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DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02614340.2021.1950433>

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Citation for published version (APA):

McDonald, P. (2021). Doing, Having and Getting Work: Acting as Creative Labour. *The Italianist*, 41(2), 267-270.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02614340.2021.1950433>

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To cite this article: Paul McDonald (2021) Doing, Having, and Getting Work: Acting as Creative Labour, *The Italianist*, 41:2, 267-270, DOI: [10.1080/02614340.2021.1950433](https://doi.org/10.1080/02614340.2021.1950433)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614340.2021.1950433>



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Published online: 30 Dec 2021.



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Doing, Having, and Getting Work: Acting as Creative Labour

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ABSTRACT

In what ways does acting represent a form of work? From one perspective, the work of acting is taken to mean exercising artistic and creative craft: the techniques, actions, and procedures involved with portraying a character. Yet acting also means employment, the state of being 'in work' for pay. Once we begin to think about acting as a job, however, we must acknowledge how endemic job insecurity routinely sees actors regularly experiencing unemployment, and so working to get work. A holistic account of acting-as-work must therefore appreciate the distinctive characteristics of *doing* acting work while also recognizing how cultural industries shape conditions for *having* that work, creating consequent demands on *getting* work. By presenting this tripartite model, this article proposes a few pointers towards thinking about acting as creative labour.

KEYWORDS

Italian actors; Italian performers; actors' work; job market; cultural industries

There are at least two ways in which acting gets to be spoken of as work. On one hand, acting work is taken to mean artistic and creative craft: the techniques, actions, and procedures involved with portraying a character. On the other, acting means employment, the state of being 'in work' for pay. Once we begin to think about acting as a job, however, a third account of work comes into view. Endemic job insecurity routinely sees actors regularly experiencing unemployment, and while they might describe this as periods of being 'out of work', by actively undertaking tasks to get the next acting job, actors commit themselves to the work of obtaining work. The following therefore briefly outlines how a holistic account of acting-as-work must appreciate the distinctive characteristics of *doing* acting work while also recognising how cultural industries shape conditions for *having* that work, creating consequent demands on *getting* work. By presenting this tripartite model, the article proposes a few pointers towards thinking about acting as creative labour.

Doing Work: Embodied Creativity

As cultural industries combine a multitude of managerial, administrative, service, and creative roles, it is reasonable to ask: What type of cultural work is acting? In the

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broadest of terms, if actors count amongst '*symbol creators* ... those who make up, interpret or rework stories, songs, images and so', then acting represents an instance of 'symbolic creativity'.¹ Yet as novelists, guitarists, or game designers and many other roles can be similarly classified, we should ask, what is distinctive about the symbolic creativity of acting work?

When acting, actors employ two key resources: their voices and bodies. Acting is therefore embodied-symbolic work. While embodying their 'means of production' likens actors to other categories of performer (e.g. dancers, singers, stand-up comedians), the function of their symbolic creativity distinguishes them. Specifically, actors use their voices and bodies to represent character. Any account of acting as work must therefore be grounded in attention to how the voice and body are cultivated, trained, shaped, disciplined, and deployed. Acting, fundamentally, is embodied-symbolic work.

This corporeal materiality shapes the production of professionally specialised systems of belief about what the work of doing acting involves. These are most overtly expressed in the discourses of actor training. Instructional 'how to' manuals, short acting workshops, and the longer multi-year curricula of acting schools focus predominantly on crafting the voice and body as tools of creative expression. Emphasis is placed on voice production, speech, movement, relaxation, accompanied by understanding methods for script analysis.

While necessarily cultivating self-conscious awareness of vocal and bodily expressivity, at the same time the craft discourse of actor training sets perceptual limits on the understanding of acting as work. By privileging understanding of acting labour as skills development, training discourse frames acting-as-craft, with the actor presented as a performing artist. Absent from this is an account of acting-as-employment, the conditions of getting and having work. Training discourse may not wholly ignore such matters: for example, as part of their final year curricula, some acting schools will now offer student actors advice on preparing for the job market, with guidance on audition technique, managing self-employment including tax status, and handling personal or small business finances. Still, the emphasis placed on craft obscures what it is to be or become an actor.

Having Work: Non-Linear Careers and Plural Performativity

While recognising the distinctiveness of acting, it is equally important to see actors as moving within a working environment shaped by conditions characterising cultural work more generally. In theatre, film, radio, or television, widespread organisation of production on the basis of distinct 'projects' sees human and technical resources temporarily gathered and coordinated to make a specific outcome (the show, recording, film, programme, etc.). Consequently, for actors and other freelance 'creatives', short-term contracting makes employment precarious, with bouts of unemployment inevitable. Successively and/or simultaneously holding multiple jobs to form portfolio careers is therefore standard for actors. Despite perceptions that training forms the bedrock for a career, acting requires no formally regulated and certificated routes to employment. Instead, getting acting work can depend on accumulating reputational capital amongst one's professional peers, and the social capital of building networks of professional contacts.

Biographies of well-known actors may familiarly tell stories of individuals rising to fame from obscurity, but these are unrepresentative of the working lives experienced by most actors. Navigating conditions of temporary, uncertain, and intermittent employment, generally, acting careers have no defined trajectory. Instead, they weave paths that traverse two axes. First, few actors work in a single medium alone, and so most form careers across multiple cultural industries, potentially working in theatre, radio, television, film, digital games, and/or audiobooks. Although someone might be spoken of as a ‘theatre actor’ or ‘film actor’, these perceptions probably arise from associating an actor with the context s/he predominantly, but not exclusively, works in. A second axis is then formed from the multiple types of work actors may have in any one industry. Take television, for example. Actors are utilised in multiple forms or genres – drama, comedy, documentary, animation, commercials. Then, in drama alone, hierarchical distinctions emerge between background ‘extras’, day players with limited lines in just one or two scenes, recurring roles appearing in multiple episodes, or series regulars who are part of the main cast.² If the first axis forms horizontally as actors work between industries, the second occupies the vertical, representing the multiple grades of acting work found within any one industry.

Structurally, these axes represent a range of opportunities that might be taken by an actor, but without defined or formalised pathways of progression, it is always uncertain how any actor will actually traverse these. Instead, acting careers are characterised by *complex non-linearity*. As the work of acting is grounded in embodied symbolic creativity, whatever career route emerges will be the product of navigating these axes through the uses of the voice and body. Deploying and adapting these resources to work in multiple industries and across various types of assignments, actors engage in a multiplicity of jobs, so that the singular label ‘acting’ insufficiently describes how this category of cultural work is characterised by *plural performativity*.

Getting Work: Working to Work

Routine periods of unemployment should not be taken as meaning actors become vocationally idle. For actors, as with all freelancers, there is the labour of *job-seeking*. A great deal of time and effort may be spent chasing the next acting assignment, by writing emails, preparing for and attending auditions, actively networking with professional peers to keep ‘in the know’ about possible opportunities, and conducting ‘research’ by consuming live and recorded performances. Although unremunerated, and in fact entailing some expenditure, this work becomes part of the actor’s professional identity, demonstrating continued commitment to earning a living as a performer.

While still chasing the next acting gig, economic necessity may lead actors to take temporary jobs in fields outside acting. These *survival jobs* can be many and various, although the options are limited, requiring as they do the convenience to take time out during working hours to attend auditions, or retaining the freedom to walk away without serving a formal period of notice if the right acting opportunity comes along. Flexibility is therefore essential, although this often means jobs restricted to casualised insecurity. Consequently, actors may commonly take work for temping agencies, or in cafés, bars, and restaurants. Ostensibly non-acting work, these labours become integral

to acting careers if economic necessity demands they are needed to get by between acting assignments. Distinctions between acting and non-acting work therefore become blurred if the former comes to depend on being subsidised by the latter.

Furthermore, the difference is hazy whenever non-acting jobs include an element of performativity. Reflecting on anecdotal knowledge of jobs taken by actors when between assignments, role-playing in corporate training workshops and seasonal work as Santa Claus for a department store grotto do not require characterisation in strictly dramatic terms, yet still involve the representation of figures. Furthermore, public-facing presentational skills are called on to work as a tour guide, or in a call centre for market research surveys. In all these cases, an actor is not acting, and yet draws on embodied performative skills.

Seeing acting as creative labour necessitates recognising the distinctive demands of doing embodied-symbolic work but also how the voice and body come to be used to execute plural forms of work, some but not all of which might be defined as acting. If the work of actors exceeds acting work, it becomes necessary to contemplate a broad sphere of labour, with performance work positioned within a larger context of performing work.

Notes

1. David Hesmondhalgh, *Cultural Industries*, 4th edn (London: Sage, 2019), p. 9, original emphasis.
2. I base these terms on a typology suggested by Meghan Dubitsky, 'The Different Types of TV Acting Roles', *Central Casting*, 30 April 2020 <<https://www.centralcasting.com/different-tv-types-of-acting-roles/>> [accessed 15 June 2020].