

BackStage

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In the premiere episode of *The Sopranos*, the audience meets Tony as he sits fidgeting in a psychiatrist's office. The long gaps of silence between the few words of dialogue -- richly filled by actors James Gandolfini and Lorraine Bracco -- hint at the depth of their characters. Every time the mob boss shifts his elephantine frame in the overstuffed chair, one can almost hear thunder rumble in the distance. For perhaps the first time in episodic television, a brute of a protagonist is introduced with subtlety and grace.

Actors working on scripted shows for new media, however, might not get the chance to unspool a character in such a way. Computers and cell phones, created for and by a hurry-up world, don't truck with stillness and nuance. Though it's far too early to gauge what influence, if any, the latest technology will have on acting, chances are it will leave some imprint -- just as every other previous media development has.

"Acting expressions will have to be more overt," says Michael Salort, executive producer and head writer of *In Men We Trust*, a series created for the Web. "You have to understand the medium. Otherwise you get lost.... How does someone translate? They understand their medium, they understand their audience."

The Web and cell phones won't supplant film and television, of course, but they will augment them. And talk is growing louder that the Internet will become the place networks test pilots. If so, actors are going to have to make sure their work holds viewers' attention if they want their show to graduate to television.

Others, however, contend that technological changes don't make much difference: Good acting will always come through, no matter the medium. "Truth is still truth, reality is still reality, an actor coming alive is still an actor coming alive," says longtime acting teacher William Esper, a protégé of Sanford Meisner who has instructed Kathy Bates, Sam Rockwell, and Aaron Eckhart, among many others. "A camera has a way of seeing inside an actor in the most intimate way. But if there's nothing going on inside that person, it's a waste of time." After a pause, he adds, "God, I can't imagine acting on a cell phone. That really brings it down, doesn't it?"

This wouldn't be the first time new technology has changed the way actors act. Enclosed spaces, makeup, and lighting are some of the things that have altered the craft over the centuries, but cinema probably brought the most profound shifts

to date -- though its full effect wasn't realized until the sound era.

"Movies didn't take the place of live theatre," says Robert Thompson, director of the Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University. "It allowed acting to go in places and in ways theatre could never have taken it."

With cameras and microphones, conversations could echo the intimacy of real life. A close-up could eliminate the need for words. And it was film that enabled the acting principles championed by Stanislavsky, Strasberg, Adler, and Meisner -- techniques grounded in a character's behavior and interior life -- to be fully realized during performance.

However, the benefits that camera and film brought to acting did not readily translate to television, because the attention of viewers wasn't held captive as it was in a darkened playhouse or movie theatre. "When TV comes along," Thompson says, "it takes performance out of the theatre and puts it right smack into our domestic space.... Now the doorbell's ringing, the baby's crying, the pot roast is burning, and there's homework waiting to be done."

With so many distractions, expository dialogue became essential to keep reinforcing the plot. Shows about cops and doctors proliferated, because they are people who routinely traffic in information. But Jack Webb as Joe Friday asking for the facts wasn't exactly Olivier as Hamlet probing for the truth. "It didn't allow for great acting in the ways we like to think of it," says Thompson.

But in 1981, he contends, one cop show changed acting on television for the better: Hill Street Blues. Its writers incorporated the serial nature of soap operas but replaced the melodrama with realism. As a result, the emphasis shifted from plot to character, and TV slowly began to fulfill the promise first made by movies. Shows as different as The Sopranos, The West Wing, Six Feet Under, and Deadwood all owe a debt to Steven Bochco's breakthrough drama, says Thompson.

Salort, of In Men We Trust, says his show's DNA was cloned from Sex and the City: It's targeted at women in the 18-to-35-year-old demographic, it will have product placement, and it will feature characters who navigate the vicissitudes of the New York dating scene. "The women face the same challenges as the women on Sex and the City," he says. "But they're less self-absorbed, which is something that always annoyed me about the show."

In Men We Trust is significantly different in another way: The episodes are seven minutes long. Seven have been shot so far, and the show's producers are negotiating for online distribution with a television network that has a significant Web presence. (Salort wouldn't say which network that is.)

Though he hopes the program will generate enough online interest to transfer to television, Salort says directly copying the TV model and putting it on the Web won't work, at least not yet. According to the Online Publishers Association, he says, research shows that people who watch content on the Web don't want it in long form. There are exceptions, of course, but "the people who watch *Lost* are going to watch it any way they can get it."

With brevity the norm, story lines are compressed and characters have to be types that the audience can readily recognize. "It's relatively easy to understand the characters on their dates," Salort says of his show. "They're classic characters: the overaggressive woman, the woman who's professionally skilled but in her private life is a bit of a klutz, and the woman who's kind of detached, who doesn't know what's wrong."

Casting the show, he says, was no different from TV or movies: The producers wanted the best actors they could get. In performance, however, there needed to be significant changes from television. "These are players on a PC," Salort says. "The acting has to be much more overt. Nuance has to be redefined. There is very little nuance on a tiny screen."

The differences are tough to articulate for a nonactor, but Salort says expressions have to be exaggerated. "If Brando started as a Web actor, he'd get lost," he says. "People are multitasking while they're watching your piece of content. You have to grab them and hold them, and that's at the expense of nuance."

But Ian Kahn, who plays the protagonist's ex-boyfriend on *In Men We Trust* and was one of Carrie's beaus on *Sex and the City*, disagrees. He says he sensed almost no difference in how he approached his role for the Web show, with one exception: pace.

In a seven-minute show, "I was aware I had to keep it moving," Kahn says. "If it were a movie or a television show, I'd be a little more relaxed."

It could be frustrating for actors trying to find their characters while a stopwatch is ticking inside their heads and directors are impatiently tapping their feet. But speed is definitely a performance issue with the new technology, and not just for actors. Standup comics will also feel the effect, according to Shawn Ullman, vice president of business development for the Laugh Factory in Los Angeles, who is producing comedic bits to be downloaded to cell phones.

"Their standup routine is going to have to be a lot faster," he says. "They're not going to have that seven-to-15-minute grace period where they can build a

connection with the audience. It's going to have to be a wham-bam kind of thing. Jokes are going to have to come across a lot faster. Material is going to have to change."

Just as Kahn disagreed with Salort, however, comic Adam Hunter parts with Ullman on how much his performance will change. "Nothing really changed," he says about filming a cell phone routine last year. "I write for whatever is funny and then mostly go from there." Maybe the technology is all too new to be measuring changes at this point. Or maybe the shifting dynamics that exist are evident only to those observing, not performing.

Ultimately, Thompson says, changes in technology or within a particular medium don't matter, no matter how they proliferate or manifest themselves. "If I were advising a new actor, I would tell them to do exactly what their grandparents would have done," he says. "Be a really good actor, and the world is your oyster.... Because at the end of the day, people are always going to want to sit down, noninteractively, and let someone else entertain them. The people who are good at it are very valued in any culture."