



Public performance:
and defending quality in a dysfunctional society

Some thoughts by [Georgina Kirk](#) April 2012

Driving to a meeting of the **Manchester Salon** the other week, I heard Joan Collins on the radio talking about how, when she was establishing herself in show business, actors were dedicated to their craft, whereas now it's all "I wanna be famous!". Putting aside the mild irony of it coming from a woman better known for her appearance and attitude than her acting ability, this assertion got me thinking.

Lancashire-born actor Sir Ian McKellen seemed to agree with Ms Collins in an interview in [The Observer](#) recently, where he was said to be concerned that "Acting standards are falling and Britain's reputation for brilliant stagecraft is at grave risk" and that "Some newcomers to theatre today are now motivated by the promise of fame and high salaries rather than by a love of the

profession".

While I have the greatest respect for Sir Ian's acting and knowledge of stagecraft, I side with The Guardian's theatre critic [Michael Billington](#) when he maintains we have some first-class young British actors, and I'd add comedians, singers, magicians, and a variety of public performers to the list. I'm regularly impressed by performances I see on both screen and stage and I don't believe that, across the board, performers are either less gifted or work less hard than those of fifty or a hundred years ago. In fact, many of them have to work much harder: performing in London's West End these days is not as remunerative as one might expect, and usually actors have to take second jobs to cover the bills. The reason they keep acting is love of the profession.

The newcomers Sir Ian is talking about, and I agree there are quite a few, for whom acting is no more than a vehicle to fame and fortune, are representative not of declining standards of public performance but of social dysfunction. It seems to me that two parallel trends are facilitating this country's descent into vacuity: the rise of what Joan Collins calls the [sub-lebrity](#) and the stranglehold of anti-elitism.

Attention-seeking

On the supply side, as it were, we have millions of people whose unmet need for attention drives them to seek it from a public audience. Although this has always been the case, these restless souls are being increasingly funnelled into the performing arts. One reason for this, I believe, is that until a few decades ago, many occupations afforded a comfortable degree of respect and appreciation, whereas nowadays very few jobs carry with them automatic recognition. As argued by Professor John Haldane in [The Scotsman](#) "Bankers, clergy, journalists, lawyers, politicians and teachers have all declined in public esteem – and other professional groups can hardly presume a higher reputation."



The System, technology and modern culture combine to entrench the problem

The need some people feel to seek affirmation from the wider public, to fill a void left, typically, by neglectful or absent parents, is by no means a new phenomenon. What's new is the culture that entices these unfortunate individuals into believing that becoming an overnight celebrity is the cure for their existentialist anguish – and the system that supports that culture.

The System, of course, revolves around money. Michael Billington (quoted above) sees danger in the reduction of state funding for the arts:

“Although I accept the acting profession is changing in accord with the ‘I want it now’ temper of the times, I still think McKellen is plain wrong in saying that acting standards are slipping. The talent is palpably there. The big question, as we await the fall of the insane spending cuts, is whether that will still be true in 10 years' time, when the blooming subsidised sector may only be a shadow of its present self.”

I'm inclined to agree with Simon Heffer of [The Telegraph](#), that it's better if sponsorship is elicited from the private sector instead but the point is, wherever financial assistance is coming from, it's necessary if 'culture' is going to be accessible to everyone and not just those who can afford to spend tens of pounds on tickets.

It's hard to make a life, let alone a living, as a public performer. Low wages, no security, often having to travel and stay away from home... it's not for dilettantes. People do it, as I've said, for love of the profession, but also in the hope that, sooner or later, they'll get a break. Sadly, however, the system is biased against the success of any given newcomer and many dreams are dashed on the rocks of economic reality. Production companies making quality television programmes and films are loath to take risks, preferring to stick with tried-and-tested faces than to take a chance on someone new. Casting directors for stage shows tend to be equally conservative, as do bookers of other types of act (such as circus skills, magic and music).



With the third millennium and the digital era came reality TV. Big Brother, The X Factor, The Apprentice – suddenly, here was a way people with no experience of show business (and often minimal talent) could get themselves into the public eye. These programmes are cheap to make – a consideration of escalating importance as the number of channels expanded and the economy contracted – and from the beginning they have been inundated with hopefuls offering

themselves up as the next big star. Good news for some, perhaps, but as Joan Collins observes “The most depressing consequence of our obsession with ‘sub-lebrities’ is that the real stars – the actors who are attempting to craft a career from talent and long years of training – are being left on the breadline as the airwaves are clogged with reality shows.” A degree of hyperbole from Joan here but in essence she’s right - the System favours wannabes, because they are inexpensive and malleable.

Hand in hand with the boom in reality TV, technology has advanced, increasing exponentially not only the speed of communication around the world but also the number of possibilities and platforms for self-promotion. In today’s global village, we are accustomed to instant reactions, results and gratification.

These are the influences that have led the newcomers Sir Ian McKellen was talking about to hope getting up on stage is going to be a shortcut to fame and wealth. Years of training at drama school and serving an apprenticeship in repertory theatre perhaps seems too long a slog to be contemplated by the Facebook and Twitter generation, particularly when all this can be bypassed relatively easily by simply getting oneself noticed by the media.

Some of the new **star-making** programmes have unearthed some formidable talent. Connie Fisher, winner of How Do You Solve a Problem like Maria?, was a marvellous find (currently appearing in *Wonderful Town* at The Lowry). After making her mark in I’d Do Anything, Samantha Barks has proved her worth as Nancy in *Oliver!*

(click to read a review of

[*Oliver!*](#)

at The Palace Theatre, Manchester in which she shone) and as Eponine in *Les Misérables* in the West End.

But then there are Jedward, Katie Price and many others whose names I don't know, who seem to have found a place in the nation's heart despite having remarkably little to recommend them. What, as they say, is that all about?

Anti-elitism: dumbing down and bigging up

In my view, anti-elitism has a great deal to do with it. I am referring to the attitude that it's preferable to be 'socially inclusive' than to be excellent. In the article in The Scotsman quoted above, actually an obituary of my great-uncle, Professor Sir Michael Dummett, Professor Haldane makes the point that those who pursue and value knowledge and achievement are a dying breed:

"I said that Dummett was outstanding but also that he was an example of a type that was once familiar but has become rare, and may even be disappearing. This "type", believe in knowledge and learning, in reading, writing and understanding; in excellence in art, in scholarship, and in science; in the importance of breadth and depth of achievement across more than one field of endeavour; in the value of experience under testing conditions; in holding oneself and others to high standards; in aiming for decency, integrity and justice in public life, and making a direct contribution to achieving these."



Symbiosis

On the face of it, the situation suits both parties. Attention-seekers have increasing opportunities to parade themselves in public and the audience clamours for more. If the performers are dire, we can feel superior; if the performers are good, we can adopt them as role models and/or criticise snidely and will them to fail. The more we know about them, the more exposure they have, the easier it is to find fault with them.

As Shakespeare said, the appetite grows by what it feeds on. I've already made the point that those starved of recognition will often go to great lengths to gain attention, even of the most negative sort, and I think the food analogy can be extended to the audience too. Once we've engaged with the characters in a particular drama, we want to know what happens to them: if we're fed a constant diet of pap, it becomes addictive. In truth, most people feel more satisfied after a balanced meal made of healthy ingredients, and after consuming an excellent, stimulating, thought-provoking performance. But when the first thing that catches the eye is a large slab of chocolate, it can be hard to resist the short-term sugar rush.

For self-serving (financial) reasons, the System exploits and perpetuates the dysfunctional

symbiosis between the unfulfilled public and the wannabe celebrity. Those hungry for affirmation continue to be catapulted, unprepared, into the limelight, frequently lured by the promise of a job or some help with their problems, as well as the prized attention of a fickle audience. Of course, these people are responsible for their own decisions and nobody forces them to apply. I'm just saying I think the makers of some of these programmes should be more honest about the fact that what they are doing is not about giving anything to the participants, it's about providing entertainment and chasing ratings.

What can we do to help?

Over the long term, I believe we can all make a difference by being more generous with the attention we pay to other people. Every time we omit to give praise where it's due, every time we bestow an insincere compliment, every time we fail to listen to someone who is trying to be heard, we risk contributing to society's dysfunction. It may sound trite to say so but if we could all be better friends and neighbours to each other, those crying out for attention would not have to resort to putting themselves forward for ***Britain's Got Talent*** or, worse still, the Jeremy Kyle show. Performing in public will always be the domain of the extrovert, the one who enjoys being the centre of attention, but the primary motivation needs to be to act, sing, dance, juggle, whatever the performer's forte is, rather than simply to get some attention. This will protect both the performer and the quality of the performance.

More immediate measures we can take are to support good-quality acts and productions by attending them and publicising them. Conversely, it is our duty to speak out if a performance is not of an acceptable standard. If we vote with our feet, our ratings and our purchases of printed media, we can change the supply by changing demand. Obviously, this is not a new idea but it can be useful sometimes to be reminded of the power we have as consumers.

We are lucky in Manchester to have a number of venues in the city and the surrounding area that consistently provide well conceived, first-rate entertainment, often showcasing acts or

productions that are a bit different from the mainstream. Apart from the obvious places such as The Royal Exchange, The Lowry and The Cornerhouse, I'd also like to mention The Bolton Octagon, The Oldham Coliseum and The Blue Cat Café in Heaton Moor – the latter being an intimate space for bands and stand-up comedians to perform. Undoubtedly, Britain's got a vast amount of talent: let's get out there and support it.

And finally, we have to challenge anti-elitism, and I like to think this is something the Manchester Salon does excellently.

Editor's note: This is clearly a problematic area of understanding the historical, political, and social trends within society and how excellence in the arts is conceptualised. Trying to drop down to individual motivations from the wider context is perhaps the most difficult element of the mix. To this end, the Salon is currently trying to programme a discussion around this and look at how the various pressures are indeed affecting the scripting, performing and production processes - click on this [new Renaissance in the Arts](#) link to find out more.