

Research findings on class and the working actor

Details:

The Creative Arts sector is worth an estimated £100Bn, or more than 5% of the UK economy.

Labour Force Survey data suggest that in film and television the general workforce has around half of the proportion of working-class people in it than in the workforce as a whole

The Warwick Commission's recent report found that children born into low-income families were the least likely to find successful employment in the cultural and creative industries.

Although class is rarely cited in diversity debates, it provides a compelling lens through which to view the creative industries.

Context: class and the working actor

The working class is under-represented in the creative industries, a gap that is researched through authentic voices of working-class actors on screen.

Key findings are:

- The actors interviewed struggled to raise the funds to enter acting school.
- Those sustaining an early career face further challenges:
 - Non-acting jobs pay poorly but are needed 'between roles'
 - There is competition between day jobs and acting roles to attend auditions
 - On-going training and registration for Spotlight (essential for job-seeking) is expensive.
 - The acting profession is London-centric, disadvantaging those on low-incomes outside London and the South-East
- This research raises three key questions:
 1. Social justice issues regarding the biasing of opportunities towards the privately educated who dominate at the top end of the profession;
 2. Economic issues for the industry, a homogenised talent pool stifles innovation in the market and reduces the relevance of the performing arts to a diverse audience
 3. Cultural issues regarding the representation of ourselves as a society to ourselves and others abroad.

Audience

Connection with Equity: The film premiered in September 2017 at the TUC's Congress House where more than 100 people attended and participated in the Q&A afterwards. Its last major public screening was at the Crystal Palace International Film Festival in March 2019.

In all it has been screened publicly on more than 40 occasions in independent cinemas, theatres and other venues. The film has had a significant impact for the actors' union Equity, its members and its policy making. The film screened at numerous Equity branches and the directors spoke at the union's May 2018 annual conference on the issue of class stratification in the industry. The film has played a key role within Equity in helping push the question of class up the union's agenda and in the 2019 establishment of a new 'Class network' within the union which will campaign on the issue.

Methods

Professor Wayne's research method is to create a documentary that follows the experiences of young working-class actors attempting to get into acting. In their own words, they describe the complex barriers they face, including the lack of cultural capital, influential social networks and economic support.

Lack of financial support is shown to be a major factor that divides the journey of those interviewed from many middle-class British actors who sweep the board at award ceremonies.

Established working-class actors, including Christopher Eccleston, Julie Hesmondhalgh and Maxine Peake reflect on the class discrimination they faced early on in their careers. Assumptions around accents and roles by casting directors and others are prevalent and go deep.

"One thing that was really powerful to me as a child was that whenever I heard a voice of authority, whenever I heard a voice that was 'intellectual', whenever I heard a voice that was 'cultural', it was white, it was male and it was middle class."

-Christopher Eccleston

These older established actors point to the grants they had access to that were crucial in helping them establish a foothold in the industry. Many such support systems have now been cut.

"We need to tell stories to progress and move forward, to understand each other" says Maxine Peake, but warns that the industry is exclusive. 'The media world is a boy's own club. We need a working-class club so we can hire each other, then there will be a good mix and the stories that need to be told will be.'

Policy Audience

This research is of interest to those involved in the creative industries. Since these are more dependent than other sectors on funding by government agencies and discretionary organisations, the sphere of influence is wide:

- Arts Council England
- Equity

- Creative Industries Federation
- TUC
- Drama Schools
- MPs

Research

By producing a documentary, *The Acting Class*, Professor Wayne and his co-director has elicited the views of contemporary working-class actors in their own words.

Documentary: [The Acting Class can be watched for free here.](#)

'*The Acting Class and the Myths of Meritocracy*' by Deirdre O'Neill and Mike Wayne was published in the *Journal of British Cinema and Television* Vol.19 (1) 2022.

The Acting Class features a young working -class actor from Bolton called Tom Stocks who has set up Actor Awareness. This is exactly the kind of 'club' Maxine Peake advises, providing a network of fellow struggling actors, social capital and opportunities to write, direct and act. The film uses Tom's story as an example of grassroots self-help and a narrative strand that we dip in and out of through-out the film.



Tom Stocks visits Eton in the film, whose acting alumni include Damian Lewis, Tom Hiddleston and Eddie Redmayne.

Research Leader



[Prof Michael Wayne](#)

Professor Wayne has published many books and journal articles on film, television and the media, but he especially values practice-based research. 'It is a great way to engage with people outside academia and convey important and complex issues in an easily accessible form to a wide range of people, because everyone is familiar with the medium of film, but many fewer people will wade through an academic thesis' he says. *The Acting Class* is his third feature length documentary, following *The Condition of the Working Class* (2013) both co-directed with Dr Deirdre O'Neill.

Prof Wayne sits on the TUC's London East-South-East Creative and Leisure Industries Committee and is a co-author of its recent discussion document 'Making Culture Ours' which argues for a sea-change in how we value, invest and access arts and culture.

The Acting Class was co-directed with Dr Deirdre O'Neill (Hertfordshire University). *The Acting Class* began life as a Twitter conversation between Dr O'Neill and Tom Stocks about class inequality in general and in the acting industry. From there Dr O'Neill and Prof Wayne met with Tom Stocks and began planning the documentary.