

ACTING MINUS THE DRAMA

Read an article about actress Harriet Walter and answer the multiple-choice questions on the next page

Harriet Walter has written a fascinating book about her profession. Benedicte Page reports.

It is not often that an experienced actor with a high public profile will sit down to answer in depth the ordinary theatregoer's questions: how do you put together a character which isn't your own? What is it like to perform the same play night after night? Or simply, why do you do it? Harriet Walter was prompted to write "Other People's Shoes: Thoughts on Acting" by a sense that many people's interest in theater extended beyond the scope of entertainment chit-chat. "I was asked very intelligent, probing questions by people who weren't in the profession, from taxi drivers to dinner-party hosts to people in shopping queues. It made me realize that people have an interest in what we do which goes beyond show business gossip," she says.

"Other People's Shoes" avoids insider gossip and, mostly, autobiography. "If events in my life had had a huge direct influence, I would have put them in, but they didn't" Harriet says, though she does explain how her parents' divorce was a factor in her career. But the focus of the book is to share - remarkably openly - the inside experience of the stage and the rehearsal room, aiming to replace the false sense of mystery with a more realistic understanding and respect for the profession.

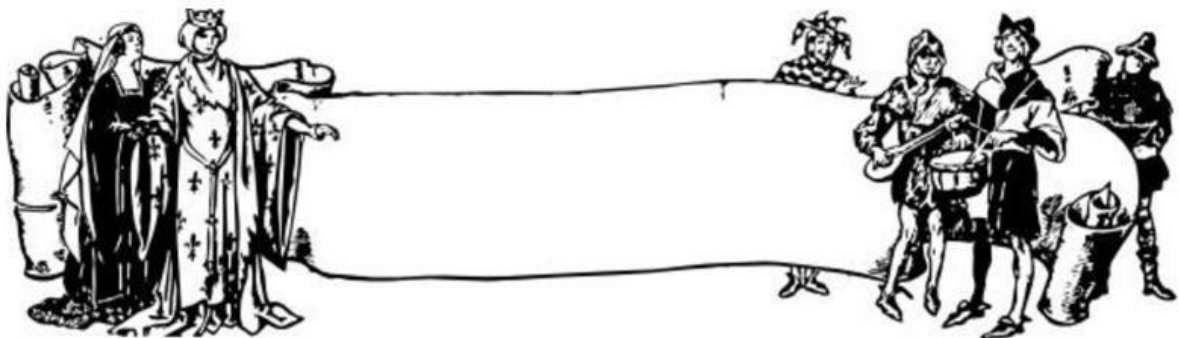
"There's a certain double edge to the publicity an actor can get in the newspapers: it gives you attention but, by giving it to you, simultaneously criticizes you," Harriet says. "People ask you to talk about yourself and then say 'Oh, actors are so self-centred.'" And the "Sound-bite" variety of journalism, which touches on many things but never allows you to go into them in depth, leaves you with a sort of shorthand which reinforces prejudices and myths."

Harriet's career began in the 1970s and has included theatre performances with the Royal Shakespeare Company and television and film roles. She writes wittily about the embarrassments of the rehearsals room, as actors try out their half-formed ideas. And she is at pains to demystify the theatre: the question "How do you do the same play every night?" is answered by a simple comparison with the familiar car journey you take every day, which presents a slightly different challenge each time. "I was trying to get everyone to understand it isn't this extraordinary mystery and you're not visited by some spiritual inspiration every night.

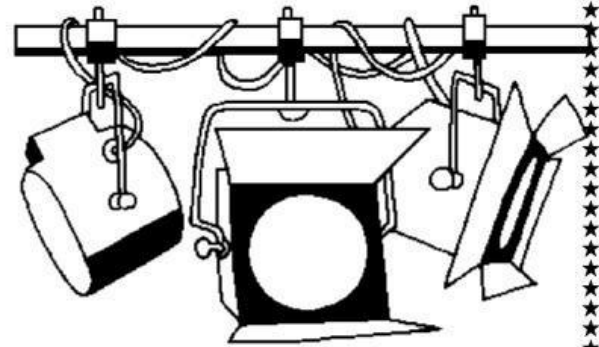
Harriet's own acting style is to build up a character piece by piece. She says that this process is not widely understood: "There's no intelligent vocabulary out there for discussing the craft of building characters. Reviews of an actor's performance which appear in the newspapers are generally based on whether the reviewer likes the actors or not. It's not about whether they are being skillful or not, or how intelligent their choices are."

There remains something mysterious about slipping into "other people's shoes"; "It's something like falling in love," Harriet says. "When you're in love with someone, you go in and out of separateness and togetherness. It's similar with acting and you can slip in and out of a character. Once a character has been built, it remains with you, at then of a phone line, as it were, waiting for your call."

Harriet includes her early work in "Other People's Shoes" - "I wanted to separate myself from those who say, 'What an idiot I was, what a load of nonsense we all talked in those days!'" It wasn't all rubbish, and it has affected how I approach my work and my audiences" And she retains from those days her belief in the vital role of the theater.



- 1 Harriet Walter decided to write her book because she
- A was tired of answering people's questions about acting.
 - B knew people liked to read about show business gossip.
 - C wanted to entertain people through her writing.
 - D wanted to satisfy people's curiosity about acting in the theatre.



- 2 In paragraph two, we learn that Harriet's book aims to
- A correct some of the impressions people have of the theatre.
 - B relate important details about her own life story.
 - C analyse the difficulties of a career in the theater.
 - D tell the truth about some of the actors she has worked with.

- 3 What problem do actors have with newspaper publicity?
- A It never focuses on the actors who deserve it.
 - B It often does more harm than good.
 - C It never reports what actors have actually said.
 - D It often makes mistakes when reporting facts.



- 4 Harriet uses the example of the car journey to show that
- A acting can be boring as well as rewarding.
 - B actors do not find it easy to try new ideas.
 - C actors do not deserve the praise they receive.
 - D acting shares characteristics with other repetitive activities.

- 5 What does "it" refer to (paragraph 4 highlighted in bold)
- A facing a different challenge
 - B taking a familiar car journey
 - C acting in the same play every night
 - D working with fellow actors



- 6 Harriet criticises theatre reviewers because they
- A do not give enough recognition to the art of character acting.
 - B do not realise that some parts are more difficult to act than others.
 - C choose the wrong kinds of plays to review
 - D suggest that certain actors have an easy job.

- 7 Harriet says that after actors have played a particular character, they
- A may be asked to play other similar characters
 - B may become a bit like the character
 - C will never want to play the part again.
 - D will never forget how to play the part



- 8 What does Harriet say about her early work?
- A It has been a valuable influence on the work she has done since
 - B it was completely different from the kind of work she does now
 - C She finds it embarrassing to recall that period of her life
 - D She is annoyed when people criticise the work she did then.

