

# TIME TO ACT

**SIMON ANNAND**

Foreword  
**CATE BLANCHETT**

Introduction  
**VICTORIA BROACKES**

Design  
**LOUISE BRODY**

**TERRA**



**STAGE  
DOOR**



I love actors. It's a weakness in a producer, but it explains why I jumped at the chance to be involved with the book you're now holding.

The vulnerability of actors is extreme. Their power is also extreme.

I find it impossible not to love the people who create this world of such extreme highs and lows. And you can see how Simon also loves them, how he documents the way they travel from living as themselves to inhabiting someone else, how he frames them in situ, in cramped dressing rooms and crowded corridors, or peering into their mirrors as if they are trying to identify the people they're about to become.

When Simon and I first discussed this book we saw it as an extension to *The Half*, his first essay in demonstrating the passage of the actor from street to stage. We couldn't have known how his photographs would also be permanent records of a world that may, I fear, never again exist so exuberantly.

Treasure this trove, please.

PETER WILSON

Producer, *The Woman in Black*, *An Inspector Calls*

THE  
MARK RA

ROYAL

THE JERWOOD THEATR

ROYAL  
CANE  
VENHILL

ROYAL  
COURT

ES AT THE ROYAL COURT



# FOREWORD

**T**he dressing room is a strange space. Intensely private, full of superstitions, whirling with thoughts and emotions, yet simultaneously intensely public – people running in and out, mic checks. An intimacy of dressers. Last-minute notes being given. Jokes cracked. ‘The front curtain isn’t operational tonight, so we need to gather in five to re-block the opening...’

A flurry of ablutions, hilarious observations shared from the journey in from the so-called ‘real’ world to this, our deeply unreal reality of the half hour until act one begins, when we throw ourselves into the ring and see what happens. Will it happen tonight?

Into this swirl, for the last thirty-seven years, Simon Annand has been quietly welcomed. Only he, who has spent so long inside rehearsal rooms capturing the dynamic and expressing the movement of performers in action – the muscular conversation that is putting on a theatrical production – would be able to enter the backstage area, camera in hand, and cause nary a ripple...

It is as difficult to capture actors and creative teams in unselfconscious action as it is to arrest birds in flight. His aim is to illuminate the process (and in the case of Annand’s book *The Half*, to present prelude and aftermath) in a way that invites an understanding in the viewer. And now, in *Time to Act*, he deepens this exploration further.

But there lies Simon’s skill. He is inside this process with his subjects. His sensitivity to atmosphere is, quite simply, astonishing. His decades-long examination of lives lived in the theatre is an invitation into very private worlds, at the second before they become public.

It is an opportunity, in a world obsessed with outcomes, to understand procedure – the constant, restless process of actors searching for becoming, for danger, for risk, for the journey itself, without expectation that a definitive destination will ever be reached.

The readiness is all.

‘Act one beginners – stand by, lighting, hair, wardrobe, wigs and make-up!’

**CATE BLANCHETT, ETHEL BARRYMORE  
THEATER, 2017**

**FOLLOWING PAGES:** The Harold Pinter Theatre and their display in the stage-door area where the actors sign in. It is interesting to see the kinds of images used to promote actors in different eras, and how many distinguished actors have worked at this theatre.

**CATE BLANCHETT**

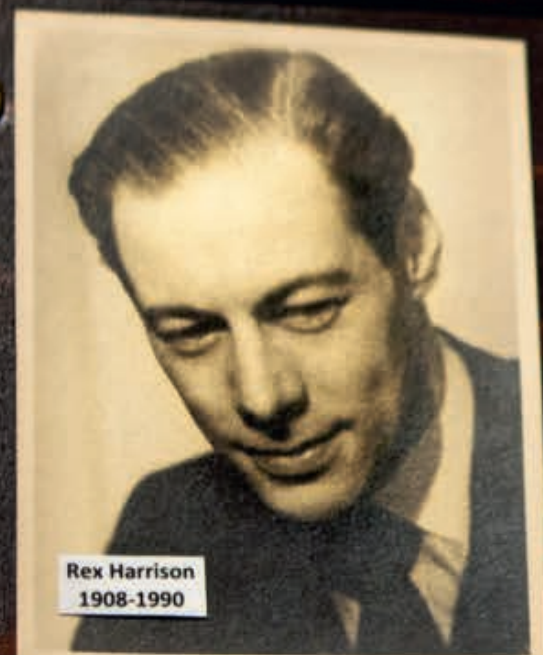
*John...*

1908 - 1990

*Ron...*



*Joan Marsh*



Rex Harrison  
1908-1990

*Rex Harrison*



*With love  
Joan Sanders*

JOAN SANDERS  
1912 - 1992



*S*





*Lionel Lincoln*



*Bill Esmond*



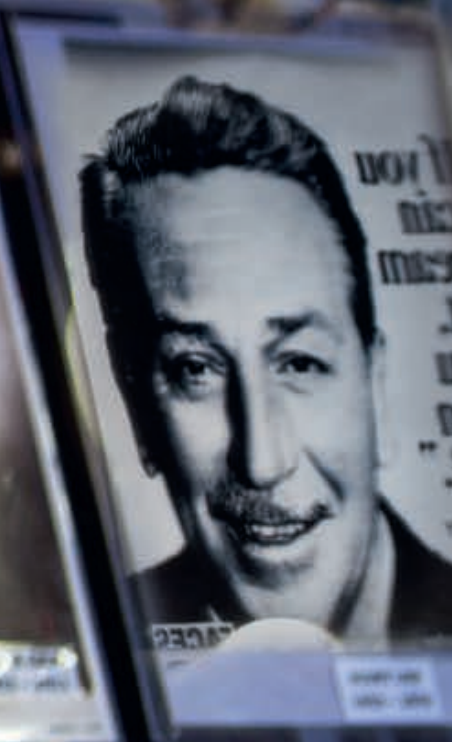
HILL ESMOND  
R. R. G. Book Review  
"I FIND THIS THE FINEST USE OF THE WORD 'AND'  
KEEPED BY SALES IN PERFECT CONDITION."  
**HILL ESMOND**  
1908 - 1990  
*Hill Esmond*  
LAWSON BROTHERS LIMITED



*Bill Esmond*  
**OPHELIA LYNN**  
1882 - 1976



**OPHELIA LYNN**  
1882 - 1976



**ALAN BATES**  
1904 - 1997

**OPHELIA LYNN**



Stage →



# SIMON ANNAND'S WORLD

I cannot precisely remember when I first encountered Simon Annand. But around 2004 I do remember a meeting to view his work in the (now closed) V&A Theatre Museum in Covent Garden, and finding it immediately fascinating. One does not need to be an actor or theatre professional to feel the compelling power of Simon's photographs – images of an actor in the final moments before he or she steps onto the stage in front of an audience. One does not even need to know the actor or the character they are about to play. Even without these, the photographs elicit a pure human empathy for the act of preparation, the glimpse into a private moment when the actor must leave all thoughts and concerns of the day behind and transform him or herself into whoever he is to play that night. It is both imaginable and unimaginable.

It has been my pleasure to have known Simon Annand since then. This early meeting led to the first of several iterations of an exhibition created at the V&A with Simon, which in various forms toured the UK and the continent over several years. For this first exhibition in 2005, we named the show *The Dressing Room*, in part because we were unsure whether the general public understood the term 'the half' and its significance, in part because we conceived the idea of exhibiting the photographs in the actual dressing rooms of the small studio theatre at the heart of the V&A Theatre Museum. Along with the psychological insights the photographs revealed, their window into the dressing rooms of major stars and West End theatres was itself fascinating.

Contrary to the glamorous image of theatre dressing rooms that we might imagine, most people would be surprised to see the cramped conditions in many British theatres today. Particularly in older theatres, where there is no space to expand backstage, facilities can be scruffy, and even modern ones can be functional and confined – they are rarely luxurious. Even so, modern dressing rooms are generally an improvement on those of the past. In Elizabethan Britain, actors dressed in communal changing rooms in the 'tiring house' (the attiring house) behind the stage. When, from 1660, women were also allowed to act on the public stage, separate dressing areas were provided for them in the larger theatres. Then, as now, the stars were given private rooms in which to prepare, whilst the rest of the company shared. In smaller theatres, facilities were often communal, and touring companies had to make do with any available space.

Although leading actors may have had their own rooms, privacy was not a priority – anyone could visit the 'tiring rooms' to see the actors and glimpse backstage life. Thankfully for actors, this has changed – 'the half' is recognised as a precious and necessary half-hour of calm and privacy. But thankfully for us, Simon's photographs take us into this unseen world, to capture these moments of intense concentration, transformation and nerves that have been hidden from public view for centuries. Alongside revealing so

An early photo, about to go on stage as a servant at the Lyric Theatre Hammersmith in Bill Gaskill's production of *The Relapse*, 1983. For two years I had been serving at the bar, eager to experience what it was like to actually be on the stage, with a live audience staring back at you. The servant had no lines and his main function was to accompany the lead actor Simon Callow, who played Lord Foppington, at one point carrying him around in a Sedan chair.



much of the real person transforming into their character, they also highlight how modern performers – even the stars – often have to make do with the facilities used by their Victorian predecessors. This also speaks volumes about the profession and the commitment of those that work in it.

In curating *The Dressing Room* at the Theatre Museum, we went all out to evoke both the atmosphere and the psychology of ‘the half’. With Simon’s photographs as the centrepiece of every room, we furnished the dressing rooms as if they were in use, with notes and flowers, used ashtrays, make-up and hair accoutrements. We even created a soundtrack in this private space in the countdown to performance; a mixture of Tannoy announcements, from ‘This is your quarter hour call. Fifteen minutes to Act I. Your quarter hour call. Thank you’; to semi-private announcements, ‘Can whoever owns the red Beetle parked in Bay B please move it’; to the actors’ imagined own reflections, ‘I wonder if that newspaper’s theatre critic will be in tonight’; and even unwanted thoughts that could crowd into an unquiet mind: ‘Did I remember to turn the oven off?’

Simon started this body of work thirty-seven years ago, and the continuously expanding collection has gone from strength to strength and been seen around the world. Since opening at the Theatre Museum in 2005, *The Dressing Room* became *The Half*, and travelled to nineteen venues over thirteen years, including the National Theatre in London, the Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff, the Arles Photography Festival in France, the V&A in London, the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford upon Avon, the Bakhrushin State Theatre Museum in Moscow and the Player’s Club in New York.

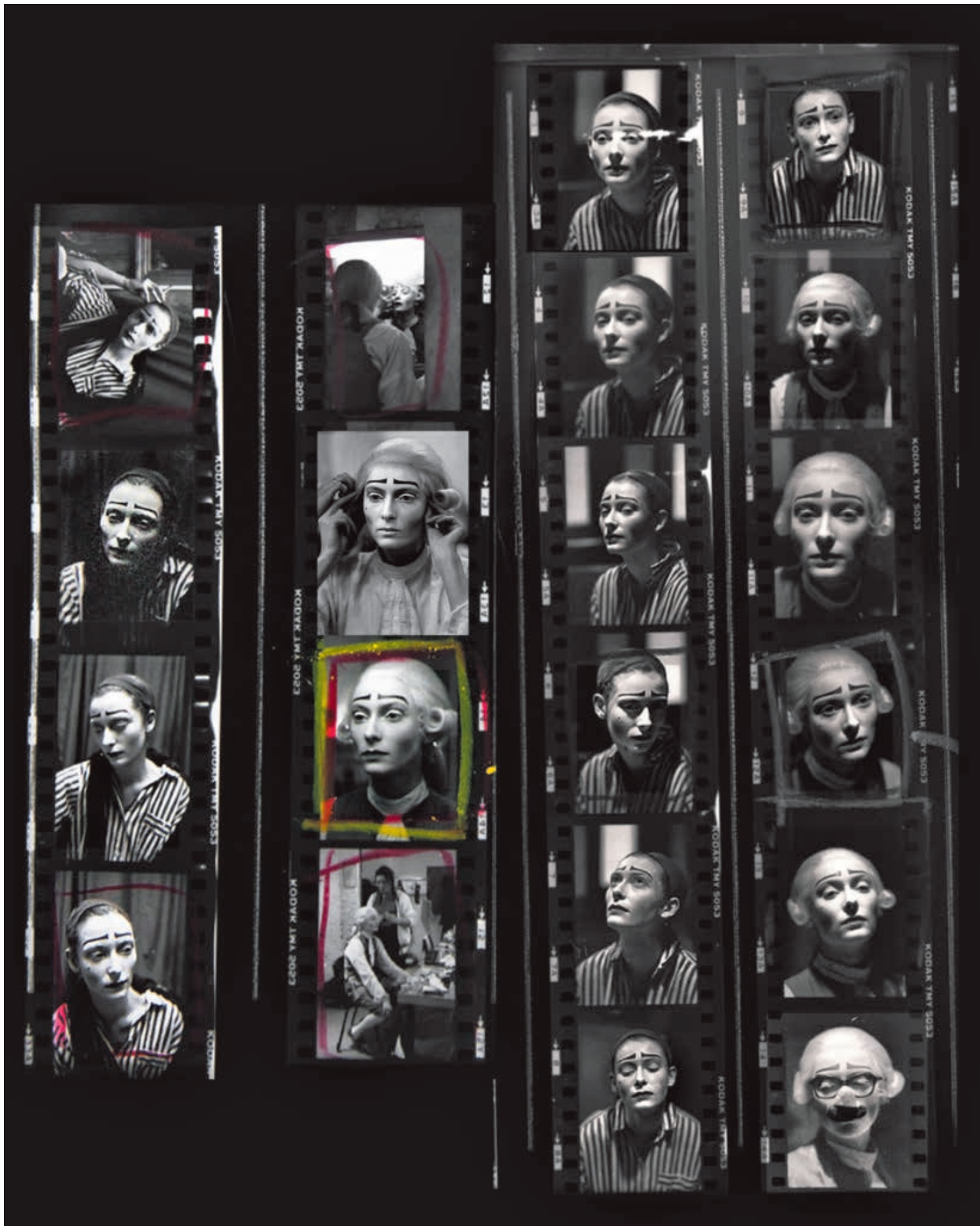
In recent years, social media has given us an insight into the ‘backstage’ world (in all its forms) of the famous, but the images people choose to share of their own lives are different, rarely capturing them at their most private and vulnerable, as Simon’s photographs do. However ‘natural’ they seem, we know there is an element of staging that comes with projecting an image of oneself online. To be able to capture actors in moments of natural, unposed concentration demands a very strange dual skillset: having the confidence to be the only other presence in the room, snapping away at such a personal, high-stakes and intimate moment, whilst also being able to become somewhat invisible and allowing the actor to undergo their necessary and usually solitary preparation.

ABOVE LEFT: Eve Arnold looking at my book, *The Half* in 2008. I was fortunate to get to know Eve in her later years. Given her deep knowledge of both photography and actors, when she confided in me ‘if only I had thought of this idea’, the encouragement gave me a moment of infinite clarity and affirmation.

ABOVE RIGHT: Maggie Smith, *Interpreters*, Queen’s Theatre, 1985. She was extremely generous with her time. We spent two unforgettable hours chatting before taking a single photo.

OPPOSITE: Anthony Hopkins, *Pravda*, National Theatre, 1986. In those days, interviews were part of the session and Tony explained at length why he had returned from America. His portrayal of Lambert LeRoux was the strongest performance of power I ever saw.







OPPOSITE: Tilda Swinton, *Mozart and Salieri*, Almeida, 1989. Tilda is photogenic doing just about anything.

ABOVE LEFT: Griff Rhys Jones, *Charley's Aunt*, Lyric Theatre Hammersmith, 1983. The first dressing-room photograph I ever took. Griff was playing an ebullient character, which contrasted with the melancholic atmosphere in his room. It was this that gave me the idea for a book on 'the half', a project which continues to this day.

ABOVE RIGHT: Judi Dench, *The Royal Family*, Theatre Royal Haymarket, 2001. Judi has been very supportive of *The Half* project, ever since the early 1980s. For this I am eternally grateful. She is universally loved for her work, her sense of humour and her kindness.

Simon has always attested that the photographs are not an attempt to chronicle a certain period in London theatre, or to suggest that the productions chosen are better than others which may not have been included. It is all about the actors – who have always been personally selected by Simon, rather than commissioned for a magazine or newspaper.

So who is this man behind the camera? Quietly spoken and thoughtful, Simon's personality lends itself perfectly to his line of work. He possesses great knowledge and appreciation of theatre, and of the art and practice of photography, allied with precision and determination to achieve only the best. Simon's enthusiasm for the theatre began as a pupil in the 1960s at a school with its own Victorian replica of a Greek theatre. But the first time he was paid to shoot a major production came in the 1980s at London's Old Vic theatre, when Jonathan Miller became artistic director. Since then, Simon has taken production photographs and been fortunate to work on a number of important productions (including *War Horse* and *Jerusalem*) and for other great directors. These experiences gave Simon the opportunity to work on a wealth of different shows, from the modern classics of Ibsen, Chekhov, Strindberg, and Pinter, to Shakespeare in many forms, as well as musicals, pantomime, opera, experimental and physical theatre, international circus and even burlesque. This book brings these strands together, avoiding any hierarchy. Simon, looking back across all these styles and forms, says: 'Each one has its own complexity and each one is as difficult to perform as another.'

Some of the images are intended to be 'fly-on-the-wall' in their approach and others are not. What links them is an aesthetic which is essentially humanist, rather than predatory. The actors are seen as workers, not celebrities. His photographs reveal a fragility and humanness, without undermining the courage that comes with being a performer. They also give an insight into the intimacy of the actor's dressing rooms and the various ways they mentally prepare: a calming cigarette; a final bit of chat with co-stars; the finishing touches of make-up; or perfecting the body language of their character... Simon is on the actor's side and his camera respects all facets of their preparation before going live on stage.

Victoria Broackes, Senior Curator, V&A Department of Theatre and Performance



This week

Friday 27th

Simon Annand will  
be in taking photos of  
you all from 6.30 - 7.30

Saturday 28th Jan.

Stage free for warm up  
from 1.00 - 1.30

1.30 Touch tour on stage

VISHVA  
B...  
SIMON  
28736

The image shows a whiteboard with handwritten notes in black and blue ink. The notes are organized into sections for Friday 27th and Saturday 28th Jan. There are some additional scribbles and names at the bottom.





ARTISTS

&

STAFF  
ONLY



# PROLOGUE

In *Time to Act* the actors have given their permission for a photographer to be present and want the process to be seen. Each actor has their own way of spending the thirty minutes before curtain-up. The spectrum varies from a Method approach, which is inhabiting the character at all times, to the opposite, holding the fictional character back and only releasing it at the last minute before entering the stage. A Method actor might request complete silence during the session.

There have been a few thousand sessions for this monograph. The purpose of every session is to add a fresh story to the existing narrative. It is a challenge to find something new each time. The only way to achieve this is to be open to the 'rhythm of the room' when you first enter and to resist any temptation to control it.

A photographer must trust his subject. It is the relationship a person has with themselves, inside their own head, that makes them photogenic. With an actor who is about to go on stage, there is also their relationship with a fictional character, which makes the psychological exchange between them particularly interesting. It is for this reason that I often ask an actor to arrange a session late in the run, when the fictional character they are playing has been completely absorbed and the photographer's presence is less likely to distract.

The actor's residence in a room is temporary and the length of stay depends on the success of a show. The incoming actor will decorate a dressing room in his or her own way. The older the building, the more it is part of history, which always helps to create an atmosphere.

People have often asked about rituals. There are many and they are varied, but it is for each actor to reveal this for him- or herself. Another frequent question is whether the actors are nervous. Nerves can come from different sources, including from an actor's private life. Each evening they have a choice, either to use what has happened to them during the day, or to contain their feelings if they are unhelpful for the performance.

One of the central principles in *Time to Act* has been to avoid the tendency to make an actor look like 'an actor' wherever possible. The subject has always been regarded as a man or a woman first, famous, or not, and as an actor second. It is the journey that actors embark on that is fascinating, not the fact they are actors.

Due to the millions of images taken across the world on mobile phones there has been much talk of the 'death of photography'. In spite of the proliferation of imagery, it is just as difficult to take an informed or iconic photograph as it ever was. When the pen was invented, which was a revolutionary tool that democratised the ability to record information, it did not at the same time create an excess of poets.

Nearly all of the images in this book are shutter driven rather than lens powered. The decisions of when to press the shutter are based on complicity with the subject, as opposed to making the subject look 'more interesting' by using an extreme lens or composition. 1/125<sup>th</sup> of a second is all it takes to make an image. It is the perfect short story.

## KIM CATTRALL'S DRESSING TABLE, OLD VIC THEATRE, 2013

Many leading actors across the generations have looked into this mirror.

SIMON ANNAND





**HALF HOUR CALL** 25

**15 MINUTE CALL** 87

**5 MINUTE CALL** 167

**CURTAIN UP** 215