

How I found my inner Gordon Gekko

If you aren't a natural master of the universe RADA might teach you to act like one in a day, says **Richard Morrison**

My mind has blanked. The old limbs feel like jelly. Nine people, all strangers to me until two hours earlier, are sitting in a semicircle. I am in the middle, trying to hold their attention. Not by speaking or gesticulating. Simply by standing still and exuding such an air of friendly but confident ease that all present will feel the impact of my charisma. When I was a teenager I used to have a recurring nightmare exactly like this.

It doesn't help when I remember where I am, and who might have trod these boards before I did. Was this the very spot where Alan Rickman and Ken Branagh learnt to emote Shakespeare?

Did Mike Leigh hone his directorial skills where I am now dismally failing to radiate an iota of personality?

And I have to stand like this for a whole minute! I keep it up for about 43 seconds, my jaw muscles frozen in what feels like a ghastly, skeleton-like grin. Then my eyes start swivelling wildly round the room for a means of escape.

"Time's up; well done, Richard," says our course tutor Meg Ralph, who is paid to be kind. "But you do tend to look over people's heads. Try to engage your audience by eye contact."

I am in the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. No, at this late stage in my career I haven't decided to switch professions. And even if I had, it is unlikely that I would be accepted by RADA, where 3,000 would-be actors audition each year for 28 places.

But there's another way to say that you "trained at RADA". That is to pay to go on one of its short (one or two days, at £625 a day) but intensive courses for business people. The idea is obvious, really. Many skills that actors learn — speaking clearly, communicating with body as well as voice, playing a role, performing in front of strangers — are needed in many professions. So why shouldn't a drama school make its experts available to the business world?

"Most of the work we do in these personal development courses is voice-orientated," says Edward Kemp, the artistic director of RADA. "But," he adds mysteriously, "I am keen to move more into status transactions, which we use a lot in drama training."

Status transactions? Enlighten me. "We used to think of status purely in terms of one's social standing," Kemp explains. "But there are many other sorts of status. Experts can adjust their status so they are slightly above the person they are hoping to influence, but not so far above as to be frightening. Effective status transactions can be

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Above: **Richard Morrison, second from left, "embraces the room" in a way that would doubtless meet with the approval of Michael Douglas, right**

taught, and the skill can be hugely valuable — for lawyers, for example."

Hmm. Actors teaching lawyers to be more deceptive than they already are? That doesn't sound like an advance for humanity. "You could say it's deceptive," Kemp says. "Or you could say it's about effective communication. And don't forget that as actors we are chiefly concerned with conveying truth."

The one-day "personal impact" course that I'm on doesn't seem to have attracted any lawyers. But there are people working in the City, event management, the Civil Service and the NHS. I don't know who paid their £625 fees, but last year there was a rumpus when it was revealed that cash-strapped Towers Hamlets Council in East London paid for a councillor to go on a RADA course. And the RADA brochure

flaunts endorsements from the Home Office and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, which have both sent employees on the course.

Most of the participants on my course are in their thirties and are there, they say, because they have reached a level where they are leading groups, taking meetings and running presentations, and feeling unprepared for the task. The doctor speaks of his need to tell patients and relatives clearly and sensitively what their options are. A self-conscious company secretary speaks about how nervous she gets when talking to more than two people at once. In this spirit of confessional angst, I reveal that, though I have no problem communicating my thoughts in writing (it's my job, after all), I get worried about people's reactions when I have to say something tough to their face.

During the next seven hours we are put through exercises to build confidence. We throw imaginary fishing-nets over everyone in the room, to show us the importance of standing in a way that "embraces" all those present. We lie on the floor and moan, very artistically, to learn how to control breathing. We imagine where our centres of gravity are. Place it too high (in the chest or head) and we are literally "pushovers", toppling when given a shove. But by imagining it to be in our stomachs we become firm, immovable, "centred".



We pair off and are given two minutes to tell our partners about a significant incident in our lives. Then each of us has to stand in front of the group and summarise, in just three bullet-points our partner's anecdote. "Ums" and "ers" aren't allowed. Neither is fidgeting, or

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sentences that trail off into thin air. "Less is more," Meg notes when we ramble.

Then, just to remind us that we are in an institution that has been training top thespians for 109 years, we are given a Shakespeare sonnet to read aloud. Or rather, the sonnet is treated like the baton in a relay: we stand in a circle and pass it on to our neighbour, one iambic pentameter at a time. "Speak each line as if it's a really big secret," Meg says. "Wooh!" she purrs approvingly when I deliver the line "borne on the bier with white and bristly beard" with what I hope is a Hammer House of Horror quiver in my voice.

Why is RADA doing this? Money is one answer. "It became clear in the 1990s that it was impossible to sustain

being a small drama school in the way that RADA once was," Kemp explains. "Since then our commercial arm, RADA in Business, has been a lifeline through some difficult periods."

The courses for business people — and other commercial activities, such as providing corporate entertainment for conferences — bring in more than £500,000 a year. That's a considerable contribution to RADA's £7 million turnover. But there are other benefits too. "It's very useful for me to teach acting skills to someone who has no interest in acting, but has an important job," Kemp says. "As an actor you want to encounter as many different sorts of people as possible. And it brings RADA new contacts. People who sign up for our business courses are also potential audience members, sponsors and board members. And it helps when you are making a case for public subsidy if you can show that you are maximising your own income."

For our last exercise Meg asks us each to read from and summarise a favourite book. I won't say that miraculous transformations have been achieved, but my fellow course-members do seem more confident, less hesitant, more persuasive than they had been in the first hour. I choose Hardy's *Under the Greenwood Tree*, and launch into a discourse about village music-making in 19th-century Dorset. "Riveting," Meg beams when I finally stop wittering on. What an actress she must be! "But," she adds, "you are still looking anywhere except at your public."

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