

‘Class ceiling’ stops working class actors from getting parts

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New research supports warnings from Christopher Eccleston and Julie Walters that acting in Britain has become a largely middle class profession.

An analysis of the largest database of British actors shows that there are relatively few working class actors and that they earn less than their middle class equivalents because of a ‘class ceiling’.

Researchers from the London School of Economics and Political Science and Goldsmith’s College analysed 402 survey responses from actors and interviewed 47 others. Some said that they had been turned down for parts because of prejudice about their social background.

In a paper published in the journal *Sociology*, the researchers, Dr Sam Friedman, Dr David O’Brien and Dr Daniel Laurison, found from Great British Class Survey data that:

- The survey data suggests 73% of actors responding to the survey came from the middle class (had parents working in professional and managerial careers) and only 27% were working class (had parents who did intermediate, routine or semi-routine work). In Britain overall, according to Office for National Statistics data, 29% of people have middle class origins.
- Middle class actors reported household earnings on average around £46,100 a year (a total for their household, taking into account partner’s earnings). This compared with £28,700 for actors whose parents who did ‘intermediate’ work and £37,000 for those from working class backgrounds, whose parents did routine or semi-routine work. Even when people of the same age, ethnicity and gender were compared, working class actors reported household earnings of £11,000 a year less than middle class ones.

The researchers also interviewed 47 actors – 28 from intermediate or working class origins and 19 from a professional or managerial background – after placing adverts on social media.

One actor, Andy, whose parents are doctors, told the researchers that “his existence as an actor is heavily contingent on the ability to ‘call mum’ during lean spells for financial top-ups. ‘It’s not great’, he explained, ‘but I can’t imagine how I would be able to do it if it wasn’t for her. I really can’t.’”

Another actor, Tommy, said that coming from a very wealthy background and attending an elite public school gave him a big advantage. “I have an apartment in central London, I have another that pays rent, I have money, assets, capital. It’s desperately unfair. My friend lives in a Peabody House and struggles to find all kinds of work. He has a degree from Cambridge but he sells maps and chewing gum and washes cars. If I go off and have a successful career now, it’s unfair – really unfair.”

By contrast Brian, a black British actor from London, said: “If I had inheritance or something I would have been able to take more risks. I would have been able to see more theatre and

meet people. A lot of British actors have explored their luck in the States. I couldn't do it. I didn't have the money. I didn't have the time."

The researchers said that getting into the right drama school was harder for working class people. "Fifteen interviewees from professional or managerial backgrounds had either attended 'big four' London drama schools or Oxbridge, compared to only five working-class actors."

One working class actor, Lola, explained of her decision to study drama in Wales – "it was just the most the most affordable option – my parents couldn't afford the London schools."

Alaina told the researchers: "There is so little good material and it's all going to the same people. The agents pick off clients from the main drama schools and they are all given sort of the best opportunities in that early stage. It is almost impossible to work out how to get in."

When they went to auditions, their working class accents told against them. Jimmy told the researchers: "One of my lecturers said to me 'have you ever considered going back and being a plumber?' You look back on it, it's like an assault from various angles."

Grace told the researchers: "People put you in a class depending on your accent and I do feel quite judged. But it's who I am. Someone asked me [in an audition] once whether I could speak 'properly' if I wanted to. They actually said that to my face!"

Derek said even when they could fake a posh (RP) accent, working class actors were still not chosen. "They don't want to hear you spouting Shakespeare, they want someone with a 'clear voice'. You still get that now – 'must be RP', 'genuine RP speaker'. Not that you can't do RP – most actors can. No, it has to be your [natural] accent. No reason why."

When working class actors were given roles, they tended to be limited. Deborah told the researchers: "I am a black character actress in my 40s and there just is not a lot of stuff out there. I've played a hell of a lot of nurses – I've played more nurses than there are in the whole of St George's Hospital. I started to get bored of that and I wouldn't take it if all she was saying was 'the doctor will see you in a few minutes'."

In the journal article the researchers said: "We demonstrate not only the striking under-representation of actors from working class backgrounds. In particular, we find that working class actors have considerably lower average incomes, pointing towards the kind of class ceiling found previously in Britain's high-status occupations.

"The British acting profession is heavily skewed towards the privileged. Even when controlling for important variables such as schooling, education, location and age, working class actors have lower incomes than their socially privileged colleagues, pointing towards a clear class-origin pay gap.

"The ability to call upon familial wealth shaped the experience of these actors in myriad ways. It provided insulation from much of the precariousness of the labour market, particularly the need to seek alternative work to support oneself between acting roles."

Sociology is published by SAGE and the British Sociological Association.

- The researchers used 402 responses by actors to the Great British Class Survey run from 2011 to 2013, which received 325,000 responses in total. This is the largest database on actors in Britain but may not be fully representative as it was self-selecting. The researchers also interviewed 47 actors, recruited after they placed advertisements on social media. The first names used in the research are pseudonyms.

Further quotes

In the journal article the researchers said: “Sophie explained that ‘she can’t get seen’ at West-End theatres because her northern English drama school ‘just doesn’t register’. The implications of this, she explained, were long lasting and cumulative. No London agents came to her showcase, so she signed with a northern agent. But this has been ‘eternally restricting’, with most ‘high-quality work based in the capital’ and London agents gatekeeping most opportunities. ‘I feel like I am always starting from the bottom’, she concluded.”

“Aiden, who spoke with a broad north-east Geordie accent, had experienced the normative power of RP as a recurring obstacle in his career. He explained that in classical theatre, and particularly in productions of Shakespeare, regional accents like his own tend to be reserved for supplementary characters, as a counterpoint, a foil, for ‘the smaller comedy roles where you have to take the piss out of yourself to get the audience on side’. Aiden told us that over time he had come to see this as deeply offensive, a process through which he was continually asked to ‘mock his heritage’ to get work, where ‘it just feels like prostitution’. Moreover, while Aiden had never explicitly been advised not to use his accent when auditioning for larger roles, 10 years of experience had taught him ‘if I do my own accent I am actually doing myself out of the job’.”

Ray told them: “I haven’t been seen by any of the big theatres in London and there is no doubt in my mind that is because of my accent.”

The researchers quote one of Christopher Eccleston’s recent interviews about acting success in which he says: “You need to be white, you need to be male, and you need to be middle class.”

They said: “These are the key attributes, according to British actor Christopher Eccleston, that one needs to secure the top roles in contemporary British theatre. Provocative, perhaps, but Eccleston is only the latest in a long line of high-profile British actors to express concern about inequalities within the acting profession. Most have focused on the problems faced by those from working class backgrounds. Actor David Morrissey, for example, has decried what he calls the slow ‘economic excision of working class actors’ while Julie Walters has warned that ‘the way things are now there aren’t going to be any working class actors’.”

For more information, please contact:

Tony Trueman
British Sociological Association
Tel: 07964 023392
tony.trueman@britsoc.org.uk

Notes

1. The paper is entitled 'Like Skydiving without a Parachute': How Class Origin Shapes Occupational Trajectories in British Acting'.
2. The British Sociological Association's charitable aim is to promote sociology. The BSA is a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales. Company Number: 3890729. Registered Charity Number 1080235 www.britsoc.co.uk