

The ARTFUL Actor

A Matthew Harrison essay

Get ready. Here comes an inflammatory statement. A controversial idea that may make you upset and arouse some anger in you. Here it is...

Acting is NOT an art form.

What?! What am I talking about?! Have I gone mad?! No. I haven't gone mad...and I'll say it again. Acting isn't art.

Acting is craft. Acting is technique. Acting...is bricklaying. The architect is the artist. The bricklayer is the one who builds the house.

The writer and director are the artists who create the story and fashion it. Actors are the instrument through which the story is told.

We don't create story. We don't write character. We *do* character. We master our craft and understanding of story structure and scene analysis and we master our technique of focus and being present in the moment and we master our ability to affect change in another through actions.

This is craftsmanship. Not artistry.

To use another analogy: Mozart composes. He's the artist. The music is played on a violin. The violin is the instrument. So, in this way, an actor...is a violin.

But wait...

This is only true from action to cut, or places to curtain.

Outside of our actual job of acting, away from stage and set, away from class and audition, out there in our lives, what do we do as actors...?

That's right. We build our instrument.

We absorb life, study the world, investigate feelings, unearth the psychology of those around us, analyze moments, read behavior, define relationships, and plunge into other people's characters, the choices they make, what defines them, and what makes them tick. We study life.

We also dig into ourselves and our own psychology, our experiences and our imaginations, and we struggle to uncover our own triggers - the hooks that open up the world of emotions within us.

And, we smash at our own inner walls, the control mechanisms and blocks that have capped our emotional landscapes, and we learn to have the courage to release the inner material from the safe boxes we've locked them up in, and to air out our emotional scars and wounds and learn how to take advantage of them, translating them into the fuel for acting.

In this way we are instrument builders.

In this way, each actor is like Antonio Stradivari...creating the perfect instrument...a Stradivarius. An instrument that resonates with purity. An instrument with many, many notes.

Antonio Stradivari was an artist.

So in this way, each actor is, in fact, an artist...but an artist when NOT acting.

That's the paradox. Learn to love it.

Actually, it should give you great relief. On set, on stage, in class, in readings, or in auditions, you as the actor can stop making the acting of greater importance than it need be. Show up. Do the job. That's all. "Build the house." "Make the cabinet." Say the lines. Tell the story. The art has been done for you. Simple.

And it should give you great relief in the "downtime" between gigs and auditions and class THAT there is in fact no such thing as "downtime" - because that is the time when you should be keeping yourself the busiest...building your perfect instrument.

When I was a teen growing up in Montreal, I was a promising young classical pianist working towards a career in performance. One day at piano lesson, when I was done cathartically smashing away at some Rachmaninoff which I embellished by adding notes and changing tempos, my teacher, Ross Cawfield, sat in silence. After a few moments, he quietly deadpanned: "That's not what Rachmaninoff wrote." He told me that if I wanted to be a composer, I should go off and compose. But that if I wanted to be a pianist, I better learn to play the way Rachmaninoff had written it. I was furious. I thought that he was curbing my artistry. But...I did what he asked.

After a weeks rehearsal, I played the piece for Ross again...this time the way Rachmaninoff wrote it...but I felt constrained and bored by it. And Ross agreed. I was boring. And that's not what Rachmaninoff meant either, Ross told me.

Confused and frustrated, I threw my hands in the air and gave up. Then Ross jabbed a finger towards my heart: "Sure! You know the notes...but now you need to learn how to live life." And then, instead of continuing our lesson at the piano, he brought me to the museum of art.

We stared at Rembrandts. We studied statues of the Madonna and Child. We looked at the shadings of light in Vermeer's paintings. Then we sat in the museum café garden and watched people. And talked of people from his past We talked about psychology. About history. About life.

Then we went back to the piano room at McGill University...and he played the Rachmaninoff piece...just like it was written. Note for note. Phrase for phrase.

And though he performed it exactly as it was written, the way Rachmaninoff meant it to be performed...the life, the fullness of the joy and sadness from within this man and all we had seen at the museum poured through from his soul into the music...

That was art. And that was craft. Together.

And that's what acting should be like.

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