotiating and reflecting, relating or distancing themselves from their characters' moral agency. In this way and considered from a greater analytical distance beyond the ethnographic material at hand, such forms of rehearsed reflexivity on acting exemplify the significance of fiction in ethical conduct and the 'extra-ordinariness' of rehearsing the capacity for relating to and detaching from characters.

By ethical conduct, then, I am referring to self- and other-constituting practices of heightened reflection on the values of specific actions, modes of being and *teloi*. This draws on anthropological perspectives on virtue and post-Foucauldian ethics (Faubion 2001; Laidlaw 2014), but the practices I describe concern how artists themselves query the emergence of ethical concerns, how they are institutionalised and articulated. Art has been one of the principal reference points for philosophical thinking about the constitution of the good in different cultural and social contexts with theatre and performance as persistent points of reference (Craciun 2017; Eaton 2001; Ruprecht 2017). This is by no means exclusive to the western philosophical and art historical tradition of aesthetics, but since the field of German public theatre was *constituted* by concerns over *Bildung*, or the German tradition of self-cultivation and introspection, these peculiar Enlightenment traditions must be part of the picture.

It would, however, contradict my earlier critique of generalising character-type analyses across a society or culture to posit the type of concern for *Haltung* as 'characteristic' of German theatre, or even society, as a whole. It would be equally problematic to construct, as MacIntyre (1981: 27) suggested, a kind of character type of German theatre director who fuses 'role and personality' and therefore embodies the moral ideologies of that culture. He did so by using questionably representative examples and anthropologically discredited character types, such as the Prussian Officer, the Professor and the Social Democrat to characterise Wilhelmine Germany, suggesting that 'what is specific to each culture is in large and central part what is specific to its stock of characters' (1981: 28). I wish to resist such kinds of generalisations. Rather, it is notable that long-term forms of cultivation in ensemble and repertoire theatres, such as the ones discussed in this article, derive from and position themselves in relation to a set of broader German traditions that value the arts, in particular theatre, as spaces and practices for the cultivation of ethically reflexive persons. Since German theatres are embedded within and respond to a reflexive and institutionalised field of theatre studies and scholarship, labour modalities and aesthetic trends get critiqued and reformed. As has been witnessed at comparable public theatre institutions, including Pina Bausch's dance theatre company in Wuppertal, which practically became archival upon her death, or Frank Castorf's contentious *Ostalgie* theatre *Volksbühne*, which was spectacularly closed and restructured by a municipal decision in 2017, such closely knit and long-running artistic projects frequently witness great difficulties with finding successors that productively manage to reform or continue their legacies. Yet, they

have a remarkable resonance within the field of artistic production in Germany, and their historical embeddedness in broader traditions of artistic self-cultivation merits comparative attention with developments in the consolidating anthropology of ethics. This can and should be done, I suggest, by retaining a close ethnographic focus on the precise practices, vocabularies and institutionalised forms of reflection on their significance for practical ethical reasoning, for such practices give rise to forms of reflexive theorisation that may inform our own as anthropologists.

I am therefore evidently less concerned with everyday forms of ethical behaviour (Lambek 2010), since the field I have been describing is constituted by particular social, institutional and ethical frames of professional practice. This is not to say that there are not everyday forms of ethical action in other, less institutionalised and less professional forms of art (Abu-Lughod 1985; Mahmood 2001) – quite to the contrary. Roger Sansi (2015) has offered ways into thinking about these dimensions and I welcome a consolidating conversation on the diverse iterations of ethical values, subjectivities and practices in artistic fields, and how they might inform current anthropological perspectives on ethics, both ordinary and otherwise. This discussion might also be fruitful for an approach towards the ordinary, since I concur with Faubion (2011: 85) that even habitual ethical behaviour through which we describe people's character is not necessarily unconscious or 'non-cognitive' (Camfield 2015), but reflected upon, even when routinised, albeit in different ways. It is for this reason that I wished to underscore 'extra-ordinary' forms of practice in which the conjuncture of ethical reflection is condensed. German theatre offers one particularly dense field of such practices and their reflexive theorisation.

Part of this discussion involves a reconsideration of the arguably neglected notion of detachment in our understandings of social relations (Candea *et al.* 2015; Lebner 2017; Strathern 1995). Detachment has come to be thought of as something to be avoided, associated with the objective positivist scientific gaze or the remote scholarly observer. My use of the notion of detachment in rehearsals of ensemble theatre is not a description of a permanent state of affairs, but of a process, or rather, a temporary phase in the broader, more complex constitution of relations. In the case of applied social theatre upon which I conducted collaborative artistic research, it describes a quasi-therapeutic process of self-reflection that led to the possibility for the creative re-appropriation of other traits of self in the context of theatre with refugees. Here, learning detachment functioned as a precondition for relating to others and to *other* aspects of the self. It should be noted, however, that these others are in this case of avant-garde or intimate applied theatre not necessarily audiences and visitors, but the ensemble itself. The rehearsed capacities I describe are therefore first and foremost internal goods cultivated for the development of a repertoire of acting virtuosity and tradition. We can and, I argue, *should* consider the ways in which 'character' is not a fixed or gradually more coherent entity, or sense of identification with the self, or with social norms, but a creative *field* for the detachment from and creative re-imagination of other ways of being.

When John Doris claims that 'people typically lack character' (2002: 2), pointing to the circumstantial and situational determination of personality, let me propose a positive inversion: rather than emphasising moments in which people appear to *lack* character, how about we think about the ways in which they *draw on* an excess of characters available to them. Theatre rehearsals are an 'extra-ordinary' setting in which such capacities and practices are cultivated in an exaggerated, perhaps distorted, way;

but this setting may extend out to a more general observation about ethical practices and the productive consequences of engaging with fiction in the formation and reflection on the capacity for character. Indeed, I argue that the awareness and capacity to draw on characters, to pick up character traits and generally to relate to a multiplicity of moral, physical and intellectual aspects of different characters, constitute central aspects of ethical formations in art, but also beyond it, namely: a sense of being conscious, responsible and free.

Borrowing from Webb Keane (2016), we might also describe such repertoires of fiction as the 'exoskeleton' of our personality, which adds to and complements, rather than fully exhausts, our compositions of selves and personhood. As in the rehearsals I described, this repertoire is what we draw upon in addition to 'our relations with others, the physical settings we inhabit, the material culture we surround ourselves with' (Laidlaw 2016: 457). Reckoning the cultivation of character through characters as a way to insert fiction into our lives then means allowing all of those implied human beings, and their traits, to become readily available for our own potential future self-making. Characters and the fiction they imply then become part of our *repertoire* of being.


It appears to me to be short-sighted in the first place to associate character too closely with authenticity and stability, with the singular, assuming that to be a morally sound person one requires a stable character replete with an authentic and unchanging moral bedrock that grounds it. While Aristotle still considered character as essentially a narrative source of one's life, situated between reality (what is) and possibility (what could be), moral philosophers have drawn on him to stabilise his account (see MacIntyre 1981: 213). There are reasons why virtue ethicists from Aristotle onwards have thought stability important, and why philosophers since Plato have found poetry as well as theatre in particular to be unreliable and even threatening to moral order or secondary to 'real' action. I am not suggesting that fiction, the arts or theatre offer better analyses of ethical formation and character, but I am arguing that it is plausible and enriching to consider imagination and multiplicity, incoherence and friction rather than only stability and authenticity, coherence and narrative, as informing the formation of character, both on and off the stage.

Indeed, what my research on the cultivation of relations to characters, or the cultivation of conducted conduct during rehearsals, has shown is that we may productively think about characters in the plural, rather than in the singular, as a possible other or further resource of our being and ethical becoming. What I propose therefore is that we can think of characters as dynamic repertoires of actions and traits that allow us to become otherwise; characters in this sense could then be described as *creative appropriations of other fictions*. In order to cultivate character, then, we need, perhaps counter-intuitively, to include the idea of detachment from stability, steadiness, singularity and to incorporate a sense of capacity for being other and multiple.

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Capacité à incarner le caractère et un personnage: la fiction, l'éthique et l'anthropologie du comportement

Le système Stanislavski est l'un des systèmes les plus populaires de répétition théâtrale, selon lequel l'acteur recherche une identification intense avec le personnage. Cet article s'appuie sur un travail de terrain avec un théâtre allemand contemporain professionnel pour proposer une approche alternative. Au lieu de tenter de se fusionner avec le personnage, l'acteur assimile son personnage à un « répertoire de fiction » dont il s'inspire librement afin de composer son propre personnage. Cette formation facilite ainsi la capacité à détacher et à s'appropriier les traits de différentes personnes, imaginaires et réelles. Il s'agit donc d'une attitude active et réfléchie qui tient compte de l'écart entre l'acteur et le personnage, plutôt qu'une appropriation passive et principalement incarnée de la part de l'acteur d'un personnage fictif et de ses traits. S'appuyant sur des discussions dans l'anthropologie de l'éthique sur la notion de comportement, cet article analyse de quelle manière la formation de la « capacité à incarner un personnage » peut façonner la compréhension anthropologique du détachement, de la réflexivité et de l'identité individuelle.

Mots-clés théâtre, éthique, répétition, anthropologie, personnage, caractère