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the degree of Master of Arts in de Taal- en Letterkunde

# **Embodying the Role: How Does an Actress Create Her Character Starting From a Text in Theater, Television and Film in Flanders?**

An Explorative Qualitative Research by Means of Expert Interviews

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## Table of contents

<b>Acknowledgment .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Summary .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Literature review .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<i>Acting methods .....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>The postdramatic theater, Elly Konijn's Acting Emotions and Diderot's "Actor's Paradox" .....</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Flemish theater landscape .....</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>Flemish film landscape .....</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>Flemish television fiction landscape .....</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>Budget cuts in the Flemish acting sector .....</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>#MeToo movement and acting as a woman in Flanders .....</i>	<i>28</i>
<b>Methodology: in-depth interviews .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>RESULTS .....</b>	<b>33</b>
<i>Trajectory and role of education .....</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>Acting methods .....</i>	<i>40</i>
<i>Role preparation and choice of roles .....</i>	<i>49</i>
<i>Key concepts .....</i>	<i>60</i>
<i>The role of text .....</i>	<i>63</i>
<i>On-camera acting versus acting on stage .....</i>	<i>65</i>
<i>Production conditions: an economic crisis in the acting sector .....</i>	<i>69</i>
<i>Acting as a woman .....</i>	<i>72</i>
<i>Acting as a woman of color .....</i>	<i>78</i>
<i>Limits of the research .....</i>	<i>82</i>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>Appendix .....</b>	<b>94</b>

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## Abstract

This thesis researches how Flemish actresses create their character in television fiction series, films and theater productions in Flanders. Through the means of in-depth interviews with ten Flemish actresses – two alumni of each of the four Flemish acting schools and two actresses who did not follow a formal education. Several aspects were questioned to paint a broad picture of how actresses in Flanders function: the trajectory and education of the actresses, acting methods, role preparation, key concepts, the role of text, acting on camera versus acting on stage, the production conditions in Flanders and acting as a woman (of color). An overview of the findings of the interviews, combined with the existing literature aims to provide an insight in how actresses in Flanders create their character and how they execute their profession in general.

Key words: acting, actresses, acting techniques, acting methods, Flanders, character, preparation, theater, film, television

Kernwoorden: acteren, actrices, acteertechnieken, acteermethodes, Vlaanderen, rol, voorbereiding, theater, film, televisie

## Summary

In this research paper, I tried to answer the question of how Flemish actresses create their role in theatre, film and television in Flanders. A lot of research has been done about how actors approach the preparation of their role, but I have chosen to be more specific and to focus on Flemish women, as they still have a more fragile position in the sector than men and still earn less than their male colleagues. As the first phase of this research, I have written a literature review about the elements that are important in the job of a Flemish actress. I started this with an overview of the most known Western acting methods and researched the theories of Elly Konijn and Denis Diderot. Subsequently, I tried to paint the picture of the current theatre, film and television landscape, taking into account the economical circumstances, such as the savings and how it is to act in Flanders as a woman. For the methodology, we interviewed ten Flemish actresses in depth. For this, we chose two participants from each Flemish theatre school (RITCS, KASK, Luca Drama and the Royal Conservatory of Antwerp) and two participants who have not been to a theatre school. The results showed that acting methods are not used that frequently anymore among Flemish actresses: only a few actresses were able to describe which acting method was the closest to their own, others claimed that they weren't very concerned about that and they all said that they did not really talk about that with colleagues or it was just brought up to be laughed about. However, they did claim that it was important to be technically strong as an actress and, for example, to be able to control your voice and your body. Elements that were brought up by the actresses as being important can be linked to elements of the techniques of Konstantin Stanislavsky, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, Jerzy Grotowski, Bertolt Brecht and Viola Spolin but we were not able to find a common thread among the actresses. Two participants claimed to follow method acting, one told that her work was a mix between Brecht and Stanislavsky and one actress stated that her acting is especially characterized by the physical method of Grotowski. When the techniques they used were compared to the previously mentioned methods, they appeared to largely coincide. However, other elements of other techniques could be seen as well, which could lead us to believe that most of the actresses use a form of hybrid acting, which is a term that was first used by the theatre researcher Richard Schechner who established that most of the actors do not solely use one method of acting but combine different elements like a sort of patchwork. All actresses but one refuted Diderot's statement and found it important to feel emotions during their acting game. Most of them said that they at least felt "something" during their acting. Connected to the importance they attach to concentration, it is plausible that what they feel are actually task-emotions. Nevertheless, this is merely a hypothesis, since this is only based on opinions and no

psychological tests were done to confirm or refute this hypothesis. In addition, it also came to light that, even though receiving a theatre education can be beneficial, it is not absolutely necessary. However, it is important to follow a particular school of thought, either by teachers, workshops or one of the acting schools and that you always keep evolving as an actress. When preparing the role, most of the actresses put a lot of emphasis on observation. We attached importance to some core concepts emerging from the research, such as concentration, intuition, authenticity and a good balance between effort and relaxation. Most of the actresses claimed that the most important differences between acting in front of the camera or in a theatre were that acting for a film was more technical. Cutting costs in the sector are keenly felt, similarly to the power imbalance between men and women in the sector. The actresses indicate that the insecurity in the sector are very prominent and that sometimes leads to some wanting to stop acting. Lastly, we also noticed that there is still work to be done in the representation of actresses of color. The actresses would also like to see solutions for problems like budget, gender and representation of people of color. We can conclude that there is no consensus about the way that "The Flemish actress" prepares her role. However, Flemish actresses share some common values, as well as some core elements that are of utmost importance to be an actress.

In deze thesis is er gepoogd antwoord te krijgen op de vraag hoe Vlaamse actrices hun rol creëren in theater, film en televisie in Vlaanderen. Er is reeds vaak onderzocht hoe acteurs precies te werken gaan, maar ik heb besloten om me specifiek toe te spitsen op Vlaamse vrouwen. Ik heb gekozen om vrouwen te interviewen, gezien zij nog steeds een kwetsbaardere positie hebben in de sector dan mannen, onder andere door het feit dat ze nog steeds ondergerepresenteerd zijn in de sector en minder verdienen dan hun mannelijke collega's. Als eerste fase in het onderzoek heb ik een literatuurstudie geschreven met betrekking tot elementen die relevant zijn in het beroep van een Vlaamse actrice. Ik startte met een overzicht van de meest bekende Westerse acteermethodes en onderzocht ook de theoriën van Elly Konijn en Denis Diderot. Vervolgens poogde ik een beeld te schetsen van het huidige landschap op vlak van theater, film en televisie, met in achtneming van de economische omstandigheden, zoals de besparingen en hoe het er in Vlaanderen aan toegaat om te acteren als vrouw. Als methodologie werden diepte-interviews afgenomen bij tien Vlaamse actrices. Hierbij werd er gekozen voor twee participanten van elke Vlaamse toneelschool (RITCS, KASK, Luca Drama en het Koninklijk Conservatorium Antwerpen) en twee participanten die geen toneelschool hadden gevolgd. Uit de resultaten bleek dat acteermethodes in 2021 niet meer zo levendig zijn bij Vlaamse actrices: slechts enkele actrices kunnen omschrijven bij welke acteermethode ze het dichtste aanleunen, de anderen gaven aan er eigenlijk niet zo mee bezig te zijn en allemaal



zeiden ze dat er hier met collega's niet over wordt gepraat of zelfs lacherig over wordt gedaan. Wel meenden ze dat het belangrijk is om als actrice technisch sterk te zijn en met name een goede beheersing te hebben van het lichaam en de stem. Elementen die de actrices belangrijk vonden en meenden te gebruiken konden gelinkt worden aan elementen uit de technieken van Konstantin Stanislavsky, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, Jerzy Grotowski, Bertolt Brecht, Viola Spolin maar er werd hierin geen rode draad onderscheiden die bij elke actrice hetzelfde was. Twee participanten meenden aanhangers te zijn van method acting, één iemand vertelde dat haar werk een synthese is tussen Brecht en Stanislavsky en een laatste actrice vertelde dat haar spel vooral gebaseerd was op de fysieke methode van Grotowski. Wanneer hun gebruikte technieken vergeleken werden met de voorgenoemde methodes, bleken die inderdaad grotendeels te overlappen, maar konden er vaak ook nog elementen van andere technieken onderscheiden worden. Dit doet vermoeden dat de meeste Vlaamse actrices waarschijnlijk gebruik maken van *hybrid acting*, een term vooropgesteld door theaterwetenschapper Richard Schechner, die vaststelt dat de meeste acteurs zich niet strict vasthouden aan één methode, maar dat ze verschillende elementen combineren als een soort lappendeken. Alle actrices op één na weerlegden de stelling van Diderot en vonden het belangrijk om emoties te voelen tijdens hun spel. De meesten zeiden dat ze op zijn minst "iets" voelden tijdens het acteren. Gekoppeld aan het belang dat ze hechten aan concentratie, is het plausibel dat dat wat ze voelen, eigenlijk taak-emoties zijn. Dit is echter een hypothese gezien dit enkel gebaseerd is op subjectieve meningen en er geen psychologische testen werden uitgevoerd om deze hypothese te bevestigen of te weerleggen. Verder kwam er aan het licht dat hoewel het volgen van een theateropleiding nuttig kan zijn, het geen absolute noodzaak is, maar het wel van belang is om een bepaalde leerschool te volgen, hetzij door leermeesters, workshops, of één van de toneelscholen en dat je altijd blijft ontwikkelen als actrice. Bij rolvoorbereiding werd er door de meesten veel belang gehecht aan observatie. Enkele kernbegrippen waar belang aan werd gehecht die naar voren kwamen waren onder andere, concentratie, intuïtie, authenticiteit en een goede balans tussen spanning en ontspanning. De belangrijkste verschillen tussen acteren voor de camera en acteren in het theater werden aangehaald met als voornaamste consensus dat film acteren technischer is. De besparingen in de sector zijn erg voelbaar net zoals de machtsverhouding tussen mannen en vrouwen in de sector die nog steeds ongelijk zit. De actrices geven aan dat de onzekerheid in de sector zwaar weegt en dat sommigen daarom reeds overwogen om te stoppen met acteren. Ook is er nog werk aan de winkel op vlak van de representatie van actrices van kleur. De actrices zouden dan ook graag oplossingen zien voor de problemen op vlak van budget, gender en representatie van

mensen van kleur. We kunnen besluiten dat er geen eenduidigheid is over op welke manier “de Vlaamse actrice” haar rol voorbereid, maar dat de Vlaamse actrices wel enkele gemeenschappelijke waarden delen, alsook het belang van bepaalde elementen die onontbeerlijk zijn om als actrice je ambacht uit te oefenen.

## Introduction

The craft of acting is ancient, stemming from the ancient Greeks and is still very lively to this day. Over the years, a multitude of books, with a lot of varying opinions, about how to best practice the craft of acting have been written. There has been rather extensive research in the past about acting in Hollywood and how actors prepare for their role, but to the best of my knowledge, this has not been the case in Flanders. Therefore, I found it useful to conduct similar research in a Flemish context. Phillip B. Zarrilli said that “the actor’s perception and practice of acting is a complex, ongoing set of intellectual and psychophysiological negotiations” and that “these negotiations are between and among one ‘self’ and a variety of (explicitly or implicitly) competing paradigms and discourses of acting/performance” (2). I want to find out which discourses and paradigms the Flemish actresses have affinity with and whether they follow (aspects of) some of the most discussed Western acting methods. For my thesis, I have chosen to focus exclusively on actresses. Research from 2020 has shown that women are still underrepresented in leading roles in film (Lauzen 1). This, in combination with the fact that I live in Flanders myself and to narrow the scope of my research, are what drew me to study and discuss Flemish actresses specifically. By means of a concise literary study and an explorative, qualitative research carried out by in-depth expert interviews, I will try to outline the current state of affairs concerning the character creation of Flemish actresses. The aim is to discover if there is a common ground between them and if there are certain themes where the opinions vastly differ. The literature review will focus on the most discussed acting methods in the Western world, a brief sketch of the Flemish theater-, film- and television landscape, the current economic conditions in the sector and the theme of acting as a woman and the #MeToo movement in Flanders. This way I would like to establish a framework in which Flemish actresses create their roles. In the result section, the themes that were discerned in the interviews will be discussed and compared with the findings from the literature review. All of this led me to the following research question and sub-questions: how does an actress create her character in theater, television and film in Flanders? Which acting techniques does she use? Is her profession influenced by the production conditions in Flanders? Is her profession influenced by her gender? By answering these questions, I hope to paint a picture of how actresses in Flanders function.

## Literature review

### Acting methods

Phillip B. Zarrilli said the following about acting methods: “Every time an actor performs, he or she implicitly enacts a ‘theory’ of acting – a set of assumptions about the conventions and style which guide his or her performance, the structure of actions which he or she performs, the shape that those actions take (as a character, role, or sequence of actions as in some performance art), and the relationship to the audience” (3). Most of the acting methods I will discuss are affiliated with Stanislavsky in some kind of way. The American Laboratory Theater, which was founded in 1923 and taught Stanislavsky’s system, had Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler amongst its students, who would later move on to become key figures in the world of Western acting methods themselves (Bartow xvii). Strasberg and Adler, together with Meisner, can be seen as “the troika of Stanislavsky-based approaches to American acting” (Bartow xix). Some of the described techniques may have conflicting ideas, whereas others are more complementary or have overlaps, but, as Arthur Bartow says: “If every human organism reacted in the same way to the same information, we would need only one technique, we would all be the same, and the world would be a boring place” (xxii). Besides the aforementioned names, I will also look at the techniques of Jerzy Grotowski, Bertolt Brecht, Michael Chekhov, Uta Hagen, David Mamet and Viola Spolin. Lastly, the classification proposed by Richard Schechner will be briefly tackled, as well as a possible definition of classical training. A lot of different classifications of acting exist, but I have chosen to focus on Western acting methods <sup>1</sup> stemming from the perspective of individuals. My selection was based on which methods I encountered most while going through several composite volumes about acting techniques. From each method, I have chosen to highlight some key terms regarding acting specifically. To give an overview of all the acting techniques that exist and their evolution would be too exhaustive for this thesis.

### *Konstantin Stanislavsky*

Almost all techniques mentioned in this literature review stem from Stanislavsky in one way or another. Emotional memory, the concept that later formed the foundation for Strasberg’s method is perhaps Stanislavsky’s most well-known concept. Emotional memory can be described as “your store-room as an actor, coming from your own experiences and supplemented by your ‘second-hand’ experiences as gained from museums, books, galleries, films, television etc.” (Merlin 226). Through the stimulation of our senses, these emotional

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<sup>1</sup> Although a lot of Western acting methods we know today are influenced by non-Western cultures (Zarrilli 90).

memories can be aroused (Merlin 184). According to Stanislavsky, the basis for every actor training should be “psycho-physicality”, a concept that “alludes to the fact that your body and your psyche are trained together to achieve a sense of inner-outer co-ordination” (Merlin 38). Besides his emphasis on emotions and psychology, another crucial concern of him was “action”: “every action you perform must have some kind of logic and sequence, otherwise you distort your sense of truth” (Merlin 198). For any of these actions, to have an “objective” is crucial (Merlin 198). For Stanislavsky, “truthful acting” is important (Merlin 36). He emphasizes the importance of true listening on two levels: listening to yourself and to your performance partner (Merlin 36). The goal of his training is the stimulation of inspiration (Merlin 39). Concerning script analysis, Stanislavsky wants his actors to study their script while considering the following four elements: the given circumstances of each character, the objectives they are trying to achieve, the actions they will employ in attempting to achieve these objectives and the units of action or “beats” that can be discerned in every scene (Baron 29). These beats reveal the series of actions the characters will utilize to reach their objectives (Baron 29). Stanislavsky says actors should make an “inner model with the help of artistic imagination to answer the w-questions (who, what, where, why and when)” (*Acting Emotions* 47). Actors should look at text as a “map to action” and he found that carefully analyzing and understanding the text was crucial to grasp the total action of the play (Harrop 54). In this regard, it is also important to look at the “given circumstances” of a play (Merlin 104). The magic ‘if’ is another element of Stanislavsky’s technique. In this technique, the actor must imagine what he would do if he were in the situation his character finds himself in (Harrop 53). According to Stanislavsky, this will enable the actor to make the appropriate choices of action (Harrop 53). Besides the magic ‘if’, other tools for building a sense of truth are “imagination” – “a well-developed imagination is your key to artistic freedom” – and “observation” (Merlin 182). In his opinion, the subconscious is also important: “Igniting inspiration and accessing the creative genius of the subconscious is what we’re really seeking as actors as we ‘embody a role’” (Merlin 252). Active analysis is another tool used in his rehearsal process: a technique in which after reading their lines, an actor would improvise the scenes – these improvisations are called études – before they start learning their lines (Merlin 272). The intent of active analysis is to find “the right score of physical actions to spark powerful emotional responses within you

as an actor” (Merlin 272). Lastly, Stanislavsky’s technique discerns four tools for preparing the “blank canvas” of the actor: relaxation, breathing, concentration and attention<sup>2</sup> (Merlin 56).

### *Lee Strasberg*

The technique developed by Lee Strasberg are mostly referred to as “the Method” or as “method acting” nowadays (Brumm qtd. in “The Actor’s Emotions Reconsidered” 62). Strasberg’s concept of affective memory is based upon Stanislavsky’s concept of emotional memory (Hollinger 12). Strasberg “lets the actor relive his personal emotional memories to make the abstract emotions of the character concrete” (*Acting Emotions* 47). In the Method, “the actor is not playing a character, rather, the actor ‘is playing himself’” (Dwight qtd. in Scheeder 3). Strasberg invented the “private moment exercise”: through the enactment of “a moment of true privacy in front of people, Strasberg hoped to get them to confront the issue and conquer it” (Scheeder 3). The private moment exercise was created because, according to Strasberg, revealing real feelings to an audience is challenging (Schechner 179). Other techniques that were introduced by Strasberg are substitution and biography (Harrop 40). Substitution is a technique in which the actor imposes the image of someone they know in real life on their scene partner (Harrop 40). Biography, then, entails the crafting of the character’s life, going beyond the information that was disclosed by the author (Harrop 40). He was also an advocate of improvisation, not in the sense that we most commonly associate the term with nowadays, but improvisation as “verbal innovation in rehearsal that leads to an exploration of the character’s thoughts and feelings” (Hollinger 13). The actor must explore himself, exhaust his own emotional memory and search inside himself to find elements that can give shape and content to a role (Crombez et al. 286). Strasburg put an end to every form of theatricality in acting: the incomprehensible, the indecent and the repulsive all form an inexhaustible source for the authenticity that the actor must strive towards (Crombez et al. 286). The Method in its current form has however not remained uncriticized. One of the problems, according to some critics is the danger of the “solipsism of playing oneself” and the possible abuse of emotion memory (Harrop 53). Some even see a connection between method acting and the #MeToo movement and even go as far as saying the following:

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<sup>2</sup> To achieve this state of concentration, Stanislavsky invented the concept of the “fourth wall”: “an imaginary wall between the actor and the audience designed to keep the actor’s attention on the stage” (Merlin 56).

Method-based practices are still doing gender-based harm, whether in the form of guru gatekeepers who use their power inappropriately, gender-differentiated training that affirms stereotypes, directors and teachers who treat women actors and characters as objects instead of subjects of their own action, or actors who act irresponsibly while ‘in character’. (Derr)

Emma Willis said the following about this matter, seeing naturalistic acting as an environment in which exploitative behavior can be found:

The language and concepts of acting methodologies, particularly those of naturalistic acting, are often entangled in how exploitative behavior is framed. For example: an actor is overtaken by the muse of the real, and therefore cannot be held fully responsible for his actions; that is, his abuses of ‘mistakes’, are an unfortunate consequence of deep commitment to craft. (258)

Feminist critics have described the method as being “inherently patriarchal and misogynist”, due to it connecting good acting with male actors, which has consequently caused the denigration of the actress as an artist (Hollinger 15). However, to this day, the method still proves its worth, since it has provided actors with “concrete tools to deal with the practical problems of film acting” among other things (Carnicke qtd. in Hollinger 13). One can notice indeed that method acting can be seen as a technique that is mostly being linked to some sort of masculinity (Zagers). Possible reasons for this are that some actors use method acting as prove of their masculinity and that the list of method-actresses one can think of on top of one’s head is rather small (Zagers). Another point of criticism on modern-day method acting is that it has become increasingly extreme, starting with Daniel Day-Lewis as the pioneer in the 1980s, and that it is steering away more and more from how Lee Strasberg had originally intended it (Zagers). Since Daniel-Day Lewis started this more extreme variant, method acting seems to have taken a new path: that of a total maniacal obsession, where actors stay in character always and everywhere and where the distinction between actor and character ceases to exist (Zagers).

### *Bertolt Brecht*

Brecht wants the actor to “engage his role actively” and to enter into a “dialectical relationship” with the role (Schechner 180). Philip Auslander claims that Stanislavsky’s central priority is overturned by Brecht, since Brecht “privileges the conscious mind over the subconscious because even that level of the psyche has been poisoned by social indoctrination” (55). Another

principle of Stanislavsky that is overturned by Brecht is the principle of the fourth wall: “It is of course necessary to drop the assumption that there is a fourth wall cutting the audience off from the stage and the consequent illusion that the stage action is taking place in reality and without an audience. That being so, it is possible for the actor in principle to address the audience direct” (Brecht qtd. in Unwin 104). Brecht wanted his actors to cause an alienation effect which Stephen Unwin explains as follows:

The ‘alienation effect’ occurs when the audience is encouraged to question its preconceptions and look at the familiar in a new and different way – that is, to make it strange [...] To induce the ‘alienation effect’, everyone involved in staging a production needs to know what the writer thinks about the events portrayed, and let this understanding affect every aspect of his work. Producing the ‘alienation effect’ requires a kind of double vision from the actor, who needs both to inhabit his character and remember that he is showing it. (71)

By causing this alienation effect, Brecht wanted to indicate that theater is not daily life (Schechner 180). Brecht’s main goal was to encourage his audiences to think critically about how society was built (Hayman 47). In Brechtian acting, *Gestus* and *Haltungen* were also important concepts. Meg Mumford defines *Gestus* as follows: “*Gestus* entails the aesthetic gestural presentation of the socio-economic and ideological construction of human identity and interaction” (Mumford qtd. in Barnett 94). She also added that it is “the externalization of the socially significant” and that a “figure’s gestures, or indeed its body-shape, can say things that go beyond the individual and reveal important things about their place in the social and economic situation. That is, the actor’s body is involved in a dynamic relationship with its social contexts as a way of establishing a visible connection between the two” (Barnett 94). Brecht states that actors should be aware of how they to other people and that “different situations will call for different responses” (Barnett 97). *Haltungen* then, are the different responses and behavior we show opposed to other people (Barnett 97).

### *Jerzy Grotowski*

In Moscow Jerzy Grotowski, came across the theories of Vsevolod Meyerhold, whose technique was a physical approach to theater that he labeled as “biomechanics<sup>3</sup>” (Bartow xxix). Grotowski too developed a technique focused on physical acting by asking the following

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<sup>3</sup> The technique of biomechanics consists of sixteen “études”; exercises that were designed to teach a number of specific principles of scenic movements to acting students (Gordon 106).



question time and time again: “What must an actor do to be fully alive onstage?” (Wangh 175). Grotowski is “concerned with the relation of the ‘mask of lies’ we wear in everyday life to the ‘secret motor’ behind the mask” (Grotowski qtd. in Auslander 55). By confrontation with the everyday self, “its deep roots and hidden motives”, Grotowski hopes to produce revelation, “an excess of truth” (Auslander 55). He focusses on the development of “psychophysical techniques”, meaning “techniques which equally engaged the actor’s mind (psycho) and body (physical) in a “total” intensive engagement in the moment (Zarrilli 90). In Grotowski’s eyes, “kinesthetic learning” is a crucial aspect of his training process (Lendra 148). He emphasizes human contact in his training and that all acting is “not an action but a reaction to something that is happening to us” (Wangh 179). He sees his acting training as a “via negativa”, meaning “a ‘way backwards’ to things we once knew” (Wangh 169). Similar to Antonin Artaud, Grotowski’s theater starts where words fall short (Crombez et al. 294). To him, theater is above all a physical and vocal expressive form (Crombez et al. 294). He teaches his actors that they should not look at the voice as being a separate entity from the body (Hayman 100). Thus, his actor training requires “great effort to develop accomplished physical dexterity and powerful vocal abilities” (Bartow xxix). He created a system of exercises that are aimed at achieving the following qualities, that can be associated with those of an athlete: plasticity, power, agility, timing and balance (Harrop 24). The aim of these exercises is to activate the actor’s body memory and to enable the actor to have immediate access to his body’s store of memories, relying on the science that our nerves and tissues will have remembered and that they will respond to similar stimuli again: “do the act and the feeling will follow” (Harrop 24). Firstly, Grotowski introduces his students to his full-body exercises and then to his “exercises plastiques”, which are “physical isolations that allow you to explore the connections between particular physical gestures and personal imagery and emotion” (Wangh 177).

Philip Auslander says Grotowski’s, Brecht’s and Stanislavsky’s techniques can all be linked to a sentence of Joseph Chaikin: “Acting is a demonstration of self with or without a disguise” (Chaikin qtd. in Auslander 54). Auslander states the following about how Grotowski, Brecht and Stanislavsky relate to this demonstration of the self: “For Stanislavsky, the disguise must be based on the actor’s own emotional experience; Brecht wants the disguise to be separable from the actor’s own persona. Grotowski believes that the actor must use the disguise by her role to cut away the disguise imposed on her by socialization and expose the most basic levels of self” (Auslander 54).

### *Sanford Meisner*

Meisner's motto concerning actors is that they must "live truthfully under imaginary circumstances" (Naremore 34). Meisner developed the concept of emotional preparation which can be defined as "using use the process of daydreaming to induce the emotional life the character requires prior to entering the scene" (Hart 65). For Meisner, "acting is doing": "There is a world of difference between the actor who is caused authentically to do what his character must do and the actor who only indicates or self-generates his actions" (Hart 51). He also wants actors to focus on their partner (Bartow xxv). The reality of doing, in combination with focusing on one's partner, becomes apparent in Meisner's repetition exercise, in which one actor initiates the exercise by responding to something he truly sees, whereafter his partner must repeat this and as time goes on, the actors will begin to respond to one another (Hart 53). Through responding and listening, Meisner's exercises are designed to allow for a "true, unpremeditated response by the actor" (Bartow xxv). Crucial in the repetition exercise is the "actor's faith": before engaging in the exercise, the actor "accepts his circumstance as a reality". Meisner's idea is that acting should look spontaneous (Bartow xix). The Meisner technique also contains an improvisational component, namely by means of "the actor's paraphrase": "a way to improvise, alone and out loud, with the events, the life circumstance of the character – in effect, to build a series of associations, memories and daydreams that help the actor acquire his new life" (Hart 86). Lastly, Meisner, in parallel with a few other methods, also entails the psychological analysis of the script, namely reading the script and learning to ask the right questions: questions that can guide the actor to better understand "why the character says what is written" (Hart 76).

### *Stella Adler*

The three principle aims of Stella Adler's technique are opening oneself fully to life and to the world, mining the infinite depth of imagination, and human growth (Oppenheim 29). Parallel to the Meisner technique, the Stella Adler technique is a technique that is oriented towards action, by embracing the point of view that "acting is doing" (Oppenheim 32). Another element she lends from Meisner is that she works with the concept of "living truthfully in imaginary circumstances" (Oppenheim 33). The technique has three distinct branches: foundation, character, and script interpretation (Oppenheim 31). The biggest difference between Strasberg and Adler can be found in the fact that according to Strasberg, you must dig into your deepest inner self, whereas Adler claims you have to find the answers in your imagination (Bartow xix).

Feminist theater theory today acknowledges Stanislavsky's system and its possibilities, mostly through how the system was modified and taught by Adler (Derr).

### *Michael Chekhov*

Michael Chekhov was also one of Stanislavsky's students but unlike Stanislavsky, Chekhov considers imagination to be more important than the use of affective memory (Bartow xxvi). Stanislavsky's insistence on being "true to life" is something Chekhov finds limiting (Hart 108). He prefers using his trademark technique, "psychological gesture", which can be defined as follows: "Psychological Gesture is a movement that expresses the psychology of the character [...] The PG is a physical expression of the thoughts, feelings and desires of the character, incorporated into one movement [...] You perform the gesture prior to your scene to trigger your artistic nature" (Dalton qtd. in Hart 112). Chekhov regards acting as "a spiritual logic" and through his technique, Chekhov communicates images "directly to the actor's artistic inner life without first needing to be cerebrally translated" (Bartow xxvii). Chekhov further developed "psycho-technique", a term coined by Stanislavsky, meaning as much as "the complete integration of psychology and physicality" (Merlin 4). He established a new vocabulary for the physical body of the actor, by using exercises that he developed "to keep the actor's body and imagination energetically balanced" (Brahe 102). Furthermore, he distinguished the Five Qualities of Movement (radiation, fire, flying, floating and molding), which were able to increase and stimulate "the dynamics of an actor's physical vocabulary in the craft of acting" (Brahe 104).

### *Uta Hagen*

Like Meisner, actress Uta Hagen focusses on the development of spontaneity and imagination, (Bartow xxviii). Besides enabling her performances to be spontaneous, her technique also helps them to grow and be alive continuously (Rosenfeld 127). For her, acting is "the exploration and discovery of the mysteries that make us human" (Rosenfeld 127). She has an eye for detail: if you make "every detail in the play as specific as it can be, you can let the circumstances of the play happen to you and propel you into action" (Rosenfeld 128). In analogy to Stanislavsky's emphasis on the senses, Hagen claims that "the five senses were the pathways to the body, mind, heart and soul" (Rosenfeld 128). Six steps and ten exercises make up the core of her technique (Rosenfeld 129). The six steps consist of six questions, similar to the ones in Stanislavsky's inner model. Alongside Meisner and Adler, Hagen also believes that "action is

at the heart of all acting” and that it is crucial “to think in terms of your doings, your actions, as opposed to your feelings” (Rosenfeld 135, 149). Lastly, another important element Uta Hagen proposes is substitution, a concept that is using experiences and facts from your own life that can be related to the scene you are playing, enabling actors to put themselves in the circumstances of the performances in a convincing way (Rosenfeld 161).

### *David Mamet*

David Mamet invented the technique called “practical aesthetics” (Bartow xxxii). The basis of Mamet’s technique was distilled from the Meisner technique that emphasized craftsmanship (Collard 329). Mamet adopted and modified Meisner’s repetition exercise, claiming that this can help actors in overcoming self-consciousness: by placing their attention on something else, like their action or their scene partner (Bella 242). Mamet wants to demystify the craft of acting by inventing a technique that everyone can employ (Merlin 245). Mamet believes the actor’s job is to affect the audience (Bella 225). According to Mamet, the best way to do this is to “actually commit to life’s improvisational nature” by using an improvisational approach in relation to saying your lines (Bella 238). Important in this improvisational approach is “the truth of the moment”, meaning “everything that is transpiring while an actor performs any given beat” (Bella 238). For Mamet, the endeavor to “become the character” is a waste of time, since “plain logic tells us that we are never *truthfully* anyone but ourselves” (Bella 227). Furthermore, Mamet also states that you cannot control your emotions, and that the actor should focus less on feelings and more on actions and doings, following Meisner, Adler and Hagen in this regard (Bella 230). He called Stanislavsky’s method “nonsense” and said that there is no need for the actor to “become” the character, that nothing is “less interesting than an actor on the stage involved in his or her own emotions” and that rather, what the audience needs to see is an “illusion of a character” while looking at a performance (Mamet 6, 9-10). He claims that it is the actor who is onstage, not the character, which is in analogy with what Brecht says about this subject (Mamet 104). In Practical Aesthetics, the actor should analyze his script by means of asking the following four questions: “What is my character literally doing? What does my character want? What is the essential action of what my character is doing? What does that action mean to me? It’s as if...” (Bella 231). The latter is not the same as Stanislavsky’s magic “if” In Mamet’s interpretation of the concept, you should not engage your memory, but your imagination (Bella 236). The “as if” is an imaginary story, “something that could happen, but has not already happened”, enabling you to “shed light on the essential nature of the

relationships, the overall scene, the underlying dilemma, and what is at stake for your character (Bella 236-237).

### *Richard Schechner*

Richard Schechner proposes his own categorization, consisting of the following five categories: realistic acting, Brechtian acting, codified acting, trance acting and performing objects – masks and puppets (175). Schechner says realistic acting is the dominant style of acting in the Western world and that when an actor performs realistically, he is probably following Stanislavsky's principles (176). With Brechtian acting, he refers to the style of Brecht, emphasizing Brecht "did not want the actor to disappear into the role" but rather "wanted the actor to engage the role actively" (180). He defines codified acting as "performing according to a semiotically constructed score of movements, gestures, songs, costumes, and makeup", trance acting as acting defined by a "possession trance", which occurs "when performers are taken over by non-human beings or things – gods, spirits, demons, forces, animals, or objects" and when talking about performing objects, he explains how "masks and puppets actually constitute second beings who interact with the human actors" (183, 192, 203). Besides this categorization, Schechner also talked about hybrid acting: many actors do not strictly follow one of the categories he discussed and often, in the same performance, elements of different kinds of acting can be combined into some sort of "quilt, moving from one kind of acting to another" (204). One can discern an opposition between the techniques of Stanislavsky and Brecht, but Schechner rather believed that Brechtian acting is supplemental to Stanislavsky's realistic acting instead of opposed to it (Schechner 180). Schechner notices how Brechtian theater is "profoundly social" whereas Stanislavsky focusses on the actor having to work on himself (Schechner 182).

### *Viola Spolin*

There are some acting techniques based on improvisation as well, with the most prominent one being the technique of Viola Spolin. Spolin placed a lot of emphasis on spontaneity – "the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with a reality and see it, explore it and act accordingly" and on intuition (4). However, in this thesis, I will focus on how Flemish actresses create their character starting from a script, which is why I have chosen to refrain from elaborating on Spolin's technique or other techniques based on improvisation.

### *Classical training*

Lastly, if classical training is mentioned, this is mostly referring to “a course of study that gives equal weight to rigorous voice and text work, stage combat, singing, relaxation and isolation of physical movement, dance, and some form of traditional (Stanislavsky-based) acting technique, scene work and performance” (Bartow xxxv).

### The postdramatic theater, Elly Konijn’s *Acting Emotions* and Diderot’s “Actor’s Paradox”

Traditionally, acting has been looked at as being some sort of “falsehood” or “pretending” and has been placed in juxtaposition with the truth of our everyday lives (McCurdy backcover). However, in the postmodern era, this has been flipped and the opposite has come to the fore: “real life is revealed as something acted and acting is where people have begun to search for truth” (McCurdy back cover). Concerning acting techniques, we have seen this shift starting with Stanislavsky and later Lee Strasberg with his realistic acting techniques and his refusal of “acting as pretending in favor of doing or being present” (McCurdy 12). Strasberg came to the conclusion that it was essential “to really live and to really experience on stage” (Garifeld in Crombez et al. 286). Hans-Thies Lehman, who coined the term of the postdramatic theater said that the actor in the postdramatic theater is often “no longer the actor of a role but a performer offering his/her presence on stage for contemplation” (135). The strongest explosion of postdramatic theater in Flanders occurs in the beginning of the 1980s (Crombez et al. 313). Following this trend, we can see a decline in the importance of representing real/realistic character-emotions on stage, but rather an influx of companies that place actors as themselves, as people (*Acting Emotions* 19).

Denis Diderot, who coined the term of the “actor’s paradox” argues that the best actors do not utilize “sensibility” or feel emotions strongly, but rather use “imitation” (Naremore 34). Diderot argues that actors that are too dependent upon their emotions, tend to lose control easier and that their performances are not always of a steady quality (Naremore 34). He placed these actors in juxtaposition to imitative actors, that are observants of social conventions and human nature, through which they can develop “imaginary models of dramatic characters” and are able to reproduce the same type of emotional colors and behavior every evening (Naremore 34). Nowadays, discussions about “the actor’s paradox” are very lively. These are discussions “concerning the paradoxical relationship between the ‘truth’ of the actor’s emotions and the emotions portrayed by his character” (Konijn, *Acting Emotions* 21). The two opposing views concerning this topic are described by Elly Konijn in the following manner:

On one side are the so-called emotionalists, who believe that the actor himself must experience the emotions he/she expresses in his/her role. On the other side are the so-called anti-emotionalists, who believe that the actor must not allow himself to be overwhelmed with his character's emotions. (Konijn, *Acting Emotions* 21)

Konijn states that the relationship between the emotions of the actor and those of the character is what takes a central position in this whole discussion. Should the emotions of the actor and the emotions of the character be in concurrence with one another or not (*Acting Emotions* 11)? She discerns three big trends while looking at most Western acting methods: the involvement style with Stanislavsky and Strasberg as its proponents, the detachment style, under which Brecht's epic theater and Meyerhold's biomechanics can be placed, and a third style that is self-expressive, where we can place the work of Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, Richard Schechner and Eugenio Barba (*Acting Emotions* 15). Furthermore, Konijn also discusses the notion of the "double consciousness" of the actor, which means that the actor is "fully connecting with the character's emotions, at the same time being in complete control of them" (*Acting Emotions* 31). She launched the concept of task emotion theory, which states that actors use so-called task emotions to imitate the emotions of characters, enabling them to make these imitations appear believable and spontaneous (Hollinger 15). Task-emotions are emotions brought about by "the actor's emotional response to the challenges of acting<sup>4</sup>", that are used to construct "the illusion of spontaneous character-emotions for the audience [...] lending to the external form of emotions the aspect of real emotions" (*Acting Emotions* 152). She eventually concludes that "the chance that the actor in performance will actually be touched (during the performance) by the essence of an emotion evoked through imagination is very slight. This is simply because the task concerns<sup>5</sup> in the acting situation have more reality, objectivity, and urgency for the professional actor than the dramatic situation does (*Acting Emotions* 93). One flaw of Konijn's

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<sup>4</sup> Some examples are the need to present a positive self-image, to appear as being a capable actor, and to create a performance that is aesthetically pleasing, as well as the stress, excitement and risk of the performance situation (Hollinger 15).

<sup>5</sup> Task concerns are concerns that are "put at stake by the task situation" and that "motivate emotional behavior" (*Acting Emotions* 61). Konijn borrows this term from psychologist Nico Frijda who makes a distinction between "source concerns" and "surface concerns": "Source concerns refer to general concerns and motivations related to desirable situations and goals (for example safety or competence), while surface concerns refer to specific interests which relate to specific goals, people, or objects (for example a sense of security with mother)" (*Acting Emotions* 61).

research in the context of this thesis is that she only conducted her research based on acting for the theater and that she disregards acting for the camera (*Acting Emotions* 18).

## Flemish theater landscape

Flemish theater is also popular beyond the national borders. Foreign directors such as Johan Simons and Milo Rau are active in Belgium, and Flemish directors have found their way onto the international stage, such as Ivo Van Hove, contributing to the export of Flemish theater. When touring internationally, the Flemish performing arts find themselves an increasingly expanding international audience and through the means of collaborations, the Flemish theater companies and centers acquire co-production resources to supplement their operating budget and thus enabling the creation of presentations and productions (Kunstenpunt, “Landschapstekening 2019” 47). Since 2000, the number of Flemish performances abroad grew strongly and the number of international partnerships grew as well. Even Flemish textual theater is touring internationally successfully (De Moor). Strategies such as supertitling, live translation and playing in other languages are used, and scripts of Flemish plays are also being translated to other languages, thus enabling the creation of remakes of Flemish plays (De Moor). Furthermore, we also see more and more non-Dutch spoken plays on Flemish stages (De Moor). Kunstenpunt, the support center of the Flemish government for the development of the visual arts, music and performing arts in Flanders and Brussels helps furthering the spread of Flemish theater abroad, for example by the project “Let me be your guide”, a series of online guides in which Kunstenpunt regularly publishes short overviews of short contemporary texts about the landscape or essays of critics with the goal to get international professionals in the arts sector acquainted with the makers and organizations of Flanders and Brussels (“Let Me Be Your Guide”). The Flemish performing arts sector is often described as “The Flemish miracle” abroad, referring to the sector and its artistic quality, interesting theater makers, big diversity of types of theater houses and institutions that form one network in which there is a constant exchange (Kunstenpunt, “Landschapstekening 2019” 36). Flanders does not know a big performing arts tradition or an own repertoire (“Landschapstekening 2019” 36). This enables artistic innovation and bricolage without being burdened with the weight of history (“Landschapstekening 2019” 36). Meanwhile, theater makers were still able to draw from the rich surrounding theater-, music and dance productions (“Landschapstekening 2019” 38). Cultural organizations in Belgium get a lot of freedom to unfold their functioning to their own likings, without strict standards concerning standardization and output which leads to lots of output that is diverse, and to initiative and generosity (Kunstenpunt, “Landschapstekening



2019” 38). In the 1980s and 1990s new artistic developments started to come to the fore in Flanders, with the rise of the phenomenon of the theatercollectives in the 1990s; collectives that are characterized by the absence of a director and that decide everything collectively (Kunstenpunt, “Landschapstekening 2019” 39). Starting from the 1980s, an emancipatory wave was realized in the Flemish theater (Douibi and De Somviele). This emancipatory wave was supported by its own production apparatus and infrastructure, which serves valuable artists to this day (Douibi and De Somviele). During the late 1990s and the early 2000s more and more productions were realized without the artists involved being linked to the production apparatus of these productions for a longer period (Kunstenpunt, “Landschapstekening 2019” 39). Since the 2000s, a trend can be discerned in which the artistic practice of artists in Flanders is increasingly diversified (Douibi and De Somviele). Nowadays, the producing organizations in the performing arts are first and foremost, the companies and collectives in theater, musical theater and dance, which may or may not be structurally or project-based funded by the government (Kunstenpunt, “Landschapstekening 2019” 40). The most prominent organizations are ran by artists or are organizations where theater makers hold a central position (Kunstenpunt, “Landschapstekening 2019” 40).

### Flemish film landscape

In 2016, scholar Gertjan Willems stated that manufacturing movies is “an extremely costly affair” and since the Flemish film market is rather small, the consequence is that even popular Flemish films are seldom profitable (227). It can thus be legitimized that most<sup>6</sup> commercially motivated and popular Flemish films receive government support (Willems 227). Films that are funded by the government through the Flanders Audiovisual Fund (VAF) can be divided into four categories: fiction, animated movies, documentaries and ‘movielab’<sup>7</sup> (Vlaams Audiovisueel Fonds vzw 12). Besides the Flanders Audiovisual Fund, Flemish filmmakers can also receive regional support, with Screen Flanders and Bruxellimage being the points of contact for Flanders and Brussels respectively (Vlaams Audiovisueel fonds vzw 14). The Belgian Tax Shelter, foreign funds and European support mechanisms such as Eurimages and Creative Europe can offer their support as well (Vlaams Audiovisueel fonds vzw 14-15). Even though Flanders makes some high-quality movies, the success of these movies at the box office is unstable. Whereas the Flemish film sector had a very successful year in 2018, in 2019 the

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<sup>6</sup> There are some examples however, even though these are scarce, of Flemish movies that are not subsidized and are successful abroad, for example the films produced by Studio 100.

<sup>7</sup> Movielab means single audiovisual creations of a cinematic nature that discerns themselves by their innovative or atypical character (Vlaams Audiovisueel Fonds vzw 12).

sector had a big setback concerning the number of visitors at the movie theaters (Ceulemans and Broos). These declining numbers could be explained by tendencies such as streaming movies online, piracy and increasingly expensive movie theater tickets (Ceulemans and Broos). Former VAF intendant Erwin Provoost explains that it gets gradually harder and harder to position Flemish movies on a European level, because it has to be strong content-wise despite the fact that they are often produced with a small budget and that they do not have the promotional budgets that Hollywood has (“Vlaamse cinema heeft teleurstellend jaar achter de rug”). The rise of streaming services and the exponential rising of the prices of cinema tickets also play a role (“Vlaamse cinema heeft teleurstellend jaar achter de rug”). Flemish director Jan Verheyen, sees the diminishing class distinctions between film and television as another reason for the setback: series are no longer seen as inferior in comparison with movies (Ceulemans and Verberckmoes). According to Flemish director Michaël R. Roskam, the budget for filmmaking in Flanders is too tight and should be managed in a more precise manner by the government (Ceulemans and Verberckmoes).

## Flemish television fiction landscape

Flemish television series are doing great. The main trend that is detected is that less and less viewers watch Flemish series live, but they rather watch them online; which is labeled by the term “delayed viewing” (Coenegracht). Furthermore, Flemish television series are also well-received in other countries. In 2012, Econopolis communicated about the export potential of the Flemish audiovisual sector and in 2021, this potential seems to have been fulfilled (Econopolis 3). One of the foreign buyers of Flemish television series contributed the success to the fact that “Flemish drama is refreshingly different, with a clever story (De Ruyck).” Flemish professor Stijn Joye also explains the success of Flemish series abroad because of the fact that Flanders is simply taking advantage of the global tendency concerning streaming services like Amazon and Netflix, that are constantly looking for new stories and since the demand is so high, they are obliged to look beyond the United States and England (De Ruyck). In 2021, Flemish fiction series are booming abroad: several Flemish television series are being sold to broadcast networks abroad, are on Netflix or can count on international recognition by big names like Ricky Gervais and Stephen King (“Is ‘Vlaamse fictie’ een kwaliteitslabel in het buitenland?”). The VRT<sup>8</sup> attributes this success to the renewed strategy for televised fiction

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<sup>8</sup> Evidently, the VRT is not the only manufacturer of Flemish series, but it is one of the biggest players in the field. Furthermore, literature that can be found about possible reasons for the popularity of Flemish series besides the reasons stated by the VRT, is scarce.

they launched in 2017, which is based upon the combination of the unique identity of Flemish fiction with international collaboration (“Is ‘Vlaamse fictie’ een kwaliteitslabel in het buitenland?”). This success outside of Flanders has not always been the case. In 2012, when streaming services were not as popular as they are nowadays, Flemish fiction was already quite popular in Flanders, but did not manage to establish a breakthrough outside of the country borders (“Waarom Vlaamse fictie geen potten breekt in het buitenland”). It was only a year later, in 2013, that Flemish television series started their conquest of the foreign market (Droeven, “Vlaamse fictie reist de wereld rond”). Even though content-wise, Flemish television series are thriving nowadays, budget-wise, it is quite the opposite. In March of 2019, Flemish television producers had to hear that the subsidies for televised fiction for the year of 2019 were already depleted (Droeven, “Geld voor Vlaamse fictie in 2019 nu al op”). The minister of culture at the time, Sven Gatz, already brought up the problem that the sector had too little resources in 2017, but to this day, budget still appears to be an issue in the Flemish entertainment sector in general (“Vlaamse fictiereeksen onder druk”). The price of producing Flemish television series has risen and this is mostly due to the internationalization (“Hoe komen Vlaamse fictiereeksen tot op jouw scherm?”). Since the consumer has readily available access to streaming services of major players such as Disney, Netflix, HBO and Amazon, who have big budgets at their disposal, the expectations for Flemish television series also rise (“Hoe komen Vlaamse fictiereeksen tot op jouw scherm”). Furthermore, more and more foreign television series are being recorded in Belgium. Foreign companies often employ a Belgian crew and usually pay these employees more than Belgian employers would, resulting in the paychecks of people working in this sector to rise, likewise contributing to a higher cost of Flemish fiction series (“Hoe komen Vlaamse fictiereeksen tot op jouw scherm”). Paul Lembrechts, former CEO of VRT, is worried that the budget cuts for culture in Flanders will cause the broadcasting company to be forced to air more reruns and that they will not be able to produce as much high-quality television series as before (MVO). However, to counter this and to ensure the production of Flemish high-quality television series can be safeguarded, VRT and their production company that creates television series are forging financial partnerships with several partners (“Hoe komen Vlaamse fictiereeksen tot op jouw scherm?”). In 2020, Streamz, a new Flemish streaming service, was launched. However, according to the Flemish Actor’s Guild, despite the fact the platform has its benefits for the local economy, Flemish actors and actresses do not benefit from this (“Moeten acteurs ook blij zijn met Streamz?”). When an actor is part of a film or a television series that is later broadcast on television, the actor receives a small fee, whereas when these films or series are launched on streaming

platforms, the actor does not receive any money (“Moeten acteurs ook blij zijn met Streamz?”). This is a worrisome prospect: if this trend continues, eventually actors will no longer be rewarded for their hard work (“Moeten acteurs ook blij zijn met Streamz?”).

## Budget cuts in the Flemish acting sector

Due to the pandemic and the budget cuts in the sector, the theater sector took a serious blow. In November of 2019, Jan Jambon, prime minister of the Flemish government announced that he wanted to diminish the project funds for the culture sector by sixty percent (Vergeyle). For this reason, at the end of 2019, there were weekly protest actions in front of the Flemish parliament (Verstraete). In April of 2020 however, Jambon partially reversed his decision, and an extra four million euros was made available for project subsidies for organizations and artists in 2020 (Vergeyle). Concerning the income of professional actors in Belgium, research from 2014 shows that only half of them get all their income from acting; the rest of their income is gained through side jobs, or they are dependent on benefits to achieve a living wage (Siongers and Van Steen 5). In Flanders, artists can apply for an artist statute, which means that in between two acting gigs, Flemish actors receive unemployment money and can enjoy the benefit rules in unemployment that are installed for artists, technicians and supporting functions in the artistic sector (“Kunstenaarsstatuut”). In the light of the budget cuts mentioned in this section and in the separate sections about theater, film and television, receiving subsidies is indispensable for the sector (Pauli). Furthermore, these subsidies can be justified by the fact that the cultural sector is a sector that creates a lot of added value to the economical field: the sector creates significant indirect employment and for every euro of subsidies they receive, the sector is able to transform this into four euros, which means the cultural sector brings in more for the Flemish government than it costs (Pauli).

## #MeToo movement and acting as a woman in Flanders

Global attention has been drawn to workplace exploitation, harassment, abuse and bullying due to the #MeToo <sup>9</sup> and Time’s Up movements <sup>10</sup> (Willis 258). Flemish actresses Anemone Valcke, Marijke Pinoy, Ella-June Henrard and Charlotte De Bruyne all spoke out about their

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<sup>9</sup> The #MeToo movement is a movement that deals with sexual violence specifically. After allegations of harassment and sexual assault by Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, the movement gained international attention (Langone).

<sup>10</sup> Time’s Up can be seen as “a solution-based, action-oriented next step in the #Metoo movement” (Langone). It is an organization that has the goal “to create concrete change, leading to safety and equity in the workplace” (Langone).

experiences with sexual intimidation on set, in the middle of the #MeToo debacle in 2017 (Maes; “Vlaamse actrices getuigen over aanrandingen”). From directors texting them asking for sexual intercourse, to directors that ask their actresses they would like to rehearse a sex scene with them in private: according to them, those things still happen. In 2017, Flemish television maker Bart de Pauw was accused of sexually transgressive behavior towards several Flemish actresses and members of his crew during the shooting and production of several of his television programs (Decré). In 2021, the nine women that filed the accusations made themselves known (Decré). This situation made the #MeToo debate even more lively in Flanders. Before the #MeToo movement became prominent, for the last couple of years, the theme of gender inequality in the creative sector has come to the attention in other domains as well, for example with the equal pay movement in the aftermath of the Oscars of 2015<sup>11</sup> and the Equal Pay Platform of Champions which functions in a broader context to push for equal payment (Willekens et al. 3). In Flanders, only thirty-seven percent of the roles in popular Flemish fiction series are being portrayed by women (“Meer vrouwen in de cast, minder populaire film?”). In 2016, Sarah Vergaerde conducted a research about how female-friendly Belgian movies are by means of studying the forty most recent films of Belgian cinematographers up until 2015. In the Belgian movies, less women than men had screen time (fifty-eight percent versus 32,5 percent) and the studied female roles were regularly stereotypical and sexist (Vergaerde). Moreover, in the studied films, 15,2 percent of women wore revealing clothing compared to only 0,29 percent of men. This is reminiscent of the male gaze, a term coined by feminist scholar Laura Mulvey, meaning that the woman is reduced to a lust object by the onlooking man, signifying male desire (11). Only a minority of the films (sixteen out of forty) pass the Bechdel Test, a test which a movie passes when there is at least one scene in it between two female characters talking about something else than a man (Vergaerde). The film industry can still be largely considered a men’s world, both in front of and behind the scenes (Benshoff and Griffin 301). Unequal pay remains a problem for women in the sector (“Meer vrouwen in de cast, minder populaire film”). A gender pay gap is established based on total personal net income from all activities (Hillaert and Hesters). One might assume that the reason for this is that films with female leads are less successful (“Meer vrouwen in de cast, minder populaire film”). Telenet conducted a research to verify this claim and proved it to be false: a better male to female ratio even makes films more popular, even though women are still underrepresented in film (“Meer vrouwen in de cast, minder populaire film”). Another study,

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<sup>11</sup> After winning an Oscar for best supporting actress for her role in *Boyhood*, actress Patricia Arquette gave a speech about gender equality and the wage gap between women and men.

by the Center for The Study of Women in Television and Film, showed that there is however a positive evolution of the representation of women in film: the number of female leads in top grossing films rose from thirty-one percent in 2018 to thirty-four percent in 2019 (Lauzen 1). An article by Wouter Hillaert and Delphine Hesters in *rekto:verso* also states that the arts are still dominated by men (Hillaert and Hesters). The problem does not appear to be due to the influx of female students female in the theater schools, where there even is a female predominance (Hillaert and Hesters). When looking at the teaching staff, however, the reverse motion is usually seen: more male than female teachers and mentors [OBJ] (Hillaert and Hesters). According to a study conducted in 2014, the transition for women in the performing arts sector from school to the work field is more difficult than for men: sixty-six percent of female alumni find their way to the subsidized landscape in comparison with seventy-eight percent of male alumni (Van Langendonck et al. 8). Theater scientist Leen De Graeve notices that the inequality is also seen when looking at the laureates and nominees of the Flemish culture prizes, where there are far more men playing a substantial part in the whole (Damareeck). The inequality in the industry is not limited to actresses and can also be seen in other functions in the industry. Sofie Van Bauwel, professor in media studies gave a keynote speech for the launch of Women in Film, Television & Media and talked about how only sixteen percent of Flemish directors are female, compared to forty percent in The Netherlands and an average of twenty-one percent in Europe (“Dag van het diverse (?) filmberoep”). Besides, according to Van Bauwel, female directors of photography and scenarists are also underrepresented (“Dag van het diverse (?) filmberoep”). Due to the scope of this thesis, we will not go into further detail about this matter, since the focus of this research is exclusively on actresses.

## Methodology: in-depth interviews

A lot of theory about how actors should act has been written over the years. The only way to truly find out whether these theories are put to practice, is by asking the artists themselves. Interviews with actors are a frequently performed practice, most often in the United States. However, to the best of my knowledge, in-depth interviews with Flemish actresses, questioning them about several elements of their job have not been conducted in a Flemish context before. Therefore, this study can be a valuable addition to the existing research on this topic. I have chosen to conduct my research using semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This means that I used an interview guide that I drafted up myself beforehand, enabling me to ensure key issues were addressed during the interviews (Mortelmans 233). Even though I had prepared some questions beforehand, the format of semi-structured interviews allowed room for improvisation

(Myers and Newman 4). While conducting semi-structured interviews, even though there is an interview guide, the researcher should try to be flexible, because otherwise he might miss data that could be important for the analysis (Mortelmans 234). This is something I tried to apply while conducting the interviews as well.

To choose my participants, I used purpose sampling. The aim of this sampling procedure is to achieve maximal variety or heterogeneity (Mortelmans 156). Crucial to this is that the researcher should aim to select cases involved in the research that contain an abundance of information and must generate useful information in order to answer the research question (Mortelmans 155). All ten selected actresses have played significant roles in theater productions as well as television series and movies, have a varied résumé and have collaborated with a multitude of different people throughout the years. To narrow the scope of our participants, I opted to only interview graduated actresses (apart from the two actresses without an acting degree). Consequently, all participants are adults. I looked for two actresses of every Flemish acting school <sup>12</sup> (LUCA School of Arts, RITCS, KASK, Royal Conservatory Antwerp) and two actresses that did not go to acting school. This way, I tried to implement as much variety as possible concerning possible views on acting techniques. The aim for the participants was to find a more recent graduate from each school and an older alumna. For the category of actresses without formal theater training, I also aimed to find a younger actress and a slightly older one. While looking for participants, it found it important to represent Flanders' diverse society, so I tried to find some participants with a different or mixed ethnic-cultural background. Besides representation of diversity, another motivation was that they could shine a light on the specific aspects of the situation of female actors in the (predominantly white) Flemish theater-, film- and television landscape. By selecting my participants with these elements in mind, I found ten respondents that each have a unique profile.

I reached out to most of the participants via e-mail, either directly addressing the actresses themselves, or via their agents. Some of the participants I originally had in mind were not interested or unavailable. At the start of my first interview, I had not been able to find all ten participants yet. Some of the participants were later recruited by a few of my first respondents, who helped me reach out to actresses they knew personally. At the time of the interviews, the five participants in the younger category were respectively thirty, thirty, thirty-

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<sup>12</sup> Even though selecting two participants from every acting school was one of my criteria, the Flemish acting schools are not exhaustively mentioned as such in the literature review, nor in the results section. I did not want the acting schools to play a big role in this thesis, since, in my opinion, this would not be a useful addition to the literature that already exists on this topic. I have chosen to focus on individuals rather than on institutions.

one, thirty-three and thirty-eight years old, whereas the participants in the older category were respectively thirty-six, thirty-nine, forty-one, forty-three and seventy-four. When comparing the age of the participant of seventy-four to the age of the other actresses, I can conclude that she is the outlier in this study. Nine out of ten actresses are thus in their thirties or forties. I believe these ages are interesting, since they all have been working as actresses for a while and are currently still executing this profession as well. All participants are current residents of Flanders.

The interviews were conducted between February and May of 2020. The estimated duration was approximately one hour, the actual interviews varied between one and a half hours and two and a half hours. According to Baker and Edwards, the required amount of interviews depends on the nature of the research (18). If possible, they recommend to continue up to the point of saturation when the interviews cease to yield new information (Baker and Edwards 18). In my case, this means that all the Flemish acting schools are represented, as well as the population of Flemish actresses that did not follow a formal education. In the case of expert interviews it has proven to be difficult to conduct more than ten interviews (Baker and Edwards 27). This number then became the guideline of this study.

The choice of in-depth interviews comes with disadvantages as well. The method has several possible pitfalls: the artificiality of the interview, lack of trust (interviewer and interviewee are complete strangers), lack of time (the data gathered may be incomplete, since the interview cannot go on for hours on end) (Myers and Newman 4). Furthermore, the results are solely based on the actresses' subjective experiences and opinions. Choosing in-depth interviews comes with a limit in the number of people you can meet as well, making it difficult to generalize. This study only has ten participants which is a rather limited number and therefore cannot be generalized and seen as the reality of all Flemish actresses. However, the importance of this research lies in the qualitative response of the respondents and since the number of participants was small, I was able to conduct rather long interviews, tackling as many elements related to the profession of acting as possible, which enabled me to really go into depth about certain aspects.

The participants were questioned about their education and trajectory, acting techniques, role preparation and choice of roles, their treatment of scripts, acting in front of the camera versus in theater productions, their experience with the production conditions in Flanders, and acting as a woman (of color). The interviews were recorded with my phone and were then transcribed by means of a Verbatim transcription. After transcribing the interviews, the interviews were analyzed using open coding which is one of the quantitative analysis



methods that are part of the Grounded Theory (Mortelmans 403). This is described as “the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered” (Strauss and Corbin in Mortelmans 403).

In the results section, I have tried discerning big themes in the interviews, labelling the different passages, and looking for common ground. I have chosen to anonymize the actresses, to ensure they would dare to speak freely and be at ease, which I believe would lead to the most interesting results. To guarantee the anonymity of the participants, I have given the respondents a random number between one and ten. The abbreviation R stands for respondent. The goal is to map how these ten Flemish actresses create their character in theater, film and television in Flanders.

## RESULTS

In this third part, we will discuss the results of the interviews. Sometimes, quotes from the interviewees will be implemented, to portray the thoughts of the respondents as correct as possible. To keep the overview and based on the research questions and aim of this research, we will divide the results into several ten big sections being: trajectory and role of education, acting methods, role preparation and choice of roles, key concepts, the role of text, acting on camera versus acting on film, production conditions, acting as a woman, acting as a woman of color and lastly, what needs to change.

### Trajectory and role of education

For the majority of the respondents of this thesis, it all started at drama school. R6 states that at acting school, she mostly discovered what suited her most and what her own style entails: “It was more of a search to find yourself, in the work field or in the world, how you fit in there and how you handle things.” The two actresses that did not pursue an acting diploma (R1 and R5) both have similar reasons: it was an unknown world for them. R1 describes this as follows:

As a first-generation migrant, pursuing an acting career or going to acting school was not really stimulated by my family. I was allowed to continue my education, after high school, which was already very exceptional for people in my environment. But anything else that had to do with even a bit of creativity was a no-go. Therefore, it was just something that never crossed my mind. I did not know anyone who did a theater program, who played in theater or who had some kind of connection with the sector.

The threshold was simply too great<sup>13</sup>. (R1)

R5 says that she did not actually know a lot about the existence of drama schools until she was

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<sup>13</sup> All the quotes are taken from the transcripts, but are translated and slightly adapted for length and clarity.

already studying at university. She also indicates that since she knew about the uncertain nature of the profession, she wanted to “have a plan b before starting with plan a”. However, despite them not being alumni of one of the four acting schools, they both followed trainings to improve their acting skills. During her studies at university, R5 was searching for a professional theater education she could follow next to her studies. Eventually, she followed the training of the private theater school Acsent in Antwerp for three years. After that, she saw a call in the newspaper of a theater company that was looking for actors and actresses with a migratory background, which resulted in some masterclasses she followed and eventually she did a proposal for her own theater play, which was then produced and was her start in the professional acting world. In the interview, she does mention that in between her bachelor and her master, she went to one of the four Flemish theater schools for a year, at the instigation of the artistic director of the theater company she was working for at the time. She was still doubting whether she should do it or not and when almost all entrance exams were over, a phone call from an important figure in the Flemish theater landscape was the push she needed to audition. This “push” was very important for her since it was not evident to start at a drama school concerning her background: “It was a very unknown world for me”. After one year, she left the school due to various reasons: the world of the school was just too different from the world she knew, there were a lot of male teachers when she was at school there and the school’s structure was not all that great either: “At the moment, the school was in some kind of transition phase”. All in all, it did not feel like a safe space for her where she could really develop herself as an actress. R1, then, rolled into the business when a theater company was looking for youngsters for a new production. She did a trajectory of two years with them and followed workshops that eventually culminated in a performance.

Concerning the actresses who did follow a formal education, whereas nobody regrets their trajectory, how they experience their time at school varied, ranging from “I was super happy there because I had found my place in the world” (R8) to quitting after two years out of dissatisfaction with how things went down at the school (R10). Most actresses do not put their school on a pedestal and even critique some of the elements of their school, such as a lack of a good network (R4, R3). R9 says that this network is exactly the benefit of a formal education: “I think a school can be helpful to network and that it can be a way to get more opportunities, because via a school, you have an entrance into the work field”. Other elements that are critiqued are the hierarchy between students and teachers (R9), the school being too strict and hard on their students, which was “not entirely correct from a pedagogical point of view” (R7) and the school being “misogynistic”, having “no knowledge of other cultural backgrounds” and

“being unconnected with the outside world” (R10). Several respondents say that the quest, experimentation and growth that they experienced during their time at school are the most valuable elements of the experience to them:

You can investigate everything that intrigues you at that moment of your life. It is a place for experiment, where you do not have to present a finished product and can focus on growth. Following a formal education helps you to go back to the source every time: why do I like doing this, how do I relate to that and thinking critically whether something is an gateway to facilitate my acting or not. (R9)

When asked about how their acting career went up until this point, three actresses respond that it has been a struggle for sure (R1, R3, R10), three others say their career always went quite well (R4, R6, R7), while the other four have a more nuanced answer (R2, R4, R5, R9). The actresses that claim their careers are going well, mainly based that on the fact whether they are employed most of the time or not and if they are financially self-reliant. These three actresses say that since they graduated, they have always had work as an actress and that they never had to take on other jobs. One actress said that her path had not been evident, but that she is grateful for all the chances she got, even with all the struggles and insecurity that came her way during her career (R4). She said that she had never lacked opportunities, up until March 2020, when COVID-19 silenced the entire artistic sector. Even more so than the struggle of booking a gig, she said it is a struggle of “insecurity and performance anxiety. It is a quest for integrity, artistry and developing yourself”. R5 indicates that she believes that an acting career is never a smooth sailing ship, with one actress even saying that struggling is inherent to any artistic career (R9). Another aspect that is mentioned is that outsiders, for example the audience, only see the success and the jobs you do book, but that they do not see the rejections and “the years and years of hard work” it took to get to that level (R1). R8 says that her path was somewhat uncommon: while most actresses struggle at first she had a kind of “reversed” career: she already worked as an actress during her studies and she said that if then, she did not land parts for a period of time, it did not matter because she was still a student. Right after she graduated as an actress, she also had plenty of work, in contrast to stories she hears from other recently graduated artists in her group of friends. But, now that she has been graduated for several years, she says she is really starting to feel the struggle. The actresses that claim their career went relatively well up until this point, claim that they are lucky in comparison with other colleagues and that they cannot complain with how their career is going. For example, R3 says that amongst her former classmates, there are people who never get cast, nor for the theater, nor for television or film. R8 says she could have more roles if she accepted more offers, but that she

only wants to accept roles she fully believes in and that she is not doing projects constantly, because she often rejects projects if she does not fully believe in them. She only wants to do projects she is completely passionate about and says that she is able to do this, because as an actress you have “full control over your career, as long as it is financially doable”. Even though some projects would help her gain popularity, she does not do them if it “does not sit quite right with her”. R1 also mentions popularity, and in particular the role that social media plays in this day and age. She supports this statement by describing how the producers had to choose between her and another actress for a part, when they asked themselves the question who had more followers on social media. On the basis of this, they chose the other actress. Both the group that see their career as more of a struggle and the group that see their career as going smoothly, are generally happy with the projects they have been able to do as working actresses.

All actresses seem to agree that it is an uncertain sector. R3 says that “you live in constant insecurity. Each time, you have to start from scratch and prove yourself over and over again.” She also says that even though she has made a name of herself, she still has to audition and that when she is working on a project, she is always keeping the fact that she has to start the search for a new project again once the current one is finished at the back of her mind. The fact that your body is your instrument, contributes to the insecurity: “If your career is not going smoothly, you have to remind yourself of the fact that you or your talent are not always what is to blame, since a multitude of different factors are taken into consideration in the casting process”. R4 agrees that it is indeed a very vulnerable profession: you are very much “exchangeable” and you can go “from hero to zero” really quickly. R1 says that she had never thought she would have been able to make a living of acting but she did, but she also realizes that “in five years, it can all be over” (R1). R5, then, sums up her struggle as follows:

Without a network it is difficult, but even if you do have a network, there are no job guarantees. There are a lot of actors who have talent and a network and yet, the acting world is simply too small. The theater sector is also a small world, a subsidized world. There is not a lot of money. It is just a small amount of money for a lot of people that have the same ambition within the same field. So, it does require some form of undertaking. Sitting on your ass, doing nothing and thinking that everything will come to you... it does not work like that. You must take initiative. (R5)

Even though it is not a job guarantee according to R5, this “network” is what kickstarted the career of R6. She claims that it all began with her internship, where she “made a lot of connections” and “met a lot of actors and actresses that had been working in the field for a long time already”. The exposure she received during this internship was also of great importance:

“The more visibility you have and the more you play, the bigger your chances are of new people asking you to play a part in a production” (R6). For R7, her internship was also of crucial importance. In her last year of theater school, she did her internship for the theater company that she is still employed with to this day. She is a member of a theater ensemble and thus has a secure job. She recognizes this is a privileged position in the acting world and is “very lucky” that she is able to turn down projects that are not interesting enough without sacrificing her financial security. However, even though she is very grateful for her job she also indicates that she is not really able to develop herself in television and film, because she is unable to commit to a lot of other projects due to her attachment to the theater company.

To the question whether their school made them a better actress, only one of them answers with a clear yes (R4) and one of them with a clear no (R7). Most of them are more nuanced, with two of them saying they would be a different actress (R2, R9) if they did not receive an education, one of them saying that she would not be an actress at all (R6), because her school and the corresponding network was what launched her career, and one actress claiming that she thinks it depends on what kind of life you have led and if you have received enough input from your surroundings whether following a formal education is crucial for you or not (R10). R3 says she is not unquestionably a better actress than she might have been without a formal education but that she regards acting school as some kind of “acting gym”. R4 believes that at theater school, you do not necessarily learn how to act, but you can “unlearn” a lot of things and learn a craft. Concerning the two actresses that did not follow a formal education, R5 says that for her personally, it was not a must: “What others learn at school, I am learning as I go”, whereas R1 says that sometimes she does miss some kind of foundation of technique and a theoretical background concerning theater and its history. Whereas R5 honed her craft through experience, R1 claims she is “self-educated”: she tries to consume as much art as possible and broadens her knowledge by researching everything she encounters in the context of the project she is working on. The majority of the actresses (8) claim that people that did not receive formal education can also be good actresses, whereas two of them are more skeptical, not claiming it to be impossible but restating the importance of technique and that that is something you miss when you did not receive formal education. In this regard, R2 makes a distinction between film and theater:

To speak in verse, you need a conservatory. To be able to deal with this freely, you need technique. Whereas an instinct without a framework; a healthy dose of talent, maybe that is more interesting for film than it is for the theater. You can pick someone off the street that happens to look like the character you have in mind, you let them do their

thing in front of the camera and it will work out just fine. (R2)

R3 describes her experience with the importance of following a formal education as follows:

You learn to train your instrument, you get stronger and you learn to look at yourself in a correct way and to recognize your own mistakes. Eventually, you are going to have to do it yourself, but you were provided with a multitude of tools to figure it all out and that is something I miss with people that did not go to acting school. Often people that did not go to acting school do not have a well-trained vocal instrument or their bodily awareness is insufficient. If you want to be a chameleon and want to be able to portray a wide variety of characters, then your body must be sufficiently trained to succeed in doing this. (R3)

She does confess there is a possible flip side to this medal as well: “Maybe schooled actors can sometimes not reach emotionality or realism, precisely because they are so technical. People that did not receive an education are often very much in touch with themselves and reality.” Ellie Konijn has remarked this danger as well: “The combination of great competence and great familiarity with a situation can result in an actor ‘going through the motions’. The acting can become so routine that the character portrayal may become cold and mechanical” (*Acting Emotions* 69). The importance possessing a certain sense of naturality is something that R10 agrees with:

Often, actresses that did not have a formal education have a certain unaffectedness. First and foremost, I believe that confidence, daring to let go and make associations that are not taught, are the most important elements. When looking at schooled actors, you can sometimes distinguish acquired patterns and behavior, which can become boring after a while. I much rather prefer people who are natural and act out of sincerity than people who try to strive for perfection when embodying a character. (R10)

Even though acting training might not be a necessity, it is useful. R5 describes it as follows: “a school offers some kind of framework, in which you can try out things for four years and wherein can build some kind of sense of security.” The actresses point out that whereas following a formal education is not essential, it remains necessary to have a good training ground of some sort. It seems essential that you can perform your craft and can learn by doing it: “if I look back at my time at school and compare it to when now in my career I can act in a play for an entire year and work with good directors; it is the same thing” (R4). R6 thinks this is definitely a possibility, but that perhaps not everyone is cut out to be an autodidact: “I do not think it is for everybody: not everybody can be an autodidact. Following a formal education is most definitely an enrichment. But do you really need it? I do not think everyone needs it. But,

not everyone that did not go to acting school and that thinks ‘I want to become an actress’ will be able to pull it off. But I think for some, it is definitely an option.” Furthermore, R10 concludes by stating she thinks that following workshops will make you a better actress than following a formal education: “Going to acting school is not enough. It is only four years and you only learn a fraction of what you can use in real life. So, I think it is better to follow different classes throughout your life in order to keep questioning yourself and to keep renewing yourself as an actress” (R10).

According to Zarrilli, when you are an actor the “process of *self*-definition and personal justification can never end – the practitioner must constantly (re)discover the ‘self’ in and through the training with each repetition” (189). Arthur Bartow says that “it is easy to see why most teachers refer to the acting profession as a lifetime of learning” (xx). Whether having followed a formal education or not, all actresses agree that in their profession, you learn every day. Even though it was not a question asked during the interviews, six respondents spontaneously started talking about how learning how to act is an ongoing process and that even after years of acting, they are still learning new things with each new project. R1 adds a critical note to this and links this to how often you get cast or not: “Actors can only grow if they can act. But, if you do not get cast a lot, you have to have a lot of discipline to keep your craftsmanship sharp”. R6 said that to really get to know what sparks your engine as an actress, acting a lot is key: “As time passes, you learn which sources you can draw from. Acting a lot, in a lot of different circumstances, comes with the discovery of new tools”. After mostly playing a certain type of character in the beginning of her career, at one point, R6 decided to also investigate different routes and to see what else was out there acting-wise so she could really be challenged again: “I want to keep reinventing myself. I am not interested in keeping on stirring in the same pot.” As R1 concludes: “As an actress, you are never finished. You must keep watching movies, plays, listening to music... You have to make sure the creative engine in your head keeps running”. Some (R9, R10) linked growing in life with growing as an actress: “Through experience, through acting often and through developing your personal life, you find a way to relate to your profession. I also notice that motherhood influenced me a lot to start acting in another way. The same goes with a little bit of misery in life, to mature a little and gain life experience” (R9). R9’s view is in analogy to Stella Adler’s, who was a big advocate of growth and also equated growing in life with growing as an actress: “Human growth and growth as an actor are synonymous” (Oppenheim 29). R10 ties this to acting technique, which will be discussed in more depth in the following section: “Anyhow, I think your technique changes because you change as a human. You grow, you encounter several different phases in

your life, you gain experience and you take that with you in your acting”. Throughout the years, none of the actresses have experienced a radical style shift, but they do see different nuances in their acting. Parallel to R9 and R10, R8 ties her changes as an actress to her evolving as a human being:

When you get older, you become more self-confident, which enables you to leave your comfort zone more often. This in turn gives me the courage to dare and try out more things in my acting. Now, I can investigate certain elements with more peace and more calmly than when I was younger. (R8)

The actresses seem to be more content with how they are acting now when looking back at how they used to do it with R7 even stating that her acting technique has improved a lot throughout the years, since she can now dose her energy better than she used to. R5 says that throughout the years, her style has developed since she learned “what works and what does not work” and she learned to “recognize what were beginner mistakes”. Other small shifts that are discerned are “starting to act in a more subtle manner” (R6) and “letting go more of the technicalities and started to work a bit more intuitively” (R3). R1 discloses that her action plan always varies slightly depending on which project she is working on at the time. R4 finds the question whether her style has evolved or not difficult to answer and states that in this regard, there is a big difference between merely acting in a play versus being involved in the creation process of the play you are acting in from the beginning:

The creation of my own plays and characters has definitely evolved, because I started doing that more and more. But in the sense of getting cast in a play with ten characters and playing one of them, I do not think my craft has changed per se, unless I am working with a certain director that asks for something new, like a new way of working that I have not encountered before. (R4)

Lastly, the actress that has seen the least changes in her acting style throughout her career, is R2: “In the first five years of my career, maybe I was still exploring. But at a certain moment, I received a lot of positive feedback and something just kind of clicked: this is it! Then, it is just a matter of turning that rock into a diamond”.

## Acting methods

The most common place to encounter any given acting method, is in acting school. Several actresses (R4, R6) find it hard to describe the acting style they were taught at school. They attribute this to the fact that you are taught by several fixed teachers and a lot of people plucked from the working field (R4) and that at acting school you are introduced to a multitude of different ways of acting and “all that exists and has existed in the landscape” (R6). R6 concludes



the following: “I think that at acting school, I was mostly looking for an own style of acting. Through my education and all the teachers I encountered, I sort of made my own filter of what suited me and what interested me and what not”. Furthermore, she states that she does not think she was taught “one particular way of acting” at school (R6). Several colleagues (R3, R4, R6) seem to agree with this. Taking into consideration that half of the actresses that went to acting school talk about not being taught just one particular acting method, it is plausible that the label of hybrid acting, a concept that is used by a lot of actors according to Schechner, also plays a role in Flanders (204). When asked about whether the actresses that received formal education were still faithful to the method or techniques they were taught at school, half of the actresses (4) answered with a convincing yes with one of them explaining it to be “because it [the techniques taught at that school] is just in your body. You studied there for five years, you found a way to act” (R8). R3 discloses that she believes she is still loyal to her school unconsciously, mostly through the acting tools that were handed to her at school and that after school, she experimented with “taking a step back” from what she learnt at school, namely in the preparation of her role and tried to do it in another way, but that after several years, she started revisiting and reutilizing the methods she was taught at school. Others were vaguer about whether they were still faithful to what their schools preached, mostly because they found the acting style they were taught at their school hard to pinpoint. R10 states that she does not really use a technique she was taught at school, but that she does still value and uses what she learnt from several guest lecturers. It seems as if the majority of the actresses are mostly influenced by mentors or people they have encountered in the context of acting, whether those are teachers they had at school or other actors or directors they met in the working field. As one actress describes it: “the core elements of my acting style is a combination of a lot of different people” (R4). Answering this question, following key figures of the Flemish acting schools and acting landscape came to the fore: Jan Decorte (R2), Jan Joris Lamers (R2), Senne Roufaer (R2), Kris Cuppens (R3, R4), Ludo Ghooos (R4), Jan Steen (R8, R6) Herwig Deweerdt (R6), Ignace Cornelissen (R6) Ivo Van Hove (R9, R7), Dora van der Groen (R9, R7), Sam Bogaerts (R6, R8), Frank Focketyn (R9), Jan Peter Gerrits (R9) and Steven Vanwatermeulen (R9).

Several actresses admitted that in fact, they are not really concerned with acting methods (R6, R9) or that they are never consciously thinking about (R1, R5). Only a few of them are state that they adhere to a certain method. R1 and R10 mostly talked about Method acting, R3 because that was the acting style one of the key figures of her school preached and R10 because after attending theater school, she followed method acting workshops in Paris. Furthermore, R8 talks about how she was taught Grotowski at school and that she is a very physical-oriented

actress herself and R2 considers her acting to be a synthesis between Brecht and Stanislavski. Each actress and what she has to say about her method will be briefly discussed separately, since these answers are difficult to generalize. R1 talks about having read a lot of literature about Stanislavsky and method acting: “I read a lot about it and I peruse a lot of methods, but I do not want to confine myself to just one style or method.” What is striking about this, is that R1, who did not follow a formal education, seems to take acting methods and studying them more seriously than her colleagues who did follow a formal education. She thinks it is valuable but wants to “let this go” when she is acting: “I take it into account, but I do not consciously focus on it. I do not want that either. I have to be able to let it go and to find some sort of way of my own. So far, this works for me”. She defines the process of acting as follows:

That is about we have set in motion, what we have conveyed to the audience and where we looked for connection and common ground. [...] I know what you [her co-star] are going to say, I know what you are going to do and, first and foremost, we are going to have fun. I will let go of everything and I will find out what happens in that exact moment. To me, that is some kind of freedom that I cherish and to preserve this freedom, I do not want to constrain myself to specific acting methods. (R1)

R2 has a clear vision about what her acting technique may look like: she considers herself to be a synthesis between Stanislavsky and Brecht. At first glance, these two techniques seem incompatible. But, as Philip Auslander has noticed “although the ideological gap between Brecht and Stanislavsky is wide, the ethos behind their respective theories of acting is the same: performance can be truthful only if it invokes the presence of the actor’s self” (56). Thus, it is plausible that R2’s technique is in fact a combination of both methods. What she takes from Brecht is mostly the following, referring to his concept of alienation: “The distance. That is where it starts. The distance between yourself and that what you are playing and that, if necessary, you accentuate this too”. What can also be linked to the vision of Brecht is what she tells about her character, which in analogy to Brecht does not coincide with herself as a person: “You always have to see the corporal human on stage, who then takes on the attitude of the character”. The third Brechtian element she mentions, is the emphasis she places on the idea of transparency and the accompanying breaking of the fourth wall:

The convention goes as follows: you [the audience] are in the dark, we are in the light. And we are going to perform for you. The consequence of this, is that you do not go on stage as your character. You go on stage as an actor, among other actors. You look at the audience. You see the audience. There is no fourth wall at all. Along the way, the circumstances and the search for your part will be the instrument establishing that

character. Suddenly, it is there. (R2)

However, even though she says to adhere to Brecht, Brecht demystifies, whereas R2 says mystery is important. Concerning Stanislavsky, she refers to his concept of sense memory: “Was it during the day or at night. Was it hot or cold? It is by confronting yourself with certain circumstances, to place yourself in a state of memories through which those practical circumstances can unlock your emotionality”. Lastly, she emphasizes that the exercises of Stanislavsky are preparatory and that they are meant to be done as homework, before the rehearsals start, so you do not arrive as “a blank slate”, but that you have actively thought about the play you will be starring in.

R3 says that she uses most tools from method acting, because that is what she was taught at school. She describes herself as a method actor to family and friends as well, mostly to justify her preparatory work for a role – for example, working out more or changing her mindset – so people respect that process more. She emphasizes the importance of having full control over your speech instrument and having bodily awareness and most importantly: “the balance between technicity and having space to mess up and fail in combination with the realism and staying true to yourself”. Besides stating she is a proponent of method acting, her emphasis on mastering both your speech instrument and having bodily awareness can be linked to Grotowski (Crombez et al. 294).

R4 does not really label her technique. She does however state that she uses her gut instinct to act and to react: “Intuition is important. I react. I react using my gut instinct. You are only as good as your co-star. I really react to what I see or to what kind of input I receive from my co-star”. When talking about what her method might entail, she talks about what rehearsing does for her:

For me, rehearsing is to define a safe space where you can permit yourself to explore anything. I know, that if I leave this area that I defined, my acting will not be good. It will be embarrassing, too small or too big. But within that area, I can do everything. That is rehearsing to me: demarcating that area with as much freedom as possible or without it really being set in stone. (R4)

Furthermore, she thinks credibility is important: acting and speaking “as if it came out of your own mouth”. Stanislavsky and his realist approach would have agreed with this statement: “you do not need to speak in the well-modulated tones of the European-trained actor – this would not be ‘honest’ if it is not your own voice; and in any case it is not the way ‘real’ people speak” (Harrop 38).

R5 who did not go to acting school, is not really concerned about acting techniques,

because it is not something she has really come across. However, this does not bother her: “those currents and ideas are interesting, but for me, it is much healthier that when I am investigating and rehearsing my part, that I do not have to think about my background, method acting, Stanislavsky or whatever.” What is important to her, is that she can start from some kind of intuition and freedom to tell a story.

R6 follows her gut instinct when acting: “I am an actor following my gut feelings. I have tools, I think, but I cannot label them.” Furthermore, she talks about the importance of concepts such as intuition, sincerity and familiarity/recognizability, which are concepts that will be touched upon in a later section.

R7 says that she always infuses a large part of her personality in every character she plays and that she mostly goes looking inside herself for a role, which can be linked to both Stanislavsky and Strasberg (Merlin 226; Dwight qtd. in Scheeder 3). This is something her mentor taught her: your character is a subcharacter of yourself. Without labelling it this way, she also referred to Stanislavsky’s ‘what if’: “I am always thinking: what would happen if I were to be in this situation, if I had that specific characteristic, if I had experienced that. How would I react?”

R8 acts with her gut instincts, focusing less on the rational and the cerebral, which matches the physical technique that her school preached. Her school was heavily influenced by Grotowski and she claims that this is the case for her as well. When starting to work on a new character, she often thinks it is a good idea “to try out the character on the rehearsal floor”. This is something Grotowski encourages as well: “We begin not by sitting down to figure out the beats of the scene, but on our feet, letting the words of our text drive our physical impulses, and allowing our whole beings to embody and interpret what we might otherwise do sitting at a table before getting up to act” (Wangh 180). At school, R8 had a lot of physical classes: mime, modern dance, African dance, yoga and power yoga among other things.

R9 says she has never really thought about which acting method she might lean most towards, but she does say several things that can be linked to method acting. Firstly, the fact that she says that by gaining life experience, she became a better actress, which hints to the fact that she can use her affective memory, just like Strasberg entailed it (*Acting Emotions* 47). Linking gaining life experience with becoming a better actress, is also proclaimed by Stella Adler (Oppenheim 29). The second reason her style may be linked to method acting is because she says that in her preparation, she really gets to the bottom of it and cannot easily shake the emotions of her character: “I am very extreme in my preparation. I am a very physical player, and when I must play a sad part, I get to the bottom of it. I am a mentally stable woman, and I

am intelligent, so I can separate that from my private life. However, it does get under your skin. If you have to play heavy situations, I will not come home happy.” She has acted in a multitude of different projects and genres and taking everything into consideration, what runs like a thread through her acting is that she always starts from integer recognition.

Just like R3, R10 also labels herself to be a proponent of method acting. She talks about the use of the sense memory exercises in particular, because they “enable you to slide in and out of an emotion quickly”. Even though she mostly talks about being a method actress, she thinks her acting technique is in fact more a combination of different elements: “it has been a while since I followed those method acting courses, so I feel like I am not truly capable of doing that anymore. At the time, I felt like I could put it to better use.” She does see one constant in her acting: that is that she does not like “acting big”: “When I am acting, everything is always very subtle”.

Whatever method they adhere to or whichever elements they find important, the actresses agree that it is important to be in control of your speech instrument and to have a strong bodily awareness. That this is equally important in all styles, is endorsed by Konijn who says that all three styles (namely the style of involvement, the style of detachment and the style of self-expression) call for a “well developed expressive instrument” which is the actor himself and his movement, countenance, posture and voice” (*Acting Emotions* 48). That being trained in both voice and movement is a necessity, is something that several scholars agree with as well (Fishman 32, Barton 82). R3 said the following about the importance of body awareness:

You can get lucky and act something well for a few times, it is just something that your body naturally does and that happens to fit your character, but if you are unaware of what you are doing, you will use it unconsciously whether it is fitting or not and you will not have control over it. If you are aware of your body, you can make more conscious choices and then you can really start to shape your character. (R3)

Concerning what Konijn and Diderot have said about acting and emotions and to discover what Flemish actresses’ stance is on the actor’s paradox, I have asked the actresses whether they really feel the emotions they are portraying or not. Nine out of the ten respondents say they really feel “something”. Mostly, it is hard to pinpoint if they really feel their character-emotion. We can divide the respondents into four categories. Actresses in the first category say they always “felt something” and that this was something they find important (R4, R6, R8). R6 describes her experience as follows:

I cannot portray an emotion without really feeling something. That does not mean I always feel it in every fiber of my body, but there is always something [...] I actually

do really feel [the emotions]. Not that that ties into my personal life. It is not that when I am sad whilst acting, that I am thinking about something that personally happened to me. I do not necessarily draw from something personal, but there is always some kind of sensation or a sense of ‘reliving’. I cannot convey an emotion without feeling something. (R6)

Respondents from the second category claim they really feel the emotion of their character (R1, R2, R3, R7, R10). However, some small notes can be made about this category. For example, R10 says: “I get the most out of myself from the feelings that I have experienced in my life. That is something I learned with method acting. You cannot exactly feel what the character you are portraying has effectively felt. But you can use elements from your own life which made you experience the emotion the character should feel and fill in the role. This is what I do”. R1 claims that she can act both with and without feeling the actual emotions, but that she prefers the former:

Empathy, if I do not feel anything, if it does not touch me, then I cannot convey these emotions. I really need to feel it. I am not saying that I always succeed. I can also play that I am crying or that I am sad. But if I do not feel it myself, then I will probably also have played well, but I prefer having felt that I really went somewhere and that I was able to touch people where necessary. (R1)

Method acting afficiando R10 feels that in Flanders “there is a big fear to dare and act emotions” and that she felt she had to adhere to this acting style: “That was what was expected of me, what you had to measure yourself by. It was your point of reference to see if you are a good actor or not. In this style, I really missed the emotional aspect. I have noticed, when acting for the camera, that the younger generations dare to do that a lot more but that the older generation is less skilled in really acting emotionally.” R2, then, explains how she goes about conveying emotions: “Do you have to think about terrible things to play or cry in an emotional scene? No, you just have to leave everything, everything behind! So you almost reach an (inactive) meditation state and let the emotion come to you, let it arise in you. And then of course you feel the emotion, you feel it”.

Deviating from the second category that contains actresses who always *feel* the character-emotions, for the actresses in the third category the *goal* was to feel the character-emotion: “I do not always feel the emotion of my character, but I always feel something, otherwise you did not do a good job. I would lie if I said the emotion is always real. You try, you want it – mostly for yourself – but sometimes, you just do not get there” (R9). Strasberg seems to agree with the fact that “feeling something” was the most important and thus, Ellie

Konijn sees this as Strasberg providing a lead for using task-emotions: “The important thing is ... not that what the actor deals with is an exact parallel to the play or the character, but that when the character thinks, the actor really thinks; when the character experiences, the actor really experiences – something” (Strasberg qtd. in *Acting Emotions* 52). A fourth category consists of R5, who is the only one that asserts the fact that it is a common misconception amongst beginning actors that the emotion must be found within yourself: “Actually, the emotion is with the audience. It is your job as an actor to awake the emotion or stir it. And not the other way around, to arouse the emotion within yourself and try to impress the audience with it”. With this statement, R5 seems to be the only one that follows the opinion of Diderot that great actors should not feel the emotions themselves. Her statement can also be linked to Bertolt Brecht and the detachment theory.

Even though that is what some actresses state, Ellie Konijn would argue whether the emotions they feel are truly real: she believes that actors tend to confuse task-emotions with character-emotions “because their training in the acting style of involvement leads them to believe that good acting means expressing the emotions of the character they are portraying” (*Acting Emotions* 107). The emotions they experience on stage are in fact more related to the experience of acting than to the emotions of the characters actors are portraying (*Acting Emotions* 107). To argue this point, Konijn talks about a study in which actor’s physiological responses during performances were investigated, in which was found that actors’ real emotions and those of their characters are not correlated (*Acting Emotions* 107). Thus, the actresses that felt “something”, but did not go as far as saying they truly experienced the emotion of their character, may have very well experienced these so-called “task-emotions”.

R3, who describes herself as a method actor says that she cannot produce fake tears or “fake it”, that her tears are real and that when she is angry, her anger is real. This has a rather inconvenient consequence: “Like I said, I often draw from method acting and you cannot keep drawing from that; when my feelings run out and I am satisfied, then they do not emerge anymore, because it feels as if I have already resolved the situation”. Herewith, she pinpoints one of the disadvantages of the Method, which reinforces Diderot’s vision that actors that rely too much on their emotions cannot summon the same feelings repeatedly and that it is better to be an imitative actor (Naremore 34). R3 is confronted with the “problem of repeatability”: Strasberg and Stanislavsky claim that “the actor lives the part by actually experiencing analogous feelings every time the role is recreated” which is not truly possible according to Konijn because “how can the actor experience fresh emotions time and again, after frequent rehearsals and several performances?” (*Acting Emotions* 37). The actresses have talked about

which techniques they implement in their practice, but how important is it for an actress to have good technique? Apparently, quite important. Nine of the respondents say that technique is important, ranging from “kind of important” to “very important”. The tenth respondent, R6, claims that she is a more intuitive player than a technical one answers: “not so much apparently for me” and thus leaves whether she finds technique to be important in general in the middle. As mentioned before, something that comes to the fore frequently, is that the most important technical element every actor should possess is that you are in control of your speech instrument and have a good body awareness. R3, who agrees with this statement, says that she even gets “frustrated” by the lack of technique in some actors, for example when they neglect their speech. R8 says that no matter what technique you adhere to, technique is important to “not lose yourself in the process” and “have a sense of control”. R2, then, believes delving into different techniques is especially important at the beginning of your acting career: “It is important that you start off by trying out as much as possible in a lot of different directions. Sooner or later, time will tell what is most interesting and what works the best for you”. Remarkably, while it is deemed to be important, most actresses emphasize that technique is just a part of the puzzle. They talk about the importance of balance. In addition, many also value a component that can be more closely linked with emotionality: authenticity (R4), sensitivity (R7), self-confidence and experience (R10). R10 also says that “technique is an important factor” for her, in combination with her “own sincere feelings that come to the fore in that exact moment”. Another benefit of technique R10 proclaims is that it can make you less insecure and that it is important to be able to work “more smoothly”, which is especially important in the current climate, where time is money, especially when acting for the camera. This will be further discussed later in this thesis, in the section “On-camera acting versus acting on stage”.

When asked about their methods and techniques, R3, R6 and R8 spontaneously make a distinction between people who analyze based on their ratio versus people who are more physical and use their intuition as a source to ignite their acting. The distinction they make between the rational and the physical is parallel to the one that Morris Fishman made, placing all major acting schools in the following two categories: on the one hand he distinguished styles who placed the main stress on the external technique of the actor, namely his gestures, movement and speech and on the other hand he distinguished a group that placed the importance on fostering the growth of their internal technique, being their emotions, feelings and thoughts (Fishman 16).

All actresses say that acting methods are not something that is heavily discussed among their colleagues. One actress even states that: “Techniques and methods are something from the



past. They are big, household names, they are unavoidable but I think it would be good if we let this go: it is a good to know them [these techniques], but it should not be something that forms the foundation to build your craft upon” (R5). She also emphasizes that technique is not what an audience wants to see: “People do not want to see techniques, they do not want to see actors that use certain tricks to bring about something. Everyone looks through that. Especially in Flanders, it is just not ‘trendy’ anymore”. Whereas R5 states acting techniques are something of the previous generation and R9 agrees with this, R7 even goes as far as saying actors find acting methods “funny”. She also talks about how she experienced looking at the material her friends who were theater sciences students had to study: “When I read that [their lecture notes] I can understand I that we do things this way. And those It seems correct. But this is in no way something that we are consciously considering or thinking about, most definitely not among other actors and actresses”. R9 even states that in the end, she does not really believe in acting techniques: “It is nice to be so involved in your craft, you are investigating, you want to relate to those techniques. But when it all comes down to it, you just start from a text, you think about what it is in that text that moves you, and... hop! The whole process is very intuitive”. Another actresses’ opinion is more nuanced: “We do not really analyze those kinds of things on a theoretical level. This is not the case because in acting, you are dealing with something where emotions play a key role” (R6). Acting methods do not appear to be a heavily discussed topic among Flemish actresses. What does come up often though is, according to R4, who you have worked with, for example Luk Perceval, Johan Simons and Guy Cassiers which she calls some of the primal directors of Flanders.

## Role preparation and choice of roles

Lots of scholars and several of the studied acting gurus swear by the addendum that “the better prepared you are, the better job you’ll do (Swain 11)”. I questioned the actresses about what this preparation should entail according to them. Almost all actresses are proven to be true observers: they get inspiration out of a lot of things in everyday life. Observation is something Stanislavsky found important: observation enables imagination to develop, and if you combine these elements with his “magic if” they form the foundation of what he called “artistic truth” (Merlin 192). Stella Adler also agreed with this, stating that actors are some kind of undercover agents: “You must constantly spy on people, studying their character elements... Acting is hard because it requires not just the study of books, though that can be important too, but constant study of human behavior” (Adler 48). Finally, the Brechtian actor is also heavily influenced by what he sees in his surroundings and builds his acting around “a series of observations taken from daily life” (Unwin 172).

Pinpointing their method of preparation exactly is not evident, since preparation often depends on the role or on the project itself (R3, R5, R9, R10) or they say they do not really have a fixed way of preparing they repeat for every project (R3, R4). Still, each actress has her specific method of preparation that will be laid out briefly in this section. A common denominator that can be discerned is that a majority of them base their characters on people they personally know in their surroundings or total strangers they observe (R3, R5) or their characters often being a synthesis between themselves and people in their surroundings (R4, R6, R9, R10). According to R2, it is always a confrontation with yourself. One of the firm principles of Uta Hagen's technique also states that you cannot leave yourself out of the equation: "the basic components of the characters we play are somewhere within ourselves" (Hagen qtd. In Rosenfeld 127). This too can be linked to Stanislavsky, with his claim that the actor's own emotional experience should form the base for the disguise of the self (Auslander 54). R9 says the following about this matter: "There is no other way than involving yourself in the mix. You are your own instrument. I have to make do with my intellect, my emotions, my fantasy and with this body." Doing research is also a frequently featured answer: watching documentaries and/or films (R1, R2, R3, R4, R6, R10) or interviewing people similar to your character (R5, R6, R9). The amount of preparation you have to do, also depends on how big your part is (R6, R10). R3, R7, R9 find it crucial that you learn how to love your character. R9 motivates this statement by saying that is why a lot of people become actors in the first place:

Because this is something that always fascinates us: what drives somebody to do something, such as murdering someone else. You are always looking for some kind of humanity. Stemming from a deep interest for the human race, you investigate what this humanity might look like exactly (R9).

R10 affirms this: this too is what led her to acting in the first place: she finds humans to be "immensely fascinating". R1 does not talk about the need to love her character, but she does say empathy is indispensable: Lastly, a few actresses mentioned that preparation is not something you do entirely on your own: usually, building your character starts with a conversation with the director (R5, R6, R8, R10). R5 talks about how sometimes "it can be the case that on your own, you have a hard time finding the essence of what your character truly entails. Then, it can really help when a director really has a clear vision and can point you in the right direction." Often, she finds this process of creating her character to be some kind of interplay between the fantasies of the director and her own fantasies. In the following section, I will go into more detail concerning the preparation of each individual actress.

First and foremost, R1 starts off with delving deep into the subject matter of the project:

“I do a lot of research and I try to read as much about the topic as I can. I also try to read things and listen to things that I associate the text with”. She is inspired by the city and its people, of which she studies elements that she can later on try out while acting, for example small mannerisms of people. An important element of her acting is empathy: “I have realized that the key is to never judge your character”. She creates the inner world of her character, starting from the text and asking herself questions:

What is that person saying? Where is this person coming from? What social circles is this person active in?” and then moves on to the physical aspect of the character: “How does this person move? What does she look like? Which hairstyle does she have, for example? (R1)

These questions appear to be similar to the questions asked in Stanislavsky’s inner model.

R2 starts with Stanislavsky’s exercises as her homework and discloses, among other things, the following about this matter: “The starting point is always some kind of self-examination. The character is taking certain decisions. Why? What would I do in that situation? Thus, it is also a confrontation with yourself”. Then, the rehearsing process starts:

When you rehearse, you learn things. But from the moment the rehearsal is over, you forget what you have learnt. You must forget it, because the foundation has been laid down: the foundation to be able to react freely. It is a combination of your own instinct and the insights you have obtained about the instincts of your character. A rehearsal is a search: for each other, for a common language, for the meaning of the comments and wishes of the director etcetera. But once it is there, it is there.

Her preparation seems to be mostly Stanislavsky-based, with a combination of the magic “what if” and crafting an inner model. Unlike her colleagues, who mostly watch documentaries to delve into the handled subject, she recommends watching movies, to really investigate “the mechanisms of how people act”. Watching movies also enables her to examine why she is moved by some things and why she “could not care less” about others.

R3 always tries to find herself in a role. She tries to do this through reading a lot about her character and thinking about it a lot, so the character truly becomes a part of herself. She thinks the most important part is that you learn to love the character: “You must truly believe that what that person does, you are behind that one-hundred percent. You have to love the character and understand why she is making the choices she makes.” Furthermore, when going through this process, she asks herself the following questions:

It is a quest in myself to who that character is. Why is that character there, why does she say the stuff she says, how does she react? I am trying to comprehend that. Then,

I look at the text, I read it again and again and I am trying to find out what the subtext is. (R3)

Again, similar to colleagues R1 and R2, she appears to be describing the creation of an inner model according to Stanislavsky's principles. To look into the subtext of your script is another element that can be discerned in Stanislavsky's technique (Merlin 137). Lastly, R3 adds that by acting together with other people, often you discover even more things about your character.

R4 says that for her, mostly the creation of her character starts with exploring the way in which her character might look at the world: "It is like a pair of glasses you can put on and take off again. Then, there are days when I am walking through the city with the pair of glasses of my character. Then I start fantasizing about what my character would do and what she would think about certain things. Besides her characters mostly being a synthesis between herself and people in her surroundings, she also says she often bases them on other references, for example characters from books she once read.

R5 never sticks to just one thing when preparing for a project and also says that her preparation is different depending on whether she is acting on stage or on camera. She makes a distinction between preparing for a role that is more text-focused versus a role that is more physical. If it is a part with a lot of text, she really focusses on looking closely into the text: trying to analyze the text and the character in order to "shape" the character. Then she looks at what she wants her focus to be, what she wants to tell through the character intuitively and what the director wants to tell with the character. Then, if it is a more physical role, her focus will be on preparing her body: "training your body to appear credible".

At the start of each project, R6 buys a new notebook and orders new movies and books to be nourished and inspired. She describes these tools to help her to immerse herself in "some kind of bubble in which I am completely immersed during the entire duration of the project". She considers herself to be an observer mostly: "Every day, I let myself be inspired by what I see and by the people I meet. Everywhere I look, I see and I hear characters". R6 starts the process by talking to people and then seeing which interesting elements she can select from those conversations to start and the building of her character. However, there is always a part of herself involved in the mix as well:

I cannot disconnect it from myself, even though I do not have the feeling I am portraying myself. In fact, it is some kind of recipe: you cannot disconnect it from yourself, and then there are ingredients you add in the mix, things you have noticed through observations, or things you have read or seen in movies. (R6)

R7 says that, just like R3, she cannot play a character she does not love. She is always looking

for a way to justify the character's behavior for herself on a psychological level and is always looking for the "humanity" of her character. She is not really someone that does a lot of research about the profession or life of her character. In fact, R7 – who is primarily active in the theater – says that her preparation mostly consists of learning her lines:

The moment we start rehearsing, I make sure to remain 'open' and am committed one hundred percent. We rehearse very fast and efficiently, without many distractions, but really giving it all on the floor and seeing what that leads to. By working with directors with whom a lot of work has been done already, grants you access to the heart of the matter quickly. (R7)

With this, she deviates from the other actresses, who do more preparatory work beforehand.

Like R7, R8 is also a fan of creating and "trying out" her character on the floor. However, she is not confined to just this technique. She makes note about what she thinks her character is like and she looks for people by whom she can be inspired: "You analyze the people you see in your surroundings, because, as an actress, you are a big fat sponge of information". Just like in her acting method, she likes to work on a physical level mostly, but says this is more suitable for the theater and often utilizes more of her ratio when acting in front of the camera: "In the theater, you have more time to do your research on the floor whereas in film, you have to think more rationally, especially if the character is far away from who I am as a person, then I have to go into more depth, psychologically speaking".

R9 says she is rather extreme in her preparation and is very perfectionist. She does a lot of research in various forms: interviewing people and visiting locations – sometimes with recurring visits over several months – that are the habitat of her character. She considers the latter as unexpected gifts, because she visits arenas where she would otherwise never go: "It gives you an open mind, it changes your outlook on life. In a way, it even makes me smarter". Furthermore, she has often acquired new skills for roles, such as horseback riding and pole dancing. She considers the acquisition of these new skills to be an enrichment. Furthermore, she talks about combining intuition and ratio in her preparation: "As soon as I intuitively know what my motor will be, I throw my ratio into the mix and then, I do a lot of research. Because if then later on, I start to do weird things intuitively on set, I want to be able to argue why I am doing that". This intense preparation, in combination with the element pointed out in the "acting methods section" suggest that R9 does in fact use some mechanisms of method acting, even if she does not label it as such. Like R5, she makes the distinction between preparation for film and television projects versus the preparation for theater:

Preparation for the theater happens less beforehand: you only have to prepare your body

and learn your lines. The rest of the creation happens in group, with the rest of the cast. In film, the tension arc is different. The camera is so close to your face, every inch of you have to be thoroughly prepared beforehand. (R9)

R10 views the whole process as solving a kind of jigsaw puzzle:

You are trying to figure out how that person is built. I do not have a conscious technique for this, but I do my research: I watch a lot of documentaries if I am not familiar with the topic, I mostly read a lot and then make further associations about what I have read. From that point onward, I start to read even more, until I come across something which I think will be interesting for my character and then you take that into the equation. (R10)

Half of the actresses <sup>14</sup> say that a good preparation is crucial: “the better you are prepared, the more you will be in control of your acting” (R10). R9 is convinced doing your homework thoroughly is what can make the difference between a mediocre actor and a good one: “I am convinced that the film actors I look up to know their scripts through and through and that they know the ins and outs of the matter. They are the ones that stand out and that really make the difference. Personally, I find it annoying if I have to collaborate with lazy actors, who hardly do any preparatory work. Because evidently, this is something you notice”. R3 agrees with this opinion: in the past, she has been startled a few times by fellow cast members that hardly do any preparatory work: “They just do their thing, and personally I am not a fan of that. Because I think you need to have some kind of respect for the profession, and because I believe that a lot of them would be capable of a lot more if they were better prepared”. However, she does make an important caveat: “Doing too much preparatory work is also not a good idea, because you do not want to block yourself. It is a fine line. You always have to be willing to change your vision or let go of your preparation and move into a different direction”. R4 then, says that she thinks this depends on the actor, whereas R6 is mostly concerned with the “accuracy” of the character she is portraying. After the homework is done, the creation of your character is not finished: “If you have eight weeks of rehearsal time, it will take eight weeks to find your character. When you are rehearsing, you discover a lot about your character and you will continue to develop it” (R5).

Actors are ritualistic creators. A lot of rather generic rituals are mentioned by the actresses when talking about their preparation: physical warm-ups <sup>15</sup> (R1, R5, R8, R10) – for example rope skipping or stretching – running through their lines one last time (R5, R8) and

<sup>14</sup> R1 and R5 did not really express their opinion on this matter.

<sup>15</sup> A physical warm-up was mostly mentioned to be done when performing for the theater.

going to the bathroom (R6). For some (R1, R4, R6), placing their props in the right position enables them to give them a jump-start mentally: “All right, we are ready to go!” (R6). Some are superstitious: R4 always consumed the same beverage during the run of a play she starred in, whereas R2 has been wearing the same perfume for years: “If I forget this, then I think I will not be able to act well”. Several more peculiar rituals are also mentioned. R8 says that sometimes, when she is on set, she listens to an “intense song” until right before it is time to shoot, enabling her to get in the right mindset: “Somebody was standing next to me that gave me a sign whenever I needed to get started. Then I would throw of my headphones and enter the set”. Something specific she does as well, is that she has a mantra for every character she plays that she repeats over and over again before she starts acting. R7 talks about the importance of being grounded and that when she feels like this is not the case, she places herself in child’s pose so she can “feel the floor”. R1 does not talk about child’s pose, but also expresses the need to “feel the floor” before a performance.

Besides rituals, most also try to adhere to a routine while being in the process of rehearsing, starring in a play or shooting a movie or television series. Most of these rituals were focused on well-being: exercising, doing yoga or stretching (R1, R4, R6, R8, R9, R10), getting enough sleep or rest (R1, R2, R8, R10), eating healthy or drinking less alcohol (R1, R7, R10) and breathwork and meditation (R1, R10). It is no coincidence that a lot of these practices are physical: “An acting process requires a lot of brainwork. A lot is going on in your head. Then, exercise can help clear your mind” (R6). Yoga, meditation and breathwork are also emphasized by Zarrilli, who sees a frequent influence of Asian techniques in Western acting methods in general (90). He also emphasizes that Indian philosophy and yoga were an important element in developing Stanislavsky’s acting technique (Zarrilli 90). In short, self-care and being more conscious about how the actresses treat their body seems to be key. If these practices are absent, that can have consequences: “I have had moments where I was not able to follow these routines. I can notice that during a performance and it causes me to be unsatisfied with my acting”. Although R5 admits that following these routines are usually more an ambition than the reality: “When you are stressed, you forgot all these good intentions. I think this is the case for a lot of actors”. This is confirmed by R1 and R7, that both admit they should probably exercise more while preparing for a part. Lastly, R1 also says that she tries to focus entirely on the project she is working on, causing her to keep other social engagements to a minimum.

No matter how well you are prepared, sometimes certain difficulties and problems can occur in the process of preparation. R4, R5 and R6 talk about always experiencing some sort of “acting crisis” in the process of preparation. Those crises can come in different shapes and

forms: “That crisis can be a groups crisis, that we are not getting to the heart of the story or that something in the story is off, but it can also be personal crisis”. Reasons for these crises can also be: “Stress, the premiere that is coming up, a collaboration that is not going smoothly or an actress that just does not get it or does not understand what the director is trying through convey through her character or her storyline” (R5). R4 believes these crises are inevitable in the theater: “The week before the premiere we always start to wonder: what the hell are we doing?”. R6 thinks this is simply a component of a “healthy rehearsal process”. Rather than crises, R2 talks about how she often encounters small irritations in her process of preparation. Personal difficulties with a character that “just does not seem to work out” or that is “incomprehensible” were experienced by R2, R3, R7 and R8. R3 explains that “sometimes, you have a clear vision in your mind of what your character should look like. Sometimes, you try to embody that character and you discover: I cannot really pull it off like I had in mind”. This can have a paralyzing effect: “If the director has a very clear and fixed vision and I cannot portray the character the way they had in mind, I freeze” (R8). In the experience of R2 and R7 these personal difficulties were accompanied by thoughts such as “I really do not see it [the character]” (R7) and “I do not grasp it” (R2). The bulk of the respondents (R1, R2, R3, R6, R8, R9, R10) struggle with the demon that is insecurity. The level of insecurity ranges from doubting yourself a bit when starting a new project with thoughts such as “will I still be able to pull it off” (R2) and “am I good enough” (R6) to downright imposter syndrome in the trend of “I am going to blow the whole thing off because I will not be able to do it” (R10) or “now everyone will be able to see that I am a fraud” (R1). R3 testifies:

People often underestimate the amount of confirmation you need when you are acting. It is a very vulnerable profession and people think that because you are good at your job, you will be aware of the fact that you are a good actress, but that is not how it usually goes. You are really standing, full of uncertainty, wondering if it is any good or not. (R3)

R5 says you should take this aspect of the profession into consideration when deciding on your career path: “I would say that people who naturally cannot withstand insecurity and if that gives them anxiety attacks, they should refrain from the profession”. According to R10, to combat this sense insecurity, “you should identify what causes this insecurity and try to get rid of it”, for example by knowing your lines through and through. Even though insecurity can be a pitfall, R9 says that the key to good acting is “being self-confident”. R8, who also claims she still gets nervous every time, says this is always temporary and that after the initial jitters, she always rediscovers why she chose this profession in the first place: “Suddenly, you are on stage, acting.



You are relaxed and then you remember: you are doing this because you are telling a story. People are caught up in that story and you can see that it moves them. As an actress, you have this beautiful responsibility in the lives of people. You are a storyteller and that is awesome”.

Whether you decide to take on a project, is not dependent on the role only. Rather, it is about the project as a whole – what is the story about – and the other people that are collaborating on the project – who is the director, cast or crew – (R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R9). For some, who you are collaborating with often has more weight in the consideration than the character itself (R2, R4, R5). Sometimes it can be the case that even though the character they are offered to play is not particularly interesting, the actresses will accept the part if the collaboration appears to be fruitful or interesting, or if they think they will have fun (R1, R5). One actress talks about the fact that they are weary to take on commercial projects, like a soap opera for example, to avoid getting a certain stamp (R3) but R9 said that she knows a lot of actresses refuse these kinds of project to stay “pure” but that she has noticed that more often than not, she says yes to these kind of parts and that this had led her to be surprised in a positive way, and that it has led to a lot of new encounters. R1 says who she feels about a script is an important barometer for her choice: “If I read something, I am looking at whether it touches me or not. That is the basis from which everything flows for me”. More practical reasons are also given: some actresses admit to haven taken on parts in the past, in order to put bread on the shelf (R9, R10), while others admit that they have taken on jobs that were not necessarily as fun, but that enabled them to gain professional experience and that this could possibly lead to more jobs in the future (R5, R10). Other criteria were: if they would watch the project themselves (R10), because the project seems fun, interesting and/or challenging (R3, R6), that they could “defend” taking on the part at that time in their life (R9), that the story is meaningful (R1, R6, R8) or simply because they were offered the part (R1, R3). Another element that needs to be taken in consideration is the depicted worldview that the project brings along:

When looking at certain gender-affirmative characters, I think: all right, that this exists, is one thing, but I do not want to contribute to the preservation of this. Most of all, I want to create new images of everything that is going on in the world and does not have proper representation yet. That, I want to help shape, I want to give that a voice. (R10)

Four actresses also pointed to the fact that it is quite a luxury if you are able to choose your roles or that turning down roles is something they do rather seldom (R3, R4, R6, R7). However, as R1, R3 and R10 pointed out, the older they get, the more options they must choose from, so the pickier they can become. Reasons to turn down a part were also given, such as not wanting to contribute to gratuitous nudity (R7), the people that participated in the project who were not

very pleasant (R3), not wanting to be associated with a project because they do not believe in it nor its style (R3), that the project is “just not good enough” (R7), that the character is stereotypical (R1, R5, R10), refusing to play the same type of character over and over again in order to prevent typecasting or being put in a certain kind of box, or just because playing the same kind of character repeatedly is not a challenge (R3, R4) or that the part simply is not interesting and playing it would not be satisfactory (R3). R9 claims that type casting is inevitable in film: “That is something you have to accept, that you get cast for the ‘type’ that you are”.

Regarding the creative freedom they receive in the process of crafting a role in Flanders, the majority do not have complaints. Six of the respondents (R1, R3, R6, R7, R9, R10) say that they feel like they do get enough freedom, with R3 stating that you are involved in a lot of different stadia, for example in the outfit choice as well, R5 noticing that you are mostly free in the theater and R9 concluding that she thinks she “cannot complain in comparison to [actors in] other countries”. R9 adds that taking the freedom in the creation of her characters is something she enforces and that this is something she learned with age, because “she did not really dare to take that kind of freedom in the beginning.” R3 gives a potential reason for this freedom: “A director is not able to check everything very thoroughly for every character. That is why you get the freedom to show what you have to offer, to present the research that you have done and to say: this is how I am going to do it!”. An answer that was given four times (R1, R5, R7, R10) was the answer that was probably most frequently given in response to any of the questions in this study: it all depends on the project and on the director. R4 was the only one that was rather negative about this topic<sup>16</sup>:

I think that Flanders is very cliché and very goody-goody, except for a few directors. You have the feeling there are only ten characters in the whole world and that you only see variations of those: either always played by the same actor in multiple series, or by another actor that looks like the first one and has to portray the exact same characters. Actors that get the chance to transform and still stay true to themselves, I think that happens a lot more abroad. Except for Flemish directors X and Y <sup>17</sup> who are especially on the hunt for these kind of things. (R4)

This is something that R9 refutes, since in her experience, on a creative level, it is quite the

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<sup>16</sup> A sidenote that should be made, is that several actresses also pointed out that in Flanders, stereotypical characters, mostly concerning gender and ethnicity, are still omnipresent. However, R4 was the only one that linked this to the freedom she could (not) take in the creation of characters.

<sup>17</sup> Similar to the actresses, pseudonyms are used for people used in quotes and anecdotes to safeguard their anonymity.

opposite:

What I hear from a lot of good directors, that sometimes work abroad, is that despite the fact that we have smaller budgets, the Flemish acting sector is very creative. In the United States, France or Germany, there is more hierarchy on set: you must stick to the plan. So, I think the interplay on set in Flanders is quite good. (R9)

Lastly, R2 and R6 explain that the freedom they feel in the creation of their character in the theater has not always been the case historically, implicitly referring to the shifts that were seen in the Flemish theater landscape starting from the 1980s. R6 discloses that “nowadays, there is not much repertory theater anymore where you have to walk from point A to point B with this emotion and with that sentence in hand. That is outdated, at least in the circles in which I find myself”. R2 elaborates on the hierarchy that used to be present in the theater: “There was once a time where directors demonstrated what the actors needed to do or that they had a fixed image of how the character was supposed to be, which they did not want to deviate from. This way, the actor was required to think and behave in a certain way”.

Critic Ronald Hayman says the following about external elements and how they can bring about the transformation from actress to character:

Suddenly there is something about the figure in the mirror that you no longer recognize. It has acquired an independence from you. It has its own way of speaking and moving which you can no longer control quite in the way you did all the previous rehearsals but you no longer need to [...] The character has acquired a backbone, strong but supple, and whatever variations get introduced subsequently, something basic has come right, which you know you can count on to go on giving your support. (35)

Almost all actresses (R1, R2, R3, R4, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10) share Hayman’s feelings: external elements truly do help them while building a character. Hair, make-up, accessories, shoes and the stage setting were mentioned most frequently in this regard. A costume can determine “how you stand, how you move” (R1) or “what your posture will look like” (R2), which are all important elements to take into consideration while sculpting a character. Uta Hagen emphasized the importance of clothing and found that “clothing can affect a real change of self” and thus centered one of her ten exercises around clothing (Rosenfeld 146). Only R5 says that she is mostly occupied with the “internal, herself and her character” so she rather “leaves hair and make-up to the professionals” even though she admits she too likes to have a little input. The actresses said that these elements can “really help you in your transformation, want that is one element that you do not have to ‘act’ anymore” (R9), and that the outfit is “a component of your character” (R1). R6 gives the following explanation: “You can sit behind your desk and

make up all kinds of things but eventually, you just have to test them out. You have to see and feel if it feels ‘right’. Sometimes I get a costume – I often have this with on-camera acting– and then when I am wearing it, it suddenly clicks: I finally understand what kind of person the director wants me to play”. R3 claims that those physical elements that can help you to shape a certain character are “also part of the Method”. Lastly, R8 says that the ritual of transforming through those external elements can do wonders for your mind as well: “Those thirty minutes before you start shooting where you are getting your hair and make-up done, that really does something to you”.

## Key concepts

Both Bertolt Brecht and Stanislavsky emphasized the importance of relaxation for the actor (Unwin 74; Merlin 56). “Movie acting *is* relaxation” as Michael Caine said in his book (18). When looking at what the actresses have to say on this topic, relaxing is deemed to be important, but to feel a healthy amount of tension and the balance between tension and relaxation was revealed to be even more crucial. As Morris Fishman puts it: “few performers are free of ‘nerves’, particularly on a first night, but the good actor uses these to give his performance ‘body’ and life (32). Scholar Robert Barton calls this “relaxed readiness”: getting calm enough, yet energized enough to perform fully (25). Chekhov proposes a sensation of ease which is “not to be used as a means of relaxation, but to provide an energized quality within the ease of one’s movements” (Brahe 104). R6 testifies: “If I am totally relaxed, as if I were lying on my couch, my acting would not be sharp”. She reveals that to her, “trusting the moment” was actually more important than relaxation.

Morris Fishman states that a certain kind of balance has to be sought in this concentration; the actor must not be as concentrated that he looks right through his partner on stage instead of looking at him, but it is also crucial that the actor has to be concentrated enough to listen to what his partner has to say (35). Both Chekhov and Stanislavsky also believe that concentration was an invaluable condition for the actor “to complete his task in performance” (*Acting Emotions* 52). Exercises focusing on concentration and relaxation are the first exercises taught in the training of Lee Strasberg: “You cannot be anything great without the art of concentrating and relaxing” (Strasberg 17). Echoing these scholars and acting teachers, the actresses concurred with their opinion: concentration is indispensable for an actress (R1, R2, R3, R4, R6, R7, R9, R10). Five of them (R2, R3, R4, R9, R10) said that they find it important to retreat into their own bubble before a performance so they can get “in the zone” and achieve the desired level of concentration. They said that they found it difficult if co-stars were still joking beforehand and some were even frustrated by this. R9 even goes as far as saying she is

“addicted” to the concentration that inevitably accompanies acting and “that concentration is part of the game and the pleasure”. R2 describes her experience with concentration as follows: “I loathe not being able to be silent beforehand. I hate it when they [my fellow cast members] are making jokes until the last minutes before we start performing. Usually, before I go on stage, I go backstage by myself and I sit on a chair. I think you need that. Because that silence is the gate between the world behind the scenes and the world on the scene”. “For R1, whether she needs the act of retreating into her own bubble before a performance depends on what kind of scene it is and whether the scene is “heavysset” or not, whereas R7 says whether she needs this moment of silence depends on how she is feeling that day. In contrast to her colleagues, R6 enjoys laughing and having fun with her colleagues before a performance: “Somehow, acting silly with my colleagues before a performance helps me to play a good show afterwards”. Jeremiah Comey says that concentrating on the other actor is the creative source of acting and that the audience will only believe your acting to the extent of how well you pull of the emotional connection with your fellow actor (48). Acting is a process of giving and taking, something of which R8 confirmed the importance as well: “Sometimes, you encounter actors that stop acting, or start half-ass acting when the camera is not on them. I think that behavior is very uncooperative. It is important for an actress to be open and to give relentlessly”. This state of concentration is also described as a state of “alertness” by R2 and R6. Grotowski then, puts an emphasis on actors in his training needing to be “alert” (Lendra 155). Furthermore, Ellie Konijn says that concentration is an important task-emotion (Lendra 155). Thus, since most actresses state that they feel at least “something” while performing and that concentration is important, that “something” they are feeling might very well be them experiencing task-emotions.

The importance of authenticity is brought up by R4 and R9. This can be linked to Grotowski, whose self-expressive acting technique claims that “the actor presents his/her most authentic self on stage, with the intended effect on the spectator of touching the inner self and “unmasking” of the spectator” (Konijn “The Actor’s Emotions Reconsidered” 63). For R4 authenticity is key: “Everything starts with whether I believe something or not”, whereas R9 describes it by saying that “it does not matter which entrance you choose for your acting, as long as you are telling an authentic story that has the capacity to move people”.

Some kind of impulse to kindle an act of creation, critic John Harrop says, is a fundamental element of all creativity (55). By using your impulses, you will know what to do in every situation and through intuition, you can access everything you have ever experienced and learned (Comey 177). Meisner underlines the importance of the actor always being in touch

with his impulses, “his most truthful responses” (Hart 55). Viola Spolin emphasizes the importance of intuition as well: “The intuitive can only respond in immediacy right now. It comes bearing its gifts in the moment of spontaneity, the moment when we are freed to relate and act, involving ourselves in the moving, changing world around us” (4). All actresses say that intuition is very important and is something they use. For R8, intuition enables her to look for a “new kind of spontaneity” and a “new kind of energy” every time. The use of intuition helps her find the “here-and-now”. Using your intuition is also a way to keep surprising yourself: “I try to keep things open, because I believe in the intuition of the moment very much. That way, sometimes you even surprise yourself. I hate fixed tones and stuff like that” (R9). R6 justifies her use of intuition as follows:

I am someone that acts very intuitively, because, if use my ratio instead, I think it is less interesting and it does not enable me to let go enough. Then, I always have the feeling I lose truthfulness and realness. I attach a lot of importance to the realness of things. I must believe it, even if things are enlarged or are a parody. There always has to be a foundation of sincerity and familiarity. (R6)

R10 also places intuition in juxtaposition to ratio:

I often think that in acting, ratio is a platitude. People and their behavior are not logical, there are a lot of layers to a person that prevent people from being ‘legible’ in their behavior, such as upbringing, trauma and learned behavior. That is why I think that sometimes it is better to engage your intuition to go beyond those layers. (R10)

R5 says that she thinks that channeling your intuition, is actually what you might learn in acting school: “I think acting is very intuitive. Actually what you learn at school is, using your intuition and imagination and to address it, erasing your fears and through your imagination, enabling you to communicate what you want to tell and bring about to a broader audience.” Most actresses thus value technique and intuition equally in their acting process. Actor and director John Howard Swain said that nowadays a common misconception is that instinct and technique are not compatible, whereas they are in fact very much compatible, an idea that our actresses are shown to adhere to (2). Critic Ronald Hayman said that the two notions can reinforce each other: “much of the technical knowledge that an actor needs, has to be assimilated so deeply that it becomes instinctive” (3).

Being in the “here-and-now” or “being in the moment” whilst acting was also deemed to be important. R2 believes that “if you are in the here-and-now, you can be lifted higher by your co-star. Those are unexpected gifts you receive and which you gratefully accept”. This can also be associated with openness, a term that also came up a few times (R2, R4, R7):

You must remain open to react unprejudiced to the material that is handed to you by your colleagues. It is a state of grace in which you are responsive to stimuli and impressions. Those are the moments that, without consciously or actively thinking about it, you are suddenly overwhelmed by something. (R2)

R7 said the following about this openness:

What a lot of people describe as being the hard part of acting is the fact that you have to take the leap. You have to dare to open yourself up. It requires a lot of guts to open yourself up to everything and to be vulnerable for everything and to intuitively react to everything that is happening around you. It is vulnerable, but actually, it is the one thing that yields everything you need.

This openness is also something R4 values: “It also has to do with daring to take that freedom, enjoying, not criticizing yourself and being able to turn off your third eye”. R4 notices that the older you get, the more embarrassed you become sometimes and the more you are distanced from the most important: “Acting in the here-and-now all the while being aware of the fact that an audience is watching you”. With this statement, R4 seems to understand and adhere to the concept of double consciousness as coined by Diderot. Furthermore, the performer playing ‘the moment’ through the means of improvisation along with his partner, within the ‘framework of given circumstances’, was also emphasized by David Mamet (Bruder et al. qtd. in Collard 9).

Other key elements that were featured were: familiarity (R6), uniqueness (R6), empathy (R1), safety (R9), integrity (R9) and sincerity (R10).

## The role of text

Considering learning lines, all the actresses have installed a system that works best for them, but some elements do seem to return. Several talked about engaging their senses while rehearsing: writing the text down (R6), saying it out loud (R3, R4, R6, R8), using mnemonic devices (R8), recording the lines of your costar and reacting to that recording (R10). The most frequently mentioned of the senses is engaging the auditory system by saying their lines out loud while rehearsing. Almost half of the respondents emphasizes the importance of repetition when learning lines (R3, R5, R6, R8). Some also say that they pair the memorization of their lines with physical activities, such as walking in the park while rehearsing their lines (R4, R5, R6) or doing chores around the house, with doing the dishes being named most frequently (R1, R3, R6, R8). Sometimes, the actual memorization phase is less present. If you are an actress starring in a play, for example, often times, you have done several table reads with your cast. Usually, R4 says she is lucky enough to know the bulk of her lines after all these tread-throughs. If you are also co-creating the play you are acting in and you have written your lines yourself,

then the actual memorization phase is also limited. Two of the actresses assert that after they are done with studying individually, they like to rehearse with a partner who is not their co-star (R3, R4, R10). R1 and R3 make a distinction between monologues and dialogues: a dialogue has anchor points whereas a monologue is more difficult to memorize. Furthermore, R1 says she always has two scripts: one in which she writes things down and another one that has to remain blank.

All actresses state they refrain from studying their lines with a certain interpretation in mind. They find it important to try and keep things “open” so that there is room for the “here-and-now” and to enable that in the moment of the scene, things can happen that you could not have foreseen. R3 believes that the key to accomplish this is to know your lines through and through:

If you know your lines so well that you can say them while doing the dishes, without thinking, then you have disconnected the text from your emotion. Then, it is just as if you were singing a song. If you can get this far, you have disconnected the interpretation and then you can start looking for new things again in the moment of the scene, based on what your co-star is offering you. But, you can only take a step back on the condition that you know your lines through and through. (R3)

R4 and R9 emphasize that when they are acting on stage, every night is different. Even though they want to keep things open, R1 and R4 finds it pleasant to try out several options of interpretation beforehand. R8 says that she prefers to refrain from learning her lines with an interpretation in mind, but that sometimes, when she is playing in a television series and there is not a lot of time to rehearse, she does add more of an interpretation beforehand and thinks about how she will act it out. R7 remarks that she does not add an interpretation beforehand, but that she has to know what she is saying as regards content, or she will not remember her lines. Whether you can deviate from your script or not and adjust your lines, depends entirely from project to project and from director to director. Almost all actresses (9) like to make changes often to the lines, so that it rolls off the tongue, if the director is willing to. Usually they do this after asking the approval of the director. R9 has a unique method for changing her lines to fit her unique needs better: she improvises beforehand, when learning the lines at home and then writes those lines down so she can use them for the actual scene. R10, who also likes to make adjustments to her lines, admits that she used to be afraid to make these kind of adjustments because she was afraid her vernacular was not good enough since Dutch is not her mother tongue. For this reason, she finds it reassuring that nowadays, the scenarists of television shows are often present on set: “They can help assess whether a line can be changed or not,



whether it is suitable for your character or not”. However, one of the actresses, R2 was very adamant about this topic: you do not change the text: “I am against that, because that is avoiding a difficulty. If the text is really meaningful, then every word has been thought through”.

R10, who adheres to method acting refers to the importance of subtext, which is a term that fits Stanislavsky better than method: “That is something I have learned in method acting classes: read your script as much as you can, because you will extract all the information you need from the script. Then, you have to look at what the sentences mean. Does the character actually mean what she is saying, or does she mean something completely different?”

Most actresses actively work with their scripts, adhering to Stanislavsky’s importance on script analysis, with some employing Stanislavsky’s model, as we have seen in the section about role preparation. All of them acknowledge that knowing your text through and through is of crucial importance.

### On-camera acting versus acting on stage

Historically, there was a long-established denigration of film acting when compared to stage acting (Hollinger 5). A lot of critical neglect followed the example of actors that denigrated film acting in interviews in comparison to stage acting, but since, many scholars have indicated the fact that this animosity is mostly geared towards the technological aspects of film (Hollinger 5). The actresses follow this trend, stating that in their opinion, film acting is definitely not easier than stage acting but that it is in fact, an entirely different discipline (R4, R6) and that it is hard to compare the two. Nevertheless, there were some significant differences between the two that came to the fore.

Theater actors are trained to reach the person sitting in the back row of the theater, both physically, vocally and emotionally (Swain 5). When actors go and play a role in film or television after being used to playing in the theater, they must adjust their way of acting, otherwise they will be “overacting” (Swain 5). Most of the actresses agree with this, with the two most mentioned statements being that film is more “intimate” than theater and that it is more “technical”. The technical characteristics the film medium possesses, seem to shape the outlines of film acting (Hollinger 7). These technical requirements call for a specific set of acting skills (Hollinger 7). Acting for the camera demands different things from the actor than acting on stage, since different techniques are involved in acting for the camera: “there are different stimuli, different restrictions, different areas of freedom within them” (Hayman 102).

That film acting is more technical in comparison to stage acting is something actresses R1, R5, R6, R7 all brought up. Some technicalities referred to by the actresses are the fact that film is not linear; shots are filmed non-chronologically, that the editor can severely alter your

performance through means of cutting and pasting, and a great take acting-wise can be ruined when something else goes wrong on set (for example an extra messing everything up or a lamp that was not placed correctly). Other elements mentioned in this regard are the fact that you must repeat scenes (R1, R3), that you have to reproduce actions in the exact same way as the previous shot (R6), sometimes you are required to look in a completely different direction when talking to someone (R5) or you directed to stand on a sticker on the floor (R5). Concerning the repetition of certain shots, R3 says that film acting is much more fragmentary than acting on stage: “Theater is in the here-and-now. It is a whole, everything is built on one another. Television is very fragmentary, you have to repeat the same thing over and over, in small parts”. This repetition could also be seen as an advantage when compared to the theater: “You can start over, whereas in the theater, there is the live aspect: you can only do it once” (R6).

This shooting non-chronologically can be challenging: “On stage you have the dramatic thrust of the whole play to help you along. In film you shoot isolated moments, probably in the wrong sequence, and you have to constantly crank yourself up to an intense pitch of concentration of every shot (Caine 9)”. Actresses R3, R4, R7, R9 and R10 confirm this. What R4 finds difficult about this is that “sometimes, when you do not shoot chronologically, you can feel like you have not mastered the character fully yet”. R7 confirms that this is difficult “if you have not yet completed the full route of your character”. R3 and R9 both point out that the tension arc is different in film when compared to theater: “Sometimes you play scenes from the end of the film and then you have to feel those emotions already, whereas in theater you can make your entire arc beautifully by building up on the scenes you have played so far” (R3).

Some have called an actor’s performance on film to be “narrower” as opposed to the “wider” acting that can be discerned in stage acting, since it is said that the actor does more on stage and less film through his adjustments. This is confirmed by the respondents that are talking about playing “smaller” (for movies and television series) and “bigger” (for the theater) (R3, R4, R6, R8, R10): “While acting for the camera, the camera can see even the slightest twitch on your face” (R3). Some also equate this acting more subtly in film to acting “more realistically” (R6, R10) or more intimate (R2, R8). R6 also spots a difference in the amount of lines that she needs to learn:

You never have to learn a lot lines for a day of shooting. Maybe four or five scenes, so that is never a lot and after you are finished shooting, you can forget everything again. That is a big difference with theater, where often times, you have to learn big chunks of texts, that you often have to remember for months. Sometimes, you are starring in two or three plays at the same time and you have to make sure you keep all those lines

memorized. In theater, it is in your mind and body, whereas television is very momentary. (R6)

Director Elia Kazan said that acting for the screen is a more honest craft than acting for the theater, since it is impossible to do anything false in front of the camera unpunished, since “[t]hat instrument penetrates the husk of the actor: it reveals what’s truly happening – if anything, if nothing. A close-up demands absolute truth” (Kazan qtd. in Comey 10). R5 confirms this and says that in “theater, you can cheat a bit more, for example when it comes to physical preparation, but the camera sees everything”. R2 and R10 endorse this opinion with R2 stating that “while acting on camera, you cannot lie” and R10 believing that “acting for the camera requires millimeter precision”. Security is also a term that was brought up in the context of on-camera acting, namely by R1:

Acting for the camera gives me more of a sense of security, whereas acting on stage is more vulnerable. While acting for the camera, you do not get confronted with the audience’s reaction immediately, because it is only broadcasted a year after shooting. Filming is not necessarily easier, because you are also vulnerable on a set. But, certain things can be made easier for you. For example, through the edit, certain things can be hidden. (R1)

The edit and the lack of control you have in film versus the fact that you are much more in control while acting on stage is also brought up (R3, R4, R5, R6, R8). Especially editing plays a big role in this: “You can cut back and forth between different scenes and enabling you to combine different ‘colors’ that you have portrayed” (R3).

While acting on film, it becomes apparent that as an actress, you are a small cog in a large system (R1, R3, R4, R9). R1 formulates this as follows: “Not everything depends on you. There are a lot of other people involved in the crew”. R4 remarks that in film “the creativity is spread amongst a lot of different people”. Furthermore, R4 mentions that in film “as an actress you do not have the final responsibility”, whereas in the theater “you are creating the play together with your colleagues and your contribution is a lot bigger” (R4). With being just a small cog in a large system comes along a sense of responsibility: “You do not want to disappoint all those people that are working on the project and investing their time in it”. However, she also points out that with this shared responsibility comes a disadvantage as well: “You are working together with fortyish people and if the sound engineer happens to make a mistake while you just did a really good take, then you can start over and the take is lost. That is why I think it is important that everyone is very concentrated and has a lot of respect for what we are doing all together”.

While acting for the camera, your energy must be dosed differently than acting for the theater: “Theater is a marathon, whereas when shooting, you have to wait often” (R7). The fact that you have to wait regularly is also brought up by R2 and R5. According to R4 you have to figure out what the best way is to deal with the rehearsal takes on set: “Sometimes you start rehearsing the scene and then you have actors that immediately go full force, something I sometimes do. But, that is an immense loss of energy. Other people are just starting to read their lines during this rehearsal and you also have some people that are in an in-between space”.

When questioning their education, R3 and R9 spontaneously said that they scarcely received any camera training. If schools would put this in their curricula more extensively, it is something that could perhaps benefit the cross-fertilization of theater with film and television. R3 expresses how she felt about this when taking her first steps in the film industry:

From one day to the next, you are suddenly standing on a filmset. You are not being prepared for that in acting school. You are standing on set and have no clue about what is going to happen or what you can expect. There is no transition, they are two separate worlds, and they just assume you will be capable of acting on camera successfully. (R3)

Acting on camera requires a different preparation than acting in the theater. Since time and money is always tight and there is no time nor budget for rehearsal, you must be prepared extra well (Swain 15). The reality of a crowded set can bring about some difficulties:

Sometimes, you have trouble accessing the emotionality of your character. If there are a lot of crew members on set, or it is a big scene with a lot of people, they can really get you “out of it”. They are just talking, it is a “regular day at the office” for them. Meanwhile, you have to dig deep into your emotions and you really have to imagine that you are really living in that scene at that moment. All the while, you have to pretend like all the realistic elements around you are not there. I find that really difficult sometimes. (R3)

R1 has had a similar experience and finds this especially difficult when doing emotional scenes: “When there is a really emotional scene and there is an extra that is doing something wrong in the background or there is something wrong with the sound, that is very frustrating”. R2 also finds these external elements on set challenging for example, she finds it annoying that sometimes “there is a lot of shouting on set”, for instance by members of the crew.

In the acting methods section, I talked about how R4 finds that acting is reacting. R3 did not specify this while talking about her acting method, but she does believe in this well. According to her, it can also cause certain difficulties:

One time, I just thought the acting of my co-star was really bad. That is very frustrating,

if you have to act with someone who you believe is a bad actor. You cannot really get into a state of flow and some kind of distance is created. You do not believe what the other actor is saying, which makes it very difficult to react. (R3)

With this quote, she suggests that she is really reacting to the other person and is not just pretending, which, just as R4's interpretation of the matter, can once again be linked to the Meisner technique.

On a filmset, time is money and the actresses experience a big time pressure (R3, R4, R5, R6). "Sometimes, you really want to do another take because you were not satisfied, but there will be no time left" (R4). R4 adds that she is less inclined to take risks creatively speaking on a filmset, because of the pressure and because "so much money is involved". R7 admits that there is a lot of extra stress involved on a filmset: "It has to be shot now. That can really just make me freeze". R6 and R2 point out that the biggest difference between acting on stage and on-camera acting is actually the financial aspect: you make a lot more money in film than in the theater in Flanders. This leads us to our next section: the production conditions in the Flemish industry and how this affects the actresses.

### **Production conditions: an economic crisis in the acting sector**

As mentioned in the literature review, over the last few years, the budgets in Flanders for culture were tight. Nine out of the ten respondents say that the budget cuts in the sector are very palpable. Only R7, who is permanently associated with a theater company, said she does not really struggle financially, but even she notices the large pressure on a film set. R3 said she starred in a production where at certain point the cast had to "threaten to go on a strike, because they had not been paid for months". Additionally, she is also frustrated by "the cheap television series that are produced nowadays, with actors and actresses that work for a low price. This way, the quality goes down, but the viewer does not even notice because those series are very popular". R1 believes these budget cuts can endanger the preservation of the existence of a new generation of theater makers: "It is really sad that young theater makers or critical voices are being gagged. That organizations, young theater makers or young people that are just starting acting school are feeling that there is no more oxygen left".

The pressure in the sector, mostly caused by the lack of time, is real. When shooting for film and television, the actresses notice that nowadays, as much scenes as possible are crammed in one day, because actresses are paid per day (R2, R3, R9). R9 talks about "extreme though shooting days" and that "the stupid thing is we all have such a high work ethic. You want to do your job well. So, you just do it. And then they say: see, it is possible to film everything in a shorter amount of time". R3 testifies that this way, "you simply cannot perform well at your

job”. The days on set are long (R2, R7). R2 finds these lengthy days on set exhausting and R8 sums it up by stating: “In film, there is no time nor money”. On the other hand, in the theater, nowadays you have to perform the play you are starring in multiple times a day, but you are not paid better (R6) and the tours and rehearsal periods are a lot shorter than they used to be (R1, R9, R10). R9 discloses the following: “When I graduated, the theatrical tours had a lot more stops. You performed fifty-ish times, whereas nowadays, the tours are a lot shorter, with maybe ten to twelve stops. In the past, you could really choose to loyally commit to one discipline and say: I am only going to act for the theater. Today, you must combine to survive. A lot of us also do commercials to get by, for example”. R4 says that the aforementioned elements are mostly felt by small theatercompanies: “either they are going to have to put an end to it, or they will have to continue in really difficult conditions”. Furthermore, R5 reveals that actors used to get free food, but that nowadays, you must pay for your own food. Concerning receiving subsidies for your own work, R10 says that she “would have definitely created more performances if the budget would have allowed it”.

The actresses noticed that fixed-term contracts were the norm, whereas nowadays, you mostly work on a freelance basis (R2, R4). This is confirmed by the sketch of the Flemish arts landscape by Kunstenpunt, namely that the last few decennia, the classic structure of theatercompanies as the basic model for collaborating, has been traded in for project-based work, and that the majority of performing artists are being employed on the basis of fixed-term contracts, that are often also short-term (“Landschapstekening 2019” 44). Those who work project-based inevitably experience periods of inactivity and when these are not or inadequately compensated financially by the periods where they are employed, the global income remains low (“Landschapstekening 2019” 44). R9 confesses that she stayed in “a female unfriendly project”, that she would have left if she had earned enough that year. R10 admits that this is often a difficult consideration: “In this regard, I find my credibility to be important, but meanwhile I also have to make ends meet, so that is a difficult balance”.

Are all these difficulties enough to consider quitting acting? R3, R8, R10 admit they think about this “all the time” or every day. The principal reason given to consider quitting is the insecurity of the profession (R3, R8, R10). On this matter, R3 says the following: “The problem is that your self-image, self-confidence and your lust for life depend on whether you are employed or not. Your personal happiness depends on if somebody else wants to cast you and I have a hard time dealing with that”. One participant said that she would not know what else to do. She notices that during the COVID-19 crisis she got very sad because she could not act, but she in previous unemployed periods it has crossed her mind to “just go and study

something else, like philosophy or psychology” (R8). R1, R4, R6, R7 said the thought has crossed their minds occasionally. R1 considered quitting when her theater company was dissolved “because of treason of her fellow founding members”, whereas R6 mostly thought about this at the start of theater school and R7 considers this matter more because of “all the distress surrounding #MeToo”. However, R4, R9 and R6 say that “they still like it too much” to quit. R2 and R9 claim they never really consider quitting acting. For R9, the profession is a “necessity, a calling”. It is a however a hard profession, which is confirmed by R6: “You have to be passionate, otherwise you will not persevere and you will be unemployed. It is a way of life. You are not home a lot, you work in weekends and at night. When other people have holidays, you are the entertainment”.

The tight budget is to the actresses fearing they might miss roles because their price is too high: “Nowadays, there are series that are made very cheaply. That is very painful to see, because often the people who act in those series are not good technical players or do not have the right techniques. I have a master’s degree, and then they are snatching away the jobs because they are cheaper. That is often the case: when my price is too high, they just go on and hire the next actress. I always try to negotiate the prices via my agent, but often times we just decide to accept the job for a lower price anyway (R3)”.

Covid-19 is mentioned by some participants, but the full extent of the current crisis was not expressed, since the interviews were conducted at the beginning of the pandemic. At the time of the interviews, R4 did state that since she is one of the actresses that emphasizes the importance of being able to act to maintain your craft, she was curious what the corona crisis would do with the skills of the actresses. Whereas it was already difficult to get by in the sector before, COVID-19 made it even more difficult. R4 describes the current situation as follows:

Sometimes it already feels like a struggle and now with the corona crisis it is even harder. It is a tabula rasa, whether or not you have had an admirable career so far: everyone is at home. Except for the actors of soap x or ensemble y, who are just being paid regularly. Everybody else is in trouble. [...] I think there will be a pre-corona and an after-corona era. If I think back on a part I refused a while ago, I think to myself: what have I done? I could have had a steady job for two years! My way of thinking about these things will be much more economically influenced after everything that has been happening right now and I think this will be the case for a lot of people. (R4)

Sociologist Rosalind Gill has found that this uncertain climate with a lot of project-based acting gigs, the low income and the uncommon working hours weighs more heavily on the professional career of women than on those of men (Gill qtd. in Willekens et al. 3). R8 testifies

about her personal struggle:

Landing acting gigs for television and film comes in waves. Sometimes, at a certain point in time, you are the person that everybody wants to cast, especially in Flanders. And sometimes, you are not that person, and that makes me insecure. People want to see somebody in which they recognize themselves. If you have a strong characteristic face like I do, then sometimes that can be difficult. That is a tough aspect of the job: to not take things personally [...] It is a vulnerable job. (R8)

R3 notices an amount of nepotism in the Flemish industry: “Often, if you are friends with certain actors or certain directors, the odds that you can star in their projects as an actor are very high. They are favoring the people they know personally”.

Besides all the budget cuts and hard parts of the industry, R6 and R9 notice that Flanders, creatively speaking, delivers high-quality productions, which is confirmed by the popularity of Flemish productions, both in Flanders as well as abroad.

### Acting as a woman

All actresses agree they are made aware of their gender in one way or another, but their specific opinions on this topic seem to vary. Some actresses emphasize that they are treated differently because of their gender (R4, R7 R8, R9). For R4, this goes both ways: “Sometimes you have to work harder and try harder to earn credibility, while other times you are being so f\*cking pampered. On the other hand, men and women are different, so it would be weird if we were not treated differently. Being a woman is part of who I am”. R8 agrees with the pampering comment: “If it is cold on set, you will be the first one to receive a blanket”. R9 feels that because she is a woman “she needs to prove herself more than men”. However, not all actresses experience it in this way. For example, whereas R3 says that there is a lot of respect in the sector, she does not really feel that she is treated differently, an opinion that R2 and R5 agree with. R2 sees a possible explanation in the fact that she “has never really been a sex symbol”. Moreover, R3 thinks it is logical that men are more drawn to each other: “Those things happen in other sectors as well, that is just how it goes: men talk more to men, whereas women talk more to women.”

In the experience of R1, R6, R8, R9, sexist remarks are still omnipresent. These remarks can make you hyper-aware of “how sexual you are as a woman” (R8). R10 sees the following trend: “There is more of an awareness towards being female than there was a couple of years ago. A few years ago, actors and members of the crew made quite a few sexist remarks. Nowadays, I notice that this happens less”. This is not what R6 experiences: “Men sometimes make very questionable remarks. Some of those I can find totally ridiculous or unacceptable”.



If you say something about these remarks, according to R8, this is not always well received: “If you say something about it, they usually think you are a buzzkill”. She also notices that often, male colleagues are trying to cover their behavior by saying things such as “But, I am not a sexist? I love women!” R8 thinks this is not the way to go: “I do not feel comfortable around you and you do not even give me the sense of safety that I can address this issue with you”. R7 also experiences these comments and behavior as down-right sexism: “Sometimes men do not listen, sometimes you are simply pushed aside, or you are being mocked when you actual have something substantial to say”. (R8)

Is there a conversation about #MeToo in the Flemish acting business? R1, R3, R4, R5, R7, R10 have noticed that the conversation about #MeToo has indeed opened up. R1 states that “people are starting to question themselves and their behavior more, doing more introspection”. It seems the movement did stir up something, but whether this is very productive or not is questionable. R10: “It is typically Flemish: they often refer to #MeToo and then act a bit giggly about it. That behavior is very typical for Flemish people: never really wanting to truly look the problem in the eye but mostly, it is them wanting you to confirm that ‘you think this is ridiculous too, right?’”. R5 also confirms that people are giggly about it, but she thinks this does not mean it is ironic or that the severity of the situation is denied: “I believe the topic is very much open to discussion nowadays. A framework has been formed that has been sent out into the world. Now, men in positions of power gained a sense of awareness about their positions and the potential dangers that come along with it. I think we have been brought to our senses”. R3 also sees no harm in this, since she states: “jokes are made about the topic in a positive way”. R7: “Some kind of awareness has crystallized, causing a lot of comments amongst other things that are not overlooked anymore like it used to. More and more people are speaking up if they see or hear something that is not okay”.

Do they notice that women that are older than forty experience even more difficulties? Things seem to be going wrong in this regard as well. R9 has received some insensitive comments in the genre of “Wow, you still look very good for your age” and “You age very well”. R3 thinks the struggle is not so much the age itself, but the lack of work in general: “There are just not a lot of parts for that age category”. R6, R7, R8 state that as a woman, you will be considered to be too old for certain characters quicker than men. Arguing this case, R6 referred to another Flemish actress, Maaike Cafmeyer, who did not get cast for a role because she was too old, even though the character was the same age as Cafmeyer was at the time (nkdr). R6 and R8 notice less discrimination based on age in the theater in comparison to film or television: “In the theater, I can play a girl of sixteen or a woman of fifty: everything is possible”

(R6). R4 thinks that this problem is a consequence of commercial considerations:

I think that writers and transmitters often write for consumption because of commercialism and finances. And if you want young people to look at your show: a teen is not going to fall in love with a forty-year-old. I also think that there often is a problem with screenwriters: when they write about forty-year-olds, it often looks like they have no inspiration, as if all of the tension goes away in life when you're older than forty. Nothing interesting is being written for that generation. And if they write for that age, they usually take younger people to play the role, because that is "sexier". (R4)

R10 sees a positive evolution in this regard, but that this causes a new problem in its turn: "The problem is that the balance is not correct yet. Suddenly, all the older women are cast for the part of prime minister". R7 said that "I find it very strange that I never used to play a mother and then all of a sudden I turned thirty and I had to play the mother of a seven-year old!"

Theater scientist Leen De Graeve confirms this problem in a Flemish context, claiming that the balance between women and men in the age category of twenty to thirty is well-nigh equal, whereas the gap between male and female actresses increases with age (Damareeck). As the actors and actresses age, mostly, if there is a choice between a man and a woman with a comparable resume, a man is chosen (Damareeck). R3 feels the negative effects of her gender mostly in this way: "there is a lot less work for women and women get paid less than men". R6 confirms both these elements and states: "In the end, I do not really mind the macho behavior, but I do wanted to be treated and paid equally".

The representation of women in media is often unrealistic, offensive, and stereotypical (Kearney 23). According to Laura Mulvey the characterization of the actress happens through her "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 11). In this paradigm she is solely "a fetishistic object of spectacle and of the voyeuristic male gaze, and the male actor serves only as the gazer, an identification figure for the spectator" (Mulvey qtd. in Hollinger 21). R9 definitely noticed this male gaze on a recent production she was working on of which she thought the plot to be too misogynistic: "The whole story is told through the lens of men. The whole series was written so you would see four women strutting in their bikinis all series long" and that her character was written as someone who "never wears underpants". While working on this production, she encountered a lot of elements that degraded women: "If I did not need the money, I would not have taken on this project. Because it is so misogynistic. At the first pitch, I was the only woman at the table and had to raise my voice to be heard between all those men. I rode my bicycle crying that day." She and her female colleagues did try to have conversations about why the plot and characters were misogynistic and while the writers did make adjustments she says she

was not able to accomplish everything she wanted in that regard: “Eventually, you lose that battle”. R8 testifies:

You have to be pretty all the time, you get a lot of makeup whereas men get a lot less. You have to adhere to the standards of a beauty ideal. You are stuck in a straightjacket. If I see that the character I am offered to play in a project is purely informative in this way, then I will refuse it. I am looking for parts that are much more layered, that truly mean something and that transcend the dimension of looks only. Characters that are more than just the mother or the daughter. I want to have the feeling that I am standing there, because I am a freaking amazing actress and not because of the size of my boobs. (R8)

R9 confesses the following: “I played in a series that was overall very misogynistic. I played a character that was actually going to be played by a man. That is why my character in that series is the only well-developed female character: because it was actually written for a man”. R8 concludes that “In Flanders, I think we have to shatter that cliché image of women. It is happening, but very slowly. We have to break through that beauty ideal”. R2 says that it is only in the last couple of years in television and film that scenarists are thinking outside the box more; “I have never played a character that had a job outside of the house”.

The consensus seems to be that they are not doing it on purpose, out of ignorance or they do not know their behavior is harmful. R9 explains that the inventors of the series which she experienced as misogynistic were “not jerks”: “That is the most shocking part, they are not aware of what they are doing wrong. They are simply ignorant men”. R10 says that “in Flanders, they think they are very forward-thinking, but actually, the parts they write are still very narrow-minded”. R8 notices that this is “conditioned behavior”: “They talk from their privileged position in which they are not aware of the fact that they are labelling women as women by highlighting their shapes. For example, at film school, you are thought that you cannot film a woman from frog perspective because then they will have a double chin and that is ugly”. Unwanted touching can also result from this ignorance:

During certain scenes, there can be groping that you really do not like and that you take with you for the rest of your life and that your male co-star is completely unaware of this. It has happened to me as well. I am certain my co-star would not even remember and that he would believe that it was in function of the image of the scene. No, that is not the case, you simply did not respect me because of that. (R8)

R4 describes it as “power abuse that unfolds in a gender-based manner”. Things she has experienced are among other things that “sometimes, people are being made so insecure that

they are easier to manipulate” and that it also feels like “behind the scenes all sorts of things are cooking up. For example, all of a sudden, that person lost the part and it was given to someone else: what the f\*ck?” For R9, the whole #MeToo situation is “not about flirting, it is about power”. R9 experienced an instance of power abuse whilst shooting a movie she now regrets starring in:

They lied about my co-star. It was only when I came to set that I saw who it was. When seeing the finished result, I noticed that they edited the film according to who was the most famous. The whole dramaturgical line was ruined of what I had acted. I was really embarrassed. I cried. I was devastated because I have a really good work ethic. Whatever I do, I want it to be good. Fortunately, now that I am older and now that I have an agent, these things do not happen anymore, because I know I have to be wary of these kind of things. (R9)

Some (R7, R8) also remarked that power abuse is omnipresent today and that it is not only the case in the entertainment sector: “I think that alpha males, maybe even women as well, are everywhere. People that are in a position of power that have the feeling that whatever they want to do, they will proceed with it” (R8). R7 gives a possible explanation as to why this debate is livelier in her sector than in others: “I this suspect this has to do with the nature of our job. We are constantly working together with people, we are touching each other a lot and we are dealing with emotions and storytelling. That is why I think the threshold is lower in this profession and that everything is vaguer. But, in principle it is something that happens in every sector”.

R8 says she has never experienced sexual intimidation on set, but she believes that “extreme examples like the situation of Bart De Pauw certainly exist”. Of course, this is the most difficult aspect of the situation to get a lot of testimonials from, since it is a personal and sometimes painful topic. R7, when asked about whether things have happened to her or where she was personally involved in unacceptable situations, she gives a meaningful nod. R1 has experienced two instances of transgressive behavior herself: she always retreats from the other actors for an outfit change and one time she had a bad experience with this “I heard somebody asking, where is R1? Oh, she is getting changed. They knew I was getting changed and still they came and find me”. Another instance she experienced was when the theater company had hired a coach to help with the final assembly of the play: “I always had a bad feeling about the guy. He was already very touchy during rehearsals. Then, one day, he asked if I could stay longer than the rest to work on a monologue. I agreed, but during that extra rehearsal, he started placing his hands lower and lower. I stood up, walked away and we fired the guy”.

One of the actresses (R8) recently shot a movie where there was an intimacy coach: “I

really enjoyed this. The coach asked me what my boundaries were and what I did and did not like and that I could say stop at anytime if I was uncomfortable”. R9 says she has never had a negative experience when shooting these scenes: “It is already very awkward to shoot these scenes, so you always do this with such integrity. I have never experienced that people were rude during these scenes, because it is very embarrassing to begin with, also for men, so everyone always behaves very respectfully”.

Some of them has experienced unwanted touching, such as R9, who still sporadically gets slapped on the ass: “it happens, but I find the elements of #MeToo concerning content worse”. R4 thinks touching is a complex subject, since her boundary depends on which person she is dealing with: “I am a very physical person, I like hugging people. Some people would be allowed to squeeze my breasts, while others give me the chills if they are merely putting their hand on my shoulder”. R6: “I do know actresses personally that went through some “#MeToo situations. So, that is certainly something going on these days. But I do not know if I am the type of woman they would try these kinds of things”.

Some have noticed colleagues, especially directors, have become more careful since the debate was first sparked. R1 has noticed that nowadays, more and more men she works with ask for her permission before touching her, for example “asking if they can hold my hand”. R2 has noticed this asking for permission as well and describes it as “some kind of newly developed alertness”. Alongside this carefulness, a sense of prudishness seems to have come along as well: “It has installed a new kind of modesty. I think that is quite problematic, because it has nothing to with our art form” (R2). R9 has heard that prudishness is especially the case with her young colleagues: “Something I hear from colleagues that also teach acting classes is that they say that ‘those young people, they do not dare doing anything anymore. That cannot be the intention. You should not feel embarrassed. We are actors and we are working with our bodies”.

According to R8 “the film world really is a men’s world” but she thinks will change when more female directors and DOPS will step forward and that “some kind of balance will be created”. When R9 talks about the ignorant men in power, she explains that their behavior can be attributed to their generation: “in that generation, money, wealth and status is still very important. They really adhere to a patriarchal paradigm”. So does notice that this is shifting: “your generation <sup>18</sup> would not accept this anymore”. R10 says she sees these positive changes as well “especially when looking at the younger generation”: “because they are so unapologetic related to that matter, they make sure the older generation follows them in this regard and that

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<sup>18</sup> Referring to the generation of the interviewer, who was twenty-two at the time of the interview.

they listen to these concerns as well”. Furthermore, R10 says that she sees a positive evolution but that “We are not there yet. Yes, there are more parts for women and it is more pleasant for women to play certain characters nowadays. But casting directors have still not come to the realization that certain characters that are written for men are perfectly suitable of being played by a woman, or even by a woman of color or a man of color”. Lastly, R2 wanted to add a strong, critical note on the whole movement:

When things really did happen that were unacceptable, I find it problematic if it happened twenty or thirty years ago. That was another situation. The world was different and the people in it were different. Women let themselves be caught by people who have so much power. Not only that, but they also let themselves be mistreated to get somewhere and I think that's the fault of both parties... On the one hand, it should not be permitted for persons with power to do this and on the other hand, I ask myself if people should have the right to say this years after the facts happened. [...] I have never heard complaints of other actresses about this matter. Otherwise, I would have acted upon it. It is a just not something I have personally encountered. (R2)

With this statement, she seemed to deviate quite a bit from what most of her colleagues said, who see the whole power abuse situation as a serious issue. However, R3 and R5 did talk about, nowadays, some kind of countermovement can be discerned:

Actually, I think that is kind of a pity. Nowadays, there is a sense of prudence. People dare to touch other less, whereas in the past, colleagues could just touch each other without it being a bad thing. Now I feel that it is surrounded with tension. You do not feel free anymore, you have the feeling that we are not honest or open anymore towards one another. Actors are more careful towards me, while there is no need to be careful at all. (R3)

R4 agrees with her colleague: “Men have become more careful and that is a pity, because the spontaneity has disappeared”. R9 has a different stance on this prudishness: “The power abuse is much more hidden now, because the business is getting more and more prude. While arguing against a misogynistic plot with my female colleagues and arguing about how we could open things up we got the reaction that we were too open-minded and that the average Flemish woman watching VRT would think that is too shocking”.

### Acting as a woman of color

In analogy to the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite<sup>19</sup>, in 2020 there was a similar commotion in Flanders

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<sup>19</sup> Director Spike Lee used this hashtag to shine a light on the all-white acting nominations at the Oscars of 2015.

concerning the Pop Poll of Humo, a Flemish periodical: all thirty-nine candidates that you could vote for were all white (Tielens, “Humo so white”). The list of actors and actresses who were eligible for winning an Ensor in 2020 showed a similar trend: Flemish fiction is still predominantly white (Tielens, “Humo so white”). Three of the respondents that were interviewed have a different ethnical-cultural background. Inevitably, throughout the interview, they talked about how their non-white backgrounds affected them as actresses in Flanders.

The participants of color indicated that they did not recognize themselves while watching television growing up and that the representation was lacking. R1 describes that this was what motivated her to start with acting herself:

I struggled with recognition, with, for example, characters that made me think of myself, with their stories, what I experienced as an immigrant child, as a non-white child in a white environment. When these characters were played, it was often played stereotypically or with a lack in depth in the stories. And I think I have felt the need to see that on the screen since I was younger and that I thought 'well, if they will not do it, I'll have to do it myself. (R1)

R5 also did not really see people of color on television while growing up “which is a distorted picture of society, because meanwhile, we make up twenty percent of society”. In 2020, she sees a bigger presence of people of color, but indicates that this does not equate this with representation: “It is better, it is more present, whereas back in the days, it used to be not present at all. I think that now the challenge is to really portray the reality. I want to see people of color on the screen without it having to be exotic”. R1 talks about how representation can be a very powerful thing:

I took on the part of a lesbian character. I have done this because there are still people in that same situation, in my personal space and also far beyond. It's not only muslim people or people of color that struggle with their sexual orientation and have struggles, but there are still people who are being attacked because they are walking hand in hand.

So that why I find it important - That's why I do what I do (R1)

The interviewed actresses of color say that all of them have been offered cliché or stereotypical roles, which is not necessarily a bad thing according to R1:

I have no problem with playing cliché roles, but clichés come from somewhere. What is their backgroundstory? When you take that with you and tell it, then you are really telling something. In the beginning, I was denying cliché roles until I realised that, if I say know, they'll give that role to someone else who also has to bring home the bacon and who will play it like they want it to be played. When I realised that, I started

accepting those roles but under my conditions: okay, you want me to play this? But then we'll have to change this and this. I'm very proud of the roles that I have played and was able to change. You can be mad about that or you can say okay, let's sit at the table and talk about that. (R1)

R5 states that what she looks for in a part specifically is 'humanity, that the part has multiple layers, that is always the most important. It has to be complex as well and not one-dimensional, caricatural or stereotypical'. All three participants have had the experience of being asked to play a stereotypical character. R5 nuances this: "I think every actor experiences this. A fat actress is also often offered stereotypical parts. I think that is part of our profession, it often functions in a stereotypical and cliché way, especially film". R10 sees the problem as follows:

We are often asked to play a cleaning lady, a terrorist or a lower-skilled person or the complete opposite: the whitewashed foreigner that is a doctor or someone of state security that speaks Dutch perfectly, because those characters are much more appreciated by the mainstream. I think that is a dangerous trend. My Flemish colleagues have a hard time understanding this because they are like: but we are writing nice roles for you now, aren't we? And then I'm thinking like: no because we are still as a "you". (R10)

While listening to their testimonies, I immediately linked what they were saying with the concept of tokenism, which can be defined as "the practice or policy of admitting an extremely small number of members of racial (e.g. African American), ethnic (e.g. Latino) or gender (i.e. women) groups... to give the impression of being inclusive, when in actuality these groups are not welcomed" (Riccucci qtd. in Ruby 675).

Only using people of color is not enough for me because the stories are still written from a white viewpoint. I struggle with people saying "more color on television". Okay, but the stories need to be more colored as well. It has to be about people living on the verge of society, that are being discriminated against and forgotten about, people that we pass by on the street but who don't get to play a role in society and if, as a person of color, you jump on the wagon and write from a cliché-affirmative narrative, I really struggle with that (R1).

R10 has also noticed that people of color are often cast because of their skin color:

The problem is, the entire casting of the lead characters is done and then they move on to the supporting characters and they have to cast an actor or actress of color for one of these characters because 'that is obligatory nowadays'. You feel that you are actually not first choice and that they often do not really appreciate you or know you, even



though you have already played many roles. (10).

She also finds it difficult to address this problem: “If we make this a problem, then we are always the ones who are complaining. But if we don't make it a problem, then the problem doesn't exist. That's something that's very ambiguous. In some way, we are obliged to play that role but we don't really want to. Her call to the industry goes as follows:

Let us play lead characters that have a diverse background, that speak Dutch but also do not have to be perfect, that can be complex and that can make mistakes. We are always portrayed in a very black-or-white manner. When I saw this, people get offended because they are like: 'yes but we made this role especially for you. You can do this. I can't believe you're refusing to play it. (R10)

R10 has noticed a relapse regarding representation of people of color on television: “Television is even whiter than it used to be. There is not a lot of interest in everything that is different, because they are frightened that they will lose viewers if they commit to that”. Critic Filip Tielens, however, sees a positive trend in Flemish theater considering the representation of people of color, with big theater houses paying more and more attention to topics such as cultural diversity, racism and decolonization, with colored actors and theater makers being able to tell their stories themselves (“Het theater bekent eindelijk kleur”). Moreover, he sees that colored actors and theater makers are getting more chances and are slowly but surely getting more responsibilities to determine the context of their projects themselves (“Het theater bekent eindelijk kleur”). R1 saw a positive change in the audition room: “I once did a casting where the casting people, when I entered the room, started talking about the necessity of telling the story of the project I was auditioning for, why this character, why they wanted to highlight this... And I thought wow, Flanders 2020, we made it!” R1 sees an emergence of women of color in the Flemish acting world: “Back in the day, if producers were looking for a woman of color to play in their project, the only choice they had was me or X. Thank God that is not the case anymore nowadays”. R5 remarks that at this moment “my background is actually an advantage, because there are a lot of societal and social conversations being held about decolonization and representation. So, it is a trend that now seems to work in my advantage. Fortunately, because that used to be not the case”. R1 also says that her background is “an enrichment”. R10 concludes with the following message: “I used to have difficulties with my ethnicity in regard to the sector because I saw it as a disadvantage. But now I have realized: I do not have problem with my background and I like being the diversity in films and series. I do not want to white-wash myself”.

## Limits of the research

In this study, I tried to be as exhaustive as possible, but still there are limits to the research. The Western acting methods that are most often found in literature were discussed and linked with the findings from the interviews. However, there is a wide variety of other (non-Western) acting techniques, theory and scholars that were not mentioned. Furthermore, there are still elements that are important for an actress that were not questioned during the interviews, such as the relationship between the actor and the public. The questions and answers were very personal, only considering their individual perspective and situation. It is possible that some of the given answers were not exhaustive about certain topics, but with this method you can only obtain the amount of information the actresses want to discuss. Furthermore, since the interviews were conducted either before the COVID-19 pandemic or at the start of the pandemic, the influence of this crisis on the actresses, except for some brief mentions, was not really studied. The influence of COVID-19 on actresses and on the Flemish acting sector in general could be a useful suggestion for further research. Another suggestion for future research, is conducting this study on a larger scale with more participants, so that the results can be more representative of the entire population of Flemish actresses.

## Conclusion

By means of this study, I hope the reader has gained more insight into how Flemish actresses function and that he has learned something. My respondents would approve of this, since according to them, acting is a life-long learning process. You must act frequently so you can continue mastering your craft and whereas going to acting school was not deemed to be useful, but not an absolute necessity, you should have a training ground of some sort, whether it is through a school, workshops or through your practice in the people you encounter therein. Nobody witnessed their acting style radically changing throughout the years, but most of them did notice a positive evolution or subtle changes in this regard. Acting methods are not very lively in discussions among Flemish actresses. It is not something that really preoccupies them or that they think about often. However, in the conversations I had with the actresses, several elements of the different techniques mentioned in the literature review could be discerned. They did claim that technique is crucial, not so much as in the sense of adhering to the big acting methods as described in the literature study, but more in the sense of having the technicality to control your speech instrument and have bodily awareness. They valued technique, but being too technical was a no-go, could lead to too mechanic playing, boring repeating every night, too perfect. In the interviews, some techniques or mechanisms were discussed rather frequently, either directly or indirectly such as the magic “if”, Stanislavsky’s inner model and Meisner’s

belief that acting is reacting. Two actresses claimed to be proponents of method acting, one actress said she sees her work as a synthesis between Stanislavsky and Brecht and another actress said she is mostly influenced by Grotowski. When comparing the elements they discussed during the interviews to the techniques they claimed to adhere to, this seemed to match for the most part. However, all the actresses discussed some additional elements that could also be linked to other acting methods. In addition, the remaining respondents found it difficult to pinpoint the technique they followed and seemed to mention key elements than can be placed in the category of several different acting methods as well. Elements that were brought up by the actresses as being crucial can be linked to elements of the techniques of Konstantin Stanislavsky, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, Jerzy Grotowski, Bertolt Brecht and Viola Spolin but we were not able to find a common thread among the actresses. Bearing all of this in mind, we can conclude that the concept of hybrid acting as coined by Schechner is very relevant in the Flemish context, meaning that most actresses employ elements from different acting styles and techniques. It appears as if Flemish actresses are using a multitude of different tools and techniques: whatever is most useful for the character and production they are working on at a given point in time. The two method actresses did not say anything about the possible misogynistic qualities of the technique, whereas they had quite strong opinions about the gender-related subjects. Furthermore, literature states that method actresses are few and far beyond, whereas in this study, twenty percent of the actresses claimed to be proponents of method acting. Based on my research, it seems as if the method acting can still be used by woman without it being inherently problematic. Technique only seemed to be part of the equation. Some important key concepts that came to the fore were relaxation, which can be linked to Brecht, and Stanislavsky, and Chekhov's sense of ease, concentration which can be linked to Grotowski's alertness, authenticity, which can also be linked to Grotowski and intuition, which was mostly important in the systems of Meisner and Spolin. According to the actor's paradox as laid out by Diderot, nine out of the ten respondents claimed that they "felt" something, with only one respondent agreeing with Diderot: it is not the actor who should feel the emotion, but the audience. Since they also found concentration to be crucial, which is one of the task emotions described by Konijn, I think that it may very well be possible that that "something" the actresses feel while performing is actually a task-emotion. However, this is a hypothesis, since it is only based on what the actresses said, and no further tests were conducted to verify this claim. Most Flemish actresses were proven to be true observers, with observation being another element that can be linked to three of the studied acting gurus, namely Stanislavsky, Brecht and Adler. Most of the actresses agreed that doing your homework is key,

with one of the most important elements being that you must know your text through and through. A lot of the actresses did their research in preparation of their character, for example by interviewing people, reading books, watching documentaries or visiting the natural habitat of their characters. The choice of roles was dependent on a lot of different factors. The difficulties they encountered during their preparation were mostly crises, both in the group process and within themselves and the everlasting sense of insecurity, that never goes away, not even after a long and fruitful career. The majority of the respondents said that external elements really helped them in the creation of their character. Each actress had invented a mechanism of some sorts that enabled her to memorize her lines quickly. Something that was frequently mentioned in this regard is that nine out of the ten respondents like changing their lines and always try to do so, whereas the remaining respondents think this is not done. The difference between on-camera acting versus acting for the theater can be mostly found when looking at technical aspects, such as the repetition of shots and the non-chronological order of shooting. Moreover, acting for film is claimed to be more “intimate” and “narrow”, whereas acting in the theater is “wider”. Difficulties on set are the time pressure, the long days and the external elements that can be distracting. All actresses agreed that the budget cuts in the sector are very palpable and worrisome. The insecurity of the profession in general is tough and acting remains a vulnerable profession. Taken these elements into account, most of them have considered quitting acting either once in a while, or all the time. The actresses all notice the impact of their gender on their profession in some sort of way. For some the impact of this element is quite large, since they have had quite a bit of negative experiences in this regard, whereas others do not see this as their primary concern regarding their profession. It does however seem as if the abuse of power, the inequality between men and woman, the sexist remarks and misogynistic roles or television series remain a problem in Flanders. There are still not enough in-depth roles for actresses of color that are not based on their color only and their representation is not yet correct either. In the future, we can only hope that there will be a positive evolution regarding gender, ethnicity and budget in the Flemish acting industry. While a lot of different elements were discussed in this study, the actresses claim that a lot of factors are not in their own control, depending from project to project. This confirms that time and time again, acting has been proven to be a unique moment, existing in the here-and-now and being constantly evolving. Even though the future of the Flemish acting sector is uncertain budget wise, creatively speaking, the sector is flourishing and is filled with talented actors and actresses at least the talent is guaranteed/ at least there is plenty of talent, which if the budget and circumstances allow, will flourish in the following decades once again.

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## Appendix

To safeguard the privacy of our actresses, the interviews will not be published.