

Mind, Memory and the Actor

Edited transcript of Michael Boyd and Oliver Sacks in conversation at Columbia's Miller Theater, New York, on 6 November 2008

Michael Boyd, Artistic Director, Royal Shakespeare Company, joins Oliver Sacks MD, Professor of Neurology and Psychiatry, Columbia University Medical Center and a Columbia University Artist, to discuss the neurology of acting.

The event is moderated by Lee C. Bollinger, President of Columbia University in the City of New York.

Lee Bollinger: We're talking about mind, memory and the actor. Let's begin with Michael. One of the things that Michael has done is twice taken the History Plays and produced them in totality. Seeing them in sequence is a stunning cultural, artistic, emotional, intellectual, experience. Having very limited exposure, an hour, two hours, to works of genius is nothing like having constant exposure over two or three days. It is just a fundamentally different human experience and something I think that we don't fully understand. But Michael says that he found out something about memory in the course of producing them, and that's where we're going to begin.

Michael Boyd: There's a poignancy for a theatre director in talking about memory in that our work disappears – it vanishes. I'm very jealous of film directors – they can go back and look at it again – but I'm also very proud when my work does live in people's memories. So memory's desperately important to me.

We worked with about 30 actors over nearly three years on the RSC's last complete cycle of the History Plays. All the actors were in at least seven of those plays, and they learnt a huge number of roles and thousands of lines.

Halfway through the project, we left the first four plays behind for nearly a year. And we had to revive them. The actors began to get anxious about whether they would remember them: not only their principal roles, but also the roles they understudied — thousands of lines, hundreds of states of emotions. An extraordinary feat of spatial memory was required, too: they had to remember where to go. Where am I? Backstage or front of house.

This process started with actors on their own going through their lines. They didn't remember them. We then moved on to working together in a room, sitting down doing a line-run. It wasn't very good. Then we decided to cut to the chase and just fling all four plays onto the stage — without costume, without décor, without all the effects. And the actors were very nearly word-perfect straight away. It was clear that the memory they were trying to retrieve was no more than a broken bit of memory, only complete when the actions of their bodies and the emotions were combined together with the recall of the

line. And then there was a further improvement when they were not only together on stage, but also together with an audience. Then they became absolutely pitch-perfect, and word perfect with an urgent need to communicate. I think that says something about where we keep our memory. Maybe our memory is in our body, as well in our cranium.

It goes side by side with something I just came across. I was invited to the Royal Academy to talk about space, on a panel that included a neurologist. I was galvanised by his account of some research he'd done on London taxi drivers that examined their hippocampi — the part of the brain that's associated with memory. Not only were their hippocampi unusually enlarged after taking The Knowledge, and further enlarged after a year or so of actually doing it, but it was again clear that these taxi drivers remembered places and destinations through the physical sense of turning left and turning right. They could not remember where a street was unless they 'physicalised' mentally the journey to that street. The study was also exploring the sense in which memory is located in the same part of the brain as that which arranges our sense of space. So he was very interested in our sense of space being an important part of the process of how we remember.

Oliver Sacks: These are very important observations, and they're not the sort neurologists and neuroscientists are usually privy to. We tend to see solitary individuals who may have memory problems of one sort or another. We don't so much see ensembles, or people in the context of a theatre or a concert.

Now, although my colleague dwelt on the hippocampus as a prerequisite for a particular sort of memory, the hippocampus certainly is not sufficient — many other parts of the brain would be involved. I see quite a lot of people whose hippocampi have been destroyed, by disease or by accident. And one speaks of these people as having amnesia, and if one is amnesic one may forget events within a few seconds. One may also lose events from one's own past. One may lose one's entire autobiography and a great deal of general knowledge, as well. But one does not lose the ability to act or to perform.

Very strikingly, I wrote about this phenomenon with a musician and musicologist, Clive Wearing, who had his hippocampus systems wiped out by an encephalitis 20 years ago. He can't remember anything much for more than seven seconds. But this man is able to conduct a choir, conduct an orchestra, play the piano or sing long, complex pieces of music. His abilities to perform musically are entirely spared. If you ask him in terms of knowledge, 'Do you know such-and-such a Bach prelude and fugue', he will look blank or say no. But put his hands on the piano, sing the first note, and he's off.

And this sort of preservation of procedural memory may apply not only to music. I know an eminent actor who has also had damage to his hippocampi and has lost the memory of much of his past. But all of his acting skills, all his enormous repertoire, from Euripides to Beckett, is all there. So the sort of memory that is involved in acting involves much more of the brain than the hippocampi.

Lee Bollinger: Do actors deliberately try not to remember in the ordinary ways, in order to do acting better?

Boyd: Yes. There is definitely a moment for every creative artist when there is loss of self. It's not even just creative artists. I think everyone can remember those moments when you are 'in the zone', when you're not aware of what you're doing, when you're not consciously trying to recall what you should be doing, you are simply in the act of doing it.

A very good definition of creativity is not to be feeding the audience what they already know, but bringing to them things they hadn't thought of before. And that requires a certain position relative to memory, in that you have to be forgetting what you definitely do know in order to move forward to a new knowledge.

Bollinger: So, Michael is about to do these eight plays, and he has the same group of people. Is there anything you would tell him, Oliver, that neuroscience would say: watch out for?

Sacks: What strikes me is the thousands and thousands of lines on the one hand, and roles on the other. These lines would have no coherence, would make no sense, would not hold together without a role, and especially a role in relation to other roles. The ability to enter a role can again outlast the hippocampi. It can outlast all sorts of mental abilities.

I see quite a lot of people with Alzheimer's disease or dementia. I had a cousin, an actress and especially a Shakespearean actress, who became quite demented, but one could give her a line from almost any speech or sonnet from Shakespeare and she would continue it, and not in a mechanical way, but apparently with all her own feeling. Or she would take on a role like King Lear or Hamlet. This business of a role, I think, is essential to the sort of memory you're describing.

Boyd: I think good performers tend to be very open, to the point where, on the one hand, they get dismissed as sentimental creatures — there's this horrible, contemptuous term 'lummy' used about the theatre. But I do think there's something missing in an actor's persona, or maybe mind, about censoring out certain emotions. They are "over-receptive", and that can be troubling for them in their lives. People who are tremendously good at closing out the troublesome tend not to be brilliant performers.

There's a valve in a brilliant actor that is "deficient". They're good at embodying emotion, but they're not very good at shutting it out. And I think that's why there is something inherently unstable about the condition of being an actor that's also very creative. Brilliant actors who survive to have a career manage that "deficiency" extremely well and lead perfectly normal lives. I don't want to discourage anyone from joining the profession . . .

Sacks: You're saying, are you, that many or most actors may react, even when they're not in role or on the stage, too extravagantly, too directly, too uninhibitedly?

Boyd: No — I think that's a caricature, but they have to carry around emotion. They have a subtle knife that gives them access to the lives of others and that leaves them subject to a sort of emotional Philip Pullman dust. Musicians I know say they can't get music out of their heads. And actors can't get emotions and stories out of their heads.

Sacks: Let's connect this with embodiment. I watched De Niro and Robin Williams when they were taking on characters from *Awakenings* [the film about his work]. Now, in particular with De Niro, sometimes when we had dinner after a day's filming I would observe that his foot was turned inwards, or that he had some postures which belonged to Leonard L., the character he'd been portraying and embodying, and these fragments were still in him. I actually got a little frightened of the literalness of embodiment with him. Somehow he seemed to be becoming too much like Leonard L, and I feared Leonard L might be taking over.

On one occasion he asked me to advise him a little bit on how people with parkinsonism might fall if they had no postural reflexes. And in the middle of my explanation, just as I said that such people might fall heavily backwards suddenly without warning, he fell heavily backwards — on me. And at that moment I thought: he's not acting, he's got it. He's actually become parkinsonian through acting it so well.

Boyd: Yet another way of addressing this is for an actor to be very powerfully suggestive. That's quite an important part of the process.

Sacks: Well, we all have that. We flinch when someone else receives a blow, and neurologists have started to talk about 'mirror neurones' in the brain which make spontaneous representations of what is happening with other people, so you then feel these yourself. And it's thought that the basis of sympathy — and, to some extent, imitation and incarnation — is partly due to these mirror-neurones.

I think there are different levels of representation. Now, for example, with Robin Williams [who played Sacks in the film], there were two clearly distinct stages. Before the filming, we went around together and he was charming, genial and brilliant. It didn't occur to me that he was, in fact, observing me minutely. About three weeks later, we'd got into a conversation in the street, and I'd got into what I'm told is one of my characteristic pensive postures. I saw Robin was in exactly the same posture, and I had an instant feeling he was mirroring me. I then realised he was not consciously doing so, but he had acquired and embodied my gestures, my postures, my so-called tricks of speech and my so-called idiosyncrasies. And it was very startling, like suddenly having a younger twin.

Audience Question: Could you talk a little bit about the effect of ‘mirror neurones’ and what kind of influence it might have in eliciting empathy when you are the viewer of a play, rather than acting in it?

Sacks: The audience has to be as creative as the actors. It’s useless having the greatest performances in the world unless there can be a very strong resonance in the personal for an audience, a resonance which may depend on mirror neurones but also obviously their entire experience and cast of minds as well. There comes into my mind the thought of some dead audiences and what can make an audience dead. Your mirror neurones have to be as active as the ones on stage.

Boyd: When we did a season of comedies, we did some work sitting around the rehearsal room in pairs, simply holding eye contact for what seemed a very long time. It was around 30 minutes, which, we were told by the neurologist looking after us for the morning, would make us fall in love with each other. And we sort of did. I was sitting opposite a really nice jolly well built actor called Christopher Roberts, and we got on really well after that.

Audience Q: Do you find method acting useful in your work?

Sacks: Method acting is acting from the inside out? Is it?

Boyd: Yes, it’s an attempt to.

Sacks: I had thought De Niro was a method actor, but I once asked him about acting and he gave me a three-word answer. He said: ‘I observe behaviours.’ And I said, ‘Yes, but what about the character, the Richard III-ness or whatever,’ and he simply repeated himself. He said he observed behaviours and felt if he got them sufficiently, that would embody the inwardness. That was, I guess, outside in.

Audience Q: You gave the example of when you sat around with your group of actors and tried to get them to remember their lines first, versus actually physically going through the motions. What’s the difference between the speech act versus a physical embodied act?

Boyd: Speech is the most physically intimate act possible. It comes from the wet bits inside you. The air I’m using is coming from way down inside, even though I’ve got bad posture, and just the pure boring business of retrieving these lines is hard to do when you are not engaged in the entire act. I would say they are best unseparated.

Sacks: I imagine it’s similar with music in a way — although you have to learn the notes first, you then have to forget the notes to play the music. Otherwise you remain a virtuoso, and not a musician.