

Cultural Camouflage: Acting Identities in World War 2 Espionage

Fraser Stevens

The world of espionage, whether political, business or military-oriented is a complicated, secretive entity, which requires intelligence and skill to allow an operative the chance of a successful endeavour. Nowhere is this more critical than within military or police clandestine operations, where failure can bring the consequence of torture, disappearance and even death. What is intriguing, though, is that among all professions in the world, acting/performing is, in many respects, one of the most relatable. Easily linked by the requirement for both operatives and performers to assume new and factitious identities, this connection between disciplines is uncharted territory within theatre and performance studies. Borrowing from theories within sociology, history and performance studies, and utilizing concepts such as mimetic realism and camouflage as a performance practice, this chapter is an attempt to begin the exploration and questioning of this very minimally researched intersection of disciplines, and to establish just how these two areas of knowledge come together in what is perhaps one of the more curious applications of theatre and performance. To refine the discussion attention will be placed

F. Stevens (✉)
University of Maryland, College Park, USA
e-mail: stevensfm@gmail.com

upon clandestine work within the context of the Allied efforts of World War 2. Beginning with a small exploration of the requirements of war-time espionage, the chapter will move into the work of the Special Operations Executive—the Allied espionage organizing body—and the approaches they were utilizing in their work. After this will be a brief overview of historical approaches to agent and actor training and their overlapping aspects.

DOING DRAMATIC THINGS

Before attempting to intermix the disciplines of theatre and espionage it is important to define “espionage” itself. In the modern sense, espionage has become synonymous with, perhaps even usurped by the term “intelligence” along with its associated studies. Thus we need to develop an understanding of this term “intelligence”. In the introduction to the edited volume *The Handbook of Intelligence Studies* Loch K. Johnson explains that officers, within the modern intelligence world, propose the following as the working definition of strategic intelligence: “the prelude to [Presidential] decision and action”.¹ Johnson’s description of intelligence is, one would argue, a fairly standard understanding that is likely to be accepted by many. Johnson continues; “At a more narrow or tactical level, intelligence refers to events and conditions on specific battlefields or theatres of war, what military commanders refer to as ‘situational awareness.’”² Johnson explains that while the terms “intelligence” and “strategic intelligence” are inclusive of all types of information from news reports, to satellite readings and so on, there also exists a secret component within the classification of “intelligence”. Those in the business of gathering intelligence blend together the open source information gleaned from the public domain with information that other nations try to keep hidden. The hidden information must be ferreted out of encoded communications or stolen from safes and vaults, locked offices, guarded military and intelligence installations, and other clandestine areas, a potentially dangerous task involving the penetration of an enemy’s camp and its concentric circles of defence. As intelligence scholar Abram N. Shulsky has written, that intelligence often entails access to “information some other party is trying to deny”.³

Regarding contemporary intelligence practices and the individuals involved in their execution, Michael Andrejgg identifies that there are a variety of intelligence operatives. In the chapter “Laying a foundation

for the second oldest profession” he lists five broad types of intelligence professionals:

Collectors [who] gather information data or both, usually by technical means like satellites or from human agents... *Analysts* [who] process that information and combine it with “open sources” information to generate higher order papers or other “products”... *Operators* [who] go places and do things, sometimes very dramatic things like starting wars and such, but more often they are doing quiet things they would prefer we not observe or talk about. Of all the types of intelligence professional, operators are the most likely to kill, blackmail, extort or torture in their work, and often “handle” spies who are at risk from their own governments. So guarding “operational security” is a core value to operators in order to protect their operations, the people they employ, and themselves. *Managers* [who] organize the work of all of these people and the budgets that support them.... And finally, *Policy Makers* [who], in theory, make the decisions that have the greatest impact.⁴

Andregg’s explanation of the “*operator*” is perhaps the most relevant to the individuals who are being examined in this chapter. It is, however, critical to note that this definition of an espionage agent, although transcending both the contemporary and early modern notion of an operative, is further contextualized by the establishments for whom they work; in this chapter the focus will be on the Special Operations Executive or SOE of the British military during World War 2.

SETTING THE STAGE

During World War 2 the British, together with their associated allies, established the SOE, a department dedicated to espionage and clandestine affairs and tasked with, as Sir Winston Churchill put it, “[setting] Europe ablaze”.⁵ Within this establishment espionage began its industrial revolution. The effort appeared simple: produce agents within a formulaic system for deployment abroad during conflict. Agents were given a variety of tasks which ranged from sabotage, collecting intelligence, aiding other operatives, to carrying out secretive and lethal missions. Specific to at least one training base, known as a finishing school, was the production of cover stories and false identities. Existing records state that in at least one of these finishing schools an actor was brought in to guide agents in the practice of camouflage as well as in the creation

and performance of cover identities, or what one would term as “cultural camouflage”—the event of assuming and enacting a strategically created and culturally aware personal identity. Accompanying this instruction by professionals was a set of manuals that would identify specific cultural and societal characteristics and challenges, as well as providing basic training skills that agents might have to employ, and were likely engage with and require during their fieldwork.

For the sake of providing a framework to engage with the intersection of espionage and theatre, we should establish the nature of “culture” within the context of conflict—occupied Europe in the 1940s, and fundamentally, the nature of “culture” in the context of espionage and the theatrical manifestations of it. In his 1961 publication *The Long Revolution* Raymond Williams identified culture in three strands:

first, the “ideal”, in which culture is a state or process of human perfection, in terms of certain absolute or universal value. The analysis of culture, if such a definition is accepted is essentially the discovery and description, in lives and works, of those values which can be seen to compose a timeless order, or to have permanent reference to the universal human condition. Then, second there is the “documentary”, in which culture is the body of intellectual and imaginative work, in which, in a detailed way, human thought and experience are variously recorded... Finally, third, there is the “social” definition of culture, in which culture is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behavior. The analysis of culture, from such a definition, is the clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life, a particular culture. Such analysis will include the historical criticism always referred to, in which intellectual and imaginative works are analyzed in relation to particular traditions and societies, but will also include analysis of elements in the way of life that to followers of the other definitions are not “culture” at all: the organization of production, the structure of the family, the structure of institutions which express or govern social relationships, the characteristic forms through which members of the society communicate.⁶

One should of course note that Williams continues on to explain that the concept of culture is not finite, and that there is no true “ideal” definition of culture, which individuals can work from—the notion of culture is in flux, constantly changing. For the sake of clarity and efficiency these differing aspects are considered as “the culture of the time” a period of

societal and political hypersensitivity and suspicion which operatives must have considered and constantly engaged with during their training and missions in the course of World War 2.

Within the context of surveillance and law enforcement, Nikos Passas and Richard Groskin sum up this critical issue of cultural differences within surveillance in foreign locations: “Differences in language, customs ... make single agency, aggressive investigations difficult to mount and sustain in foreign ... environments”.⁷ As evidence to this, within one of the training manuals of the Beaulieu section of the SOE, an agent training base which was located within Hampshire in the UK, there is a section titled *Life of Agent in the Field*; the author writes:

[An agent] must at once familiarize himself with new customs and slang which have arisen ... He must particularly avoid English habits, e.g. eating with fork alone, leaving knife and fork on plate when finished, eating soup with side instead of point of spoon, tipping soup plate forward instead of backward, carrying handkerchief in sleeve etc.⁸

Nadine Holdsworth echoes these same aspects in her monograph *Theatre and Nation*, stating that, “throughout history people have constructed group formations to distinguish ‘us’ from ‘them ...’”.⁹ and although this is being considered in relation to theatrical institutions, it provides support to the assertion that Passas and Groskin make and assists in initiating the bridging between theatre and military espionage. This well-investigated notion of “difference” in the context of culture is the critical departure point which this chapter seeks to utilize.

TRAINING

As mentioned previously, with the establishment of the SOE, this department in turn began the task of creating training camps to prepare agents for subversive work. The archival documentation indicates that there were four steps to the training process before arriving in occupied territory. These schools were given the designation of STS (an acronym for Special Training School) and were separated into three stages of subversive training: Preliminary School, Paramilitary School and finally Finishing School, the fourth stage was a final briefing location—typically London—where agents would receive their last orders before being made active.

Unfortunately, much information surrounding the training programmes, missions and results, whether successful or not, is unavailable. However, as identified by historian Denis Rigden in the edited volume *How To Be A Spy: The World War II SOE Training Manual*, substantial information on STS103, often referred to as “Camp X” and located near present day Whitby, Canada, is available. Rigden has incorporated much of this information, as well as supplemental information retrieved from the British National Archives in London into his book. The composition of “Camp X” was unique among overseas training facilities in that it provided both preparatory and specialist training regiments which mirrored the work which was done within the United Kingdom in multiple locations, while at the same time offering a whole programme within one specialized facility.

Rigden, in his introduction to the book, provides the following synopsis to identify the focus of each of these institutions:

[With]in the Preliminary Schools the student’s character and potential for dangerous clandestine work were assessed without revealing to them much about what SOE did ... [the] syllabus covered physical training, weapons handling, unarmed combat, elementary demolitions, map reading, field craft, and basic signalling ... the sort of training that any army recruit might expect to receive.¹⁰

Paramilitary schools were a more intensive specialized version of this training, focusing on “physical training, silent killing, weapons handling, demolition, map reading and compass work, field craft, elementary Morse, and raid tactics”.¹¹ Finally, finishing schools were, perhaps, the most important in the process of becoming an undercover agent. Having passed basic assessments within each of the previous stages, potential students were informed about the realities of the SOE and what their training was truly preparing them for within the war context. It is in these finishing schools’ locations where students would begin their “theatrical” training.

The Schools themselves were separated into five departments identified with letters “A” to “E”. Departments A and B are the most relevant to this chapter: “A” was dedicated to the instruction of agent technique which included procedures for clandestine life, personal security, clandestine organization, communications, as well as the creation and maintenance of cover or how to “act” while under surveillance, and how to

handle the interrogation process. Department “B” focused on the conduct of exercises and role playing which assisted agents in practising the techniques learned in Department A, such as discreet meetings, communication, interrogation, etc. Departments “C” to “E” were more specific to the understanding of enemy forces, the execution of propaganda, and the use of codes and ciphers amongst other areas.

As Rigden notes, the SOE required many specialists in various training areas, so when possible agents returning from missions would provide information to keep records up to date since experience in the field was valued above all else. However, as mentioned before, it is known that at least for the instruction of disguises and the execution of cover stories the SOE did in fact employ at least one actor to guide instruction—Peter Folis. As Bernie Ross identifies in his article for the BBC: “His mantra was, ‘When thinking disguises don’t think false beards, instead make small changes to your appearance; wear glasses; part your hair differently; take a different gait’.”¹² Here Folis, an actor, was instructing the trainees in the techniques needed to validate a personal performance and in the camouflage of self.

What now needs to be investigated are the prevailing ideas of camouflage and concealment that are central to this examination and the relationship of camouflage to theatrical practices. In her book *Performing Ground: Space, Camouflage, and the Art of Blending In* Laura Levin explores the concept of camouflage as a performance practice. Tying together historical notions of mimesis, camouflage and art, she provides a background from which to depart. It is her explanation of the intertwining of mimesis and camouflage that have contributed to this chapter. Levin writes: “I am drawing my understanding of mimesis from philosophers like Caillois ... Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno, who treat mimesis as ‘the way an organism adapts itself to its environment’.”¹³ Thus we need to touch on the ways in which Folis and his contemporaries instructed agents to adapt to their environment or changes of circumstance.

The section of the syllabus concerned with disguises, the portion which Folis dealt with, addressed alterations of physical identity, camouflage and concealment and began with the following:

Definition of Disguise.

- a) It does not mean covering your face with grease paint and hair.

b) It must have at its basis the art of being and living mentally as well as physically in this new role. The important thing to remember is to be the person you are portraying mentally first and then afterwards physically. Therefore—EXTERNAL IMITATING BY ITSELF IS NOT SUFFICIENT. By this we mean imitating the external part of a character only i.e. the walk, the voice, the manners and individual abilities etc. of the character. External imitation without proper mental preparation must mean you speak and do things mechanically without fully realizing who you are, where you come from, why, what you want, where you are going, what you are supposed to be and do when you get there, etc. You will therefore be nothing but an external caricature and easily caught out.¹⁴

The relationship between espionage preparation and actor training can already be seen here; instructors were evidently utilizing simple theatre terminology within their preparation of students and within manuals, requesting the agent to go beyond a superficial cloaking of themselves and “live” and “be” their identity. Further to this point, within the portion of the training manual entitled *Points to Be Considered in Your Disguise* the very first “Golden Rule” as identified by the authors, is the statement “Never come out of character. By this we mean not only from the clothes point of view but from the mental side also, E.g. if you are a workman do not wear a white collar and black tie, have clean hands and behave like an educated man.”¹⁵

One of the more well-known examples, appearing as a lesson within the training manuals, which stressed an understanding of cultural and societal differences and changes, was of an operative recently landed in France. Under cover the agent entered a café and requested a café noir (black coffee) as his drink. Through improper preparation and awareness the agent exposed his cover. Milk was being rationed and locals, in assuming that all coffee would be served black, requested only “coffee”.¹⁶ It is the detailed analysis of the ever-changing culture, which agents must have studied in order to be an effective asset in the war effort. Not only did this apply to agents who were citizens of unoccupied countries such as British, Canadians or Americans, but also recent immigrants in unoccupied Allied territories, first-generation citizens or individuals seeking shelter during the conflict such as Dutch, Polish or French citizens. Many individuals chose to risk their safety as operatives within their home territories from which they had escaped, and the issue of cultural camouflage was just as critical for them as it was for an agent who would be imitating a foreign language, culture and identity.

As mentioned earlier, Williams' third notion of culture encompasses a broad range of "cultural aspects" from art to everyday events to a particular way of life. If this concept is considered in the context of World War 2, and in particular occupied territories within Europe, then the culture of suspicion and scrutiny, a large part of the day-to-day existence of these besieged societies must be a part of this definition. This idea then extends to the requirement of a natural citizen of occupied nations operating as an agent for the SOE to "act" as though they are not a part of clandestine operations. The training supplied by the Allied forces was not only appropriate to foreigners of the target nations, but those who volunteered to return as agents.

Unfortunately, little seems to be known about the background of Folis and therefore about the details of his theatrical experience. Yet, we know that Folis was heavily involved in the instructional process, and even his statements concerning disguises and concealment alone (not to mention many others within the archival documents along with their obvious appropriation of theatrical terminology), serve to strengthen the inherent relationship between the training of espionage agents and theatre practitioners.

THE THEATRE OF THE TIME

Throughout the reading, training, and seminars delivered by the SOE, authors and lecturers provided constant reminders about the necessity of preparing a character/cover story in the most in-depth manner possible, as the earlier quotation in regards to disguises demonstrated. In a particular portion of one training manual the author presents an anecdote on the failure to remain "living mentally and physically as the character entirely". The author writes:

The assumed name must be learnt thoroughly and be so ingrained that the Agent responds automatically to it and NOT to his real name. He must also sedulously practice his factitious signature. A most experienced Agent in France, arriving late and very tired at an hotel, filled in the usual arrival form at the Bureau and went straight to bed. Just before going to sleep he suddenly became aware that, although he had printed his assumed name in block capitals at the head of the form, he had inadvertently signed his real signature at the foot. As he had the foresight to ascertain at what time the Police collected the registrations in the morning, he was able to get away before they arrived.¹⁷

Such evidence corroborates the requirement that living as authentically as possible was clearly an essential in the work being undertaken by operatives. Certainly an understanding of the tenets of realism was of primary significance both for espionage instructors and their agent trainees. It meshed with the notion of mimesis as part of the working definition of camouflage.

Matthew Potolsky's *Mimesis* provides a condensed and informative view on the subject and as he clearly establishes within his introduction "Mimesis describes the relationship between artistic images and reality: art is a copy of the real."¹⁸ In this current case, we can view the "image" as the attempted character, which the agent establishes, along with the identity they assume. Operatives would invent a version of the "real" to perform for the society they intended to infiltrate including the political establishment in power. Levin in *Performing Ground* makes a similar allusion equating camouflage to scenic practices. She asserts that "[it draws] together the complex strands of this developing interdisciplinary conversation, [and] makes an argument for reading camouflage as a performance strategy, as a theoretical frame for analysing contemporary performance practices and the performance of self in everyday life".¹⁹

Continuing with his exploration of mimesis Potolsky writes, "Theatrical metaphors ... figure mimesis as a representation for someone, and not only, a representation of something else. They highlight what theorists have called the 'performative' quality of mimesis, its explicit address to or dependence upon an audience."²⁰ Thus it seems that the production of performance in everyday life, of a realistic character by an agent, and intended for viewing by the infiltrated society, the audience, is fulfilling exactly these requirements. The urgency of maintaining a quality "performance" by an agent was governed by the hyper-suspicious attitudes of the political office in power, and subsequently the public at large. In this context Levin and Potolsky's writings offer us a useful framework and reinforce the distinction that imitation is not the same as replication. The SOE archival evidence strengthens this position and, as quoted earlier, states that mere imitation was an unacceptable method to utilize; only through living and being the "character" could one truly be an effective agent and convince others of one's (false) intentions. Potolsky links these ideas of mimesis and performance to acts within everyday life, and cites the influential work of Erving Goffman:

Goffman argues that all social interactions are akin to performances, based on a fundamental division between actor and audience, and between a self

that potentially knows it is acting and the character it plays. The aim of these performances is to engender “the impression of reality”, to persuade an audience that the act is sincere. No less than for stage acting, the aim of social acting is mimesis. Failure to play a role, or playing it poorly, will come across as a breach of decorum.²¹

While agents were not playing “themselves” in a subconscious manner, as is suggested by Goffman, they were straddling a barrier in which they must appear to be totally natural, while being fully conscious of the significance of their actions at all times. To do otherwise would have been catastrophic for an agent.

In knowing that the SOE were working towards a systematic training of operatives, who would live as the characters they created, and with the fact that preparations for agents were taking place within the late 1930s, suggest an historical commonality with the writing of Konstantin Stanislavsky on the preparation of a dramatic character, and it might be worth speculating that the origins of the training approaches utilized by the SOE could have been found in aspects of his writing. However, before touching on some of the commonalities between the SOE agent training methods and Stanislavsky’s actor training theories, it must be acknowledged that at present there is little evidence to support that Stanislavsky’s system was the direct model which the SOE utilized in their training methods. In knowing that Stanislavsky’s famed publication *An Actor Prepares* had been translated and published in London by 1938 it is conceivable that Peter Folis and his contemporaries could have been introduced to this work preceding the conflict and employed them in their instruction, but at present this must remain speculative.²²

Stanislavsky, as is well known, sought to establish a process through which he could instruct and prepare actors for their roles onstage. Although moving on to explore other areas of artistic expression and investigation it was this “process” so sought after for which he became most remembered. In her essay *Stanislavsky’s System* Sharon Marie Carnicke sums up the primary philosophical positions of Stanislavsky. Those which demonstrate a close relationship to agent training include the following: the **Psychophysical**, “the belief that mind and body represent a psychophysical continuum”.²³ As Stanislavsky asserted: “In every physical action there is something psychological, and in the psychological, something physical.”²⁴ **Immediacy of Performance**, “However well-rehearsed, Stanislavskian actors remain essentially

dynamic and improvisatory during ‘performance’”²⁵ and yet the performer must exist “fully within the immediate moment... He describes this state as... when the actor is seized by the role. The Russian word carries many different nuances amongst them ‘to experience’... ‘to live through.’”²⁶ **Communication**, “For Stanislavsky, there can be no ‘drama’ without interaction ... Words are one vehicle for such interaction ... but hidden beneath words is subtext ... Actors communicate subtext through non-verbal means (body language, the cast of eyes, intonations and pauses).”²⁷ **The Method of Physical Actions**, “In this method, the actor discovers and then performs the logical sequence of physical actions necessary to carry out the inner, purposeful actions of the scene.”²⁸ Included in this is “The score of physical actions includes many external moves and strategies that the actor needs to carry out the overarching purposeful action (events of the scene).”²⁹ and finally, **Active Analysis**, “In active analysis, actors grasp a play’s anatomy before memorising lines. To do so, they read a play as if it were a system of clues that imply potential performance ... Stanislavsky calls these clues the *facts* to which actors accommodate performance.”³⁰

These aspects of the far larger and more complex method that Stanislavsky proposed are each replicated in some capacity by the instructional manual of “Section A” within the SOE finishing school. What can already be identified, even during a cursory reading of archival documents, is how these concepts would fall into the process of training an agent for the creation and execution of a character. However, the question remains, what particulars existed within the training manuals and their relationship to the sections of Stanislavsky training manuals referred to above?

INSTRUCTIONS AND MANUALS

In the process of instructing an operative on the manner of creating an identity the SOE provided a fairly formulaic approach, as an excerpt from the instruction manual provided by the SOE to agents suggests: “Your cover is the life which you outwardly lead in order to conceal the real purpose of your presence and the explanation which you give of your past and present. It is best considered under the heads: Past, Link between Past and Present, Present, and ‘Alibis’ [*sic*]”.³¹

“Past” was divided into the categories of: (a) Identity, (b) History, (c) Documents (d) Clothes and Effects, (e) Change of Appearance,

and (f) Final Search. The subsection of **Identity** was split into sections, each of which had their advantages and disadvantages identified for the agent. The three choices of approach to establishing an identity were: (i) Your Own (ii) That of a Real Person, Distant or Dead, (iii) Wholly Fictitious. The manual from Beaulieu Camp further explain this within the description of “General Cover”: “An agent can adopt one of three identities ... The probabilities are that it will be the latter, despite the danger of carrying Identity papers which, however perfect in form, are not recorded at their alleged place of origin ... This danger can sometimes be averted by choosing a place of origin where the archives are known to have been destroyed.”³²

The second subsection of “Past” was **History** and this emphasized the need for realism and strategy in the establishment of the character by the agent: “Whatever your identity, your story must be plausible and not indicate any connection with subversive activity.”³³ The manual continues on to further suggest that any of the three approaches to identity should be based on personal history and facts as much as possible.

“**Documents**” can easily equated with “Props” from the stage and was the third subsection of “Past”. These items reaffirmed the previous two aspects of identity for any investigating force. The manual recognizes that for each of the previous identity categories (Own, Real Person, Fictitious), documents would provide certain obstacles and benefits, such as accurately forging an identity card for a totally fictitious individual.³⁴

Clothes and Effects, much like the aforementioned “documents”, emphasized the need to utilize only appropriate clothing for the role being enacted, and which supported the history of the character in question.³⁵ Similar to the way a member of the creative team of a theatrical production would work to establish appropriate attire or costume for a performer, so would the operative, and if circumstance allowed it their supervisory officer, work to make such choices to support their new persona. The subsection heading, **Change of Appearance** raised the issue of “looking the part”, while differentiating this from Clothes and Effects by emphasizing the need to keep supporting features consistent, such as rough hands for an individual posing as a workman.³⁶

Lastly, **Final Search** identified the necessity of maintaining the façade of a character whenever circumstances change, such as the event of changing one’s cover story or concealing recent covert activity.³⁷ This is reminiscent of Stanislavsky’s belief, mentioned earlier, that even in living as a character, the performer will constantly be required to be able to

improvise within the guise of their identity, but adjusting to the circumstances in which they might find themselves.

Under the secondary aspect of establishing a cover story, “Past to Present” was condensed into a fairly self-explanatory area of instruction. This particular area was the act of tracing a believable line from the cover story/character “Past” to “Present”.³⁸ This included the research required to have knowledge about a particular region, possess items from other locations used within backstory, and “build up your present cover background by innocent and inconspicuous actions to which reference can be made later ... make innocent acquaintances, etc.”³⁹

The “Present” was defined as “the life which you lead and the ‘story’ which you will tell about that life to account for your presence”.⁴⁰ Operatives were not always provided with assistance in preparing such a cover story, such as attempting to evade detection after having their cover revealed as an agent, and in these instances were required to manufacture another identity through their own initiative. What was fundamental to agents was that “[their] ostensible present must be consistent with [their] alleged past”⁴¹

This area was divided into three sections to consider; (a) Maintenance of Cover further separated into: (i) **Name** described as “Signing correctly and responding immediately”⁴²; (ii) **Consistency** which was clarified as “Your personality and general conduct must fit your cover story [...] Documents, clothing possessions, etc. must be suitable. Manners tastes, bearing, accent, education and knowledge must accord with your ostensible personality”,⁴³ (a re-emphasis of the realism that this work required); and (iii) **Concealment**: “Avoid foreign words, tunes, manners, etc. Avoid slang which has developed among your countrymen in Britain. Avoid showing knowledge or expressing views acquired in Britain. Conform with all new conditions which have arisen, observe new customs and acquire the language which have developed in your country.”⁴⁴ The SOE provided another useful and demonstrative anecdote to re-emphasize these rigid orders of concealment in the following: “An agent landed in an occupied country made himself undesirably conspicuous through asking a farmer, carrying milk to the neighbouring town, on the first morning of his arrival, for a drink, in a locality in which the disposal of milk had recently been absolutely prohibited except through a licensed dairy to the holder of a ration card.”⁴⁵ The last two aspects of “Present” were (b) Cover Occupation where again it was emphasized

that consistencies must be taken into consideration when choosing an occupation; and (c) Conclusion—a warning to the operative on just how complex creating an effective cover story and character were.

Finally, within this section was the instructional process for manufacturing an Alibi. Creating a successful Alibi was crucial to the maintenance of a cover story/character. Although this process was dependent on the circumstances that the agents found themselves within, the SOE provided a strategy for guiding the process. This consisted of two aspects, the nature and construction of the Alibi: **Nature** explained as being “In addition to your cover background, you must have an explanation ready for every subversive act, however small e.g. conversation, journey, etc. Such alibis are more important than your background cover, if they are good no further enquiries will be made.”⁴⁶

The construction of the Alibi was further divided into eight aspects: Plausibility, Detail, Self-Consistency, Cover Background, Truth (emphasizing that this area should be as close to truth as possible) Dead End (projecting a sense of finality), Consistency with Other, and Discreditable Story.⁴⁷ The relationships between these briefly introduced elements of the instruction manual and theatrical training of Stanislavsky and, more importantly, the quest for realism are immensely suggestive. The following are just a few instances where there is considerable crossover between the methods being instructed by the SOE and the approach which Stanislavsky sought to establish. **Psychophysical**: as was introduced earlier in the chapter, within the first stages of schooling at the Preliminary Schools, students were assessed for their psychological and physical states. Secondly, through observation students would be gauged on their ability to work within the field. Thirdly, in the paramilitary schools students were trained in hand-to-hand combat and routinely put through the rigours of physical interaction, altercation and retaliation—all governed by yet more psychological assessment. Fourthly, within Section B of the finishing schools, operatives were exposed to mocked up circumstances intended to assess their mental reaction and application of training to staged interrogation, compromised circumstance, and routine stops by police and military. **Immediacy of Performance**: the SOE stressed that students must prepare in advance for changing scenarios depending on which clandestine work they were engaged with, on whether their cover was blown and when they had to create a new identity for themselves. **Communication**: in this area there was

an emphasis on the plausibility of the event, and the effective communication required to achieve and maintain the façade. **Physical Actions:** the identification of the need to eradicate one's natural movements and actions and re-articulate oneself with the actions and movements of the new identity. Lastly, **Active Analysis:** the active event of identifying, dissecting, constructing and acting of identities, and covert tasks.

As mentioned earlier, Stanislavsky is not the only acting pedagogue whose work can be related to techniques used by the SOE. It could be argued there is more in common with Michael Chekhov's work working well with his assertions that an actor should not be portraying how "they" would react to dramatic events, but how the character would experience the world.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the emphasis that he places on "atmosphere" of situation and location, as a consideration any performer should make, relates well to both Williams' earlier explanation of culture, and the SOE declaration that agents must familiarize themselves with the cultural state of the occupied territory they will be infiltrating.⁴⁹ Certainly Chekhov's presence in the United Kingdom at Dartington Hall, beginning in 1936, along with his already well-established international presence makes a case to consider his work as one of the possible foundations for agent training.⁵⁰

Although British mainstream theatre had always been suspicious of foreign influences, and existing schools of actor training tended to preserve many of the verities of nineteenth-century theatrical practices, by the commencement of World War 2 British actors had become aware of new training methods available to them and audiences had been exposed to new artistic directions even in the production of works by Shakespeare. Michel St. Denis formed his London Theatre Studio in 1936 almost exactly at the same time as Michael Chekhov's studio. He, too, was very familiar with the work of Stanislavsky. Nonetheless, any direct connection between the work of these studios and SOE training methods must remain speculative. Indeed, such speculation might also investigate the possible input of Basil Dean who, after a theatrical career and as a film producer and a founder of Ealing Studios, had been appointed head of Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA) from 1939. He was fully conversant with the value of propaganda. This, however, calls for further investigation especially of the competing systems of actor training and their relationship to the archival documentation and literature of World War 2 clandestine history.

NOTES

1. Loch K. Johnson, "Introduction," in *The Handbook of Intelligence Studies*, ed. Loch K. Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 2.
4. Michael Andregg, "Intelligence ethics: Laying a foundation for the Second Oldest Profession," in *The Handbook of Intelligence Studies*, ed. Loch K. Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2007), 52–53.
5. Dennis Rigden, *How To Be A Spy: The World War II SOE Training Manual* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2004), 28.
6. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (New York: Harper and Collins, 1961), 57.
7. Nikos Passas and Richard B. Groskin, "International Undercover Investigations," in *Undercover: Police Surveillance in Comparative Perspective*, ed. C.J.C.F. Fijnaut and Gary Trade Marx (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 1995), 299.
8. Special Operations Executive. "SOE Course at Beaulieu." (London: National Archives, Kew, 1941).
9. Nadine Holdsworth, *Theatre & Nation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 9.
10. Dennis Rigden, 2.
11. Ibid., 5.
12. Bernie Ross, "Training SOE Saboteurs in World War Two," last modified February 17, 2011, www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/soe_training_01.shtml.
13. Laura Levin, *Performing Ground* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 11.
14. Dennis Rigden, 52.
15. Ibid., 53.
16. Bernie Ross, "Training SOE Saboteurs in World War Two," last modified February 17, 2011, www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/soe_training_01.shtml.
17. Special Operations Executive. "SOE Course at Beaulieu." (London: National Archives, Kew, 1941).
18. Matthew Potolsky, *Mimesis* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1.
19. Laura Levin, *Performing Ground* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 5.
20. Matthew Potolsky, 74.
21. Ibid., 89.
22. It should be noted that British performers as well as entrepreneurs were reasonably familiar with Russian theatre practices. Although Stanislavsky's seminal work, *An Actor Prepares* appeared in English in 1938, his autobiography *My Life in Art* had been translated in 1924. Moreover, the

British theatre more generally had seen the work of Michael Chekhov who had set up a theatre school in 1936 (see endnotes 48, 49 below) and Fyodor Komisarjevsky who had been noted for his London productions of Anton Chekhov's plays since 1921 and his productions of Shakespeare in Stratford until 1939.

23. Sharon Marie Carnicke, "Stanislavsky's System." in *Actor Training*, ed. Alison Hodge (London: Routledge, 2010), 16.
24. Konstantin Stanislavsky, *An Actor's Work: A Student's Diary*, trans. Jean Benedetti (New York: Routledge, 2008), 180.
25. Sharon Marie Carnicke, "Stanislavsky's System." in *Actor Training*, ed. Alison Hodge (London: Routledge, 2010), 8.
26. Sharon Marie Carnicke, 132–133.
27. Sharon Marie Carnicke, 12.
28. *Ibid.*, 26.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*, 18.
31. Dennis Rigden, 46.
32. Special Operations Executive. "SOE Course at Beaulieu." (London: National Archives, Kew, 1941).
33. Dennis Rigden, 47.
34. *Ibid.*, 47–48.
35. *Ibid.*, 48.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, 48–49.
39. *Ibid.*, 49.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*
45. Special Operations Executive. "SOE Course at Beaulieu." (London: National Archives, Kew, 1941).
46. Dennis Rigden, 50–51.
47. *Ibid.*, 51.
48. Franc Chamberlain. "Michael Chekhov on the Technique of Acting." in *Actor Training*, ed. Alison Hodge (New York: Routledge, 2010), 64.
49. Michael Chekhov, *To the Actor* (New York: Harper & Row, 1953), 48.
50. On the impact of Russian actor training methods upon British theatre, see Jonathan Pitches, "Tradition in Transition: Komisarjevsky's seduction of the British Theatre," and David Shirley, "Stanislavsky's passage into the British Conservatoire," in Jonathan Pitches ed. *Russians in Britain: British theatre and the Russian tradition of Actor Training* (London & New York: Routledge, 2012).

War and Theatrical Innovation

Emeljanow, V. (Ed.)

2017, XXVII, 210 p. 4 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-137-60224-4

A product of Palgrave Macmillan UK