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Interview
15.06.24

THE BUTLER'S MASK

Margaux Schwarz



A butler has a peculiar relation with the client – intimate, yet at the same time respecting clear professional boundaries. His job is a choreographed performance: he must continuously combine availability and invisibility. Margaux Schwarz went to a butler's school to do in situ research, and reflects on the servant's role.

In May 2023, I visited a butler's school based in a bourgeois house near Brussels, and I had the chance to interview its director. Although Mr. Verheven and I were both capable of communicating effortlessly in French, I suggested having our conversation in English to match the school's language of instruction. The director demonstrated an impressive command of English, albeit with a discernible Flemish accent that revealed his origin, despite his earnest attempts to adopt a distinctly British pronunciation. I also made an effort to deliver my best British accent, and together, we assumed the roles of interviewer and interviewee, in the decor of Mr. Verheven's office, a room adorned with a magnificent wooden desk and paneled walls. Meanwhile, the students were setting up dinner, which, that night, would function both as a social event and as a practical test.

Margaux Schwarz: I am deeply grateful for your warm welcome, Mr. Verheven. Could you kindly introduce yourself by sharing a bit about your background?

Mr. Verheven: 'Certainly. It all began in 1884, almost 140 years ago, with my great-grandfather, who was a butler. My family ran a pension on the Belgian coast, and later transformed it into a gastronomic restaurant and hotel. After attending hotel school and working as a sommelier on the Côte d'Azur, I took over my parents' company, expanded it with the help of my brother, and eventually sold everything. In 2001, I pursued a degree in butler training and worked as a junior butler at the Claridge's Hotel in London. I then worked

for various families, until 2013, when I started running the butler school in Brussels. We offer an 8-week residential butler training program, one of the longest and most immersive worldwide.'

MS: So your trajectory is rooted in your familial heritage?

MV: 'Indeed, it is deeply ingrained in my family history.'

MS: What prompted the transition from being a butler to founding a butler school?

MV: 'Frustration. That's mostly how these things grow. Last week, I was in Paris at one of the so-called highest-level hotels of Paris. In terms of customer service, there were so many mistakes, so many things to improve, so many ways to make connections with people, so many opportunities the hotel staff missed. So that's why I started the school. Not only do we train butlers, but we also run a recruitment office to place butlers in families. We also train companies, hotels, and resorts all around the world. We train other companies such as banks, airline companies, etc.'

MS: Are you actively involved in teaching?

MV: 'Initially I was heavily involved, but now I oversee our instructors, many of whom are former students.'

MS: How do you approach teaching etiquette and communication?

MV: 'Our focus is on mindful communication: I instruct the aspiring butlers not to use certain words to encourage thoughtfulness. It's about psychology as much as technical skills.'

MS: What do you mean, exactly?

MV: The butler-client bond is deeply intimate and demands clear, professional boundaries. Initially, we focus on language. For eight weeks, we prohibit the use of four expressions: 'yes,' 'no,' 'OK,' and 'no problem.' Instead, we encourage thoughtful responses like 'absolutely,' 'Madam,' or 'It will be my pleasure.' This cultivates mindfulness in communication. We also train them in terms of body language: we train them to stand up straight and to smile, which they often forget.'

My friend Camille frequently brings up how his 'neutral expression' tends to convey sadness, even when he's deliberately showing no emotion. He frequently feels that his face exudes a melancholic aura, which he perceives as a significant social disadvantage. According to him, the contours of his slightly drooping eyebrows communicate feelings of disappointment or even depression, while his pronounced lion's wrinkle suggests a perpetual state of discontent. Camille claims that these physical features regularly lead to misunderstandings and uncomfortable situations, and even have resulted in missed job opportunities. He contrasts this with my 'neutral expression', which he perceives as consistently positive, cheerful, and welcoming, regardless of my underlying feelings. He contends that these physical traits, which he specifies as unrelated to beauty, have afforded me advantages in both my professional and social spheres. He identifies this as unfair, categorizing it as a genetic lottery of sympathetic 'capital', alongside other Bourdieu-esque types of capital. He maintains that these expressions remain unalterable through labor or effort, even though plastic surgery may offer mitigation. He admits such a proposition might appear excessive. However, Camille is not wrong: his observation aligns with sociological studies that explore various forms of capital, such as Catherine Hakim's controversial concept of 'Erotic capital', or research on the effects of 'Aesthetic Capital' in social relations. These studies investigate the advantages associated with beauty and its impact on social interactions, as well as the discrimination faced by those perceived as unattractive. We could include a third peculiar form of capital in this list, in order to address what Camille seems to be concerned about: his struggle to effectively convey his emotions due to his lack of what Jacques Lecoq, the influential dramaturg from the early twentieth century, referred to as 'the neutral mask.' In the theater, this mask serves as a foundational tool to teach actors how to capture the

nuances of the expressive masks found in commedia dell'arte. It lays the groundwork for the variations apparent in other masks. Through this mask, the actor gains the ability to embody the features of all the other masks. Devoid of a specific expression or distinct character, this neutral mask neither laughs nor cries, expressing neither sadness nor happiness. Instead, it relies on silence and a state of tranquility. The actor's visage should be simple, uniform, and free from internal conflicts. Lecoq suggests that underneath every mask, the actor maintains this neutral state, and once actors grasp this starting point, their bodies become like blank pages ready to welcome the emotions of the other masks.

Mr. Verheven highlights the importance of the art of invisibility that is often required of domestic workers. In the world of butlers, there's an instruction called [*faire le meuble*], or 'being the furniture', emphasizing the skill of seamlessly blending into the background. Along the same lines, a friend mentioned an anecdote from his cousin, who works as a staff manager at a 5-star hotel in Paris known for hosting international political conferences. She mentioned that during significant dinners – especially those where sensitive political issues are discussed – she deliberately hires waitstaff who do not speak any of the languages spoken at the table.

MS: Is there a strategy for preserving professional distance?

MV: 'Absolutely, maintaining formality is crucial. Familiarity can blur lines, potentially compromising professionalism. A butler must be self-reliant and oversee his team with discretion and efficiency.'

In an article titled 'There Shall Be no Discernible Traces Left. The Invisible Butler in Ishiguro's [*The Remains of the Day*]' (2002), Marc A. Ouellette analyzes the behavior of Mr. Stevens, the main character of Ishiguro's novel. Stevens, in the exercise of his functions, seeks to articulate sentiments that are 'difficult to achieve', such as 'that balance between attentiveness and the illusion of absence that is essential to good waiting'. He states: 'I am pleased to say that there will be no discernible traces left of the recent occurrence.' On the basis of Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplined bodies, which maintains that 'discipline produces subjected, practised and "docile" bodies,' molded for submission and manipulation, Ouellette argues that 'There is no doubt that Stevens' is a well-practised body.' For Ouellette, this illustrates Stevens' effort to cultivate and maintain this very docility as a form of personal dignity.

MS: I've heard that in some households, especially in aristocratic circles, it is not uncommon that certain workers are requested to adopt a different first name to establish more distance. It seems that a specific first name is assigned to each position; for instance, every Governess might be called Catherine, while every Butler might go by Albert. Is this still a common practice?

MV: 'Yes, it's a common practice in aristocracy and elite service industries.'

MS: Maybe it helps to create a character. Would that be a good thing?

My question refers to a radio show and an article by Doan Bui that I came across, which described a situation where a man referred to as Damien found himself in a professional situation that required him to handle challenges in a unique, but problematic manner. 'I was unemployed and had heard through acquaintances about a very wealthy lady who was looking for a household employee. I was twenty years old, so I applied, even though I'm a boy and she had specified that she wanted a young girl. On the appointed day, I showed up in the mansion where this lady, a sixty-year-old, lived. She scrutinized me from head to toe, then said: "Oh, well, that will do. You will have to be obedient, you know! I want someone very obedient." However, her conditions were quite special: since she had always had female employees, she wanted me to dress as a maid! Complete with the maid's uniform, collar, cap, and all! Another quirk is that she wanted to call me Rosa. Because she had always called her maids Rosa. Normally, the position paid 1,100 euros net, but since I was a man, she doubled

my salary. I was at 2,200 net, with room and board. I had only had odd jobs in the restaurant industry, where I earned a meager few hundred euros. I had dropped out of school just before completing my vocational diploma, as my parents couldn't support me indefinitely. I really needed money. In fact, it seemed like an opportunity, especially since the mansion with its large park, where I was going to live, was truly magnificent. Anyway, I thought that for this salary, I could make a few concessions. And I was twenty years old, very naive. And obedient, yes, definitely.

In the course of this interview, Damien in detail explains even more bizarre practices, including wearing fake breasts and using diapers for prolonged tasks. Despite his initial shock and emotional turmoil, Damien accepted the conflicting feelings that kept him in this unusual employment for three years. In moments of resentment, there was an inexplicable attachment to his 'Maîtresse' who adeptly knew how to ease his anger or distress with occasional kindness, or what we could define as 'bribes', such as a birthday trip to Tunisia, other gifts, or a pay raise.

Damien's story reveals the difficulties to address the normalization of problematic, unethical, and/or illegal practices in the sphere of the ultra-wealthy. The worker is expected to be a blank page upon which the employers project their desires. These practices occur within domestic spaces, such as private homes, vacation houses, and hotels, making it very challenging to ensure rightful application of labor regulations, since inspectors rarely cross the doors of this secluded world. In their book *Sociologie des élites délinquantes. De la criminalité en col blanc à la corruption politique* (2014), sociologists Clara Nagels and Pierre Lascoumes raise these often unaddressed issues: 'Where do we draw the line between acceptable deviances and those that must be condemned to ensure the stability of a social organization?' As long as there is an 'exchange' involving money or goods, or other gainful promises, the financial aspect prompts some workers to fulfill every desire of their employer.

MV: 'Having a different name certainly does contribute to create a different persona or character, no doubt about it. At the end of the day, we're all playing a role, as Shakespeare said. However, I think that anyone in any job to a certain degree wants to keep their authenticity and not lose themselves too much in that role.'

MS: It might also steer one away from one's 'true' self.

MV: 'Maintaining professional distance allows one to embody a role akin to an alter ego. However, it's ultimately a personal choice. Overstepping boundaries is a pitfall in the butler profession, often a result from a failure to maintain this necessary distance. A professional maintains a certain level of formality. Breaching this boundary can lead to complications, a phenomenon observed not only in personal service, but also in corporate interactions, where familiarity can rapidly develop, for instance, in email exchanges.'

Mr. Verheven seems to use the term 'alter ego' as a positive and playful framing for the word 'alienation'. However, how can one effectively maintain distance from the very 'alter ego' one has constructed? While Mr. Verheven rightfully acknowledges the significant psychological aspects of butler training, our conversation doesn't avow the need for protective measures against the impact of hierarchical dynamics, nor the exhaustion of the perpetual roleplay, nor the fact that the worker rarely has the opportunity to 'put away' the costume of this alter ego.

MV: 'I maintain a professional demeanor, from the moment prospective students contact us, until they leave the school. Formality remains consistent; I am addressed as 'Mr. Verheven', and students as 'Mr.' or 'Mrs.' Instructors, however, may transition to first names due to close collaboration.'

MS: So, in a way, every butler is required to constantly perform professionalism, whether in front of their employer or in front of the other employees. Am I right?

MV: ‘It’s true. As a butler, opportunities to step out of character are rare. Even during moments that re-quire less performance, you’re soon back on stage, whether it’s in front of one person or a larger audience. For example, tonight’s ‘exam dinner’ is going to be very theatrical. Every student-butler has been trained to perform a synchronized service. Everything is orchestrated from the moment the guests arrive.’

MS: So just like when I entered.

MV: ‘Exactly. Everything is meticulously orchestrated, like a musical production, with tasks seamlessly synchronized. While the guests are attended to inside, their cars are cleaned and stocked with water and mints. Behind the scenes, crucial tasks, such as food preparation, are underway. The backstage coordination is important to ensure a flawless experience.’

MS: They rarely get a break!

MV: ‘Indeed, they are always on stage. It’s a three- to four-hour act where everything is rehearsed. And they’ve been rehearsing for three weeks, so let’s see how it goes!’
After the interview, I joined the students for dinner. To my surprise, we all had to eat standing; chairs were not allowed. The meal consisted of a reheated Asian dish – nothing fancy. Immediately after dining, each of us promptly returned to our assigned tasks. Mine involved conducting field recordings from Mr. Verheven’s office, where a certain Mr. Sinet had been chosen as the representative for the butlers-in-training. I equipped both men with lapel microphones, put on my headphones, and started to listen attentively, just as they were about to welcome the first guests. I remained confined to the office, while the rest of the house served as a stage for a complete tour for all the invited guests. Nevertheless, as proper hosts, both Mr. Sinet and Mr. Verheven paid me a visit every half hour to ensure my well-being, bringing along refreshments and cookies. The recording device gave proof of the essential imperative for butlers to simultaneously maintain constant availability and invisibility. I could discern their choreographed movements by means of the synchronized clinking of plates and glasses being served. I heard their warm, welcoming voices or subdued whispers maintain a rhythm that also ensured discretion, and their consistent use of ‘Mr.’ or ‘Mrs.’ to address each other, giving the impression that their first names were nonexistent. As sociologist Alizée Delpierre highlights in her essay *Servir les riches. Les domestiques chez les grandes fortunes* (2022), the house was transformed ‘into a theater where employers and employees enact their roles, but which lacks a backstage element.’ But then, when and where do they remove their masks?

(*All names in this text are fictionalized.*)

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[MAGAZINE: #102 – NEUTRAAL](#)

REKTO VERSO

magazine voor cultuur en kritiek
juni, juli, augustus 2024
editie 102: NEUTRAAL



afbeelding: Gerd J. Steering P540902



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