

## The CONTRAPUNTAL Actor

a Matthew Harrison essay

Life is in opposition to itself at all times.

This truth about existence is obvious if you look at it. There is no such thing as “day” without “night” there to give it meaning. There is no land without sea. No wealth without poverty. No gain without loss. In every single “hello” there is an implicit “goodbye”. In every win, the possibility of loss. In love, there is loneliness. In confidence, insecurity. Without death...there is no meaning to life.

Nothing can exist without its opposite there to define it.

And so it is with people. We, too, are in constant contradiction to ourselves:

The confident looking professional is actually terrified inside because he feels that he doesn't know what he is talking about. The winner appears un-caring for fear of looking like a gloater but inside is actually celebrating. The painfully shy girl actually knows what she wants and will get it at any cost.

If you stop right now and take a good look at yourself in this very moment as you read these words, it's a pretty good bet that you are in some sort of exact opposition to yourself. Maybe you're forcing yourself to spend some quality time reading, when actually you're not absorbing a single word because you can't stop thinking about being at the beach. Or perhaps you're studying to be the best actor you can be, even though you really believe what your family thinks...that you'll never make it in the business...

When working with an actor to find the character's underlying-contradictory truth, I often use the words “despite the fact that...”. Despite the fact that I'm about to vomit from nerves, I will walk across the stage to the podium. Despite the fact that I really love this man, I will push him away with all my might. Despite the fact that I'm never going to make it as an actor just like everyone tells me, I'm going to study anyway and prove them wrong.

In Hegelian terms, this is a psychological *dialectic* - an internal conflict that creates tension between the opposites - and as a result, creates a greater, more dynamic whole. With only the surface, we are nothing. But with the equal-opposite happening simultaneously, we are in self-conflict. This *synthesis* of self and self-in-opposition makes us profound, complex, and alive. To study acting *knowing* that I will succeed is fine...but surface. To give up studying because I know that I'll fail is self-victimizing. But to study acting *despite the fact that* I believe that I'll fail...that's complex. That's full of tension. And it's heroic.

In other words: if an actor approaches a script by accepting only what is on the surface as the character's truth, they will only be in tune with the one layer of the character, the surface, and risk the chance of being criticized as "one note".

But if the actor searches in the script for the deep-down opposite of what the character says and does, they will uncover the character's underlying psychological truth. Knowing that the character is playing against that deep-down-truth means the actor will be complex and realistic is well-fleshed out way.

I've been coaching a new pilot recently with a cast of strong, well-experienced actors...and they intuitively know this. They all get that there is "more than meets the eye with their characters" - but often have a hard time deciphering what the "more" is. They get muddled between conscious objective and subconscious desire. When asked what is their character's objective in the script, they tend to get lost somewhere between the character's outward *want* and inner *need*. The actor knows instinctively that there is more depth to their character, but can't seem to pinpoint the source. What the actor needs is a simple roadmap...

"Counterpoint" is that roadmap - the term I use for the actor to find the way into the character's inherent psychological contradiction...

I borrow the term from music: in a fugue (or symphony or jazz improvisation or reggae or any kind of music you can think of really), there is the melody (the *point*). With nothing else but the melody hanging out there all on its own, a piece of music would sound and feel simplistic, hollow, and...well...one note.

But with a contrasting, contradictory theme playing in opposition to the melody (the *counterpoint*), you get context, depth, and fullness. Note against note. *Punctum contra punctum*. Like "day" without "night", without context, without its accompanying counterpoint, there may be a melody...but it's not music.

Applied to story, *point* is the actor's outer objective...what the character wants and the actions the character takes to get it. "To demolish my adversary by publicly humiliating him so that he will leave me alone!" That's the point.

The *counterpoint* must be the exact opposite. So in this case, the character must actually want the attention she's getting (that would be the opposite)...maybe because her underlying truth is that she loves him despite herself.

With just the point, the character is simply mean...a nasty piece of work. With the counterpoint...she is Beatrice from *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Now. I need to be very clear about terminology...

This is not *subtext*.

The word *subtext* has been so over used (and improperly used) and generalized that really it has come to mean nothing. Perhaps what I call “counterpoint” was the specific original definition of the word. But at this point, “*subtext*” has come to describe what really is defined as “*entendre*”...or implication.

For example: the *text*, that is the dialogue, might read: “Go to hell.” But in *context* of the circumstances the character saying these words might be hot-to-trot for the other character, and so the *subtext* is in fact “I want you”. In other words, the character’s action is “to seduce through challenge”. Any actor who understands story and scene analysis would have jumped right over the ideas of text/subtext and understood immediately that the action (the partner-related verb) is “to seduce” and not been caught up in the surface text anyway.

But this is not the *counterpoint*. That’s the *point*.

Depending on the greater circumstances of the character, the back-story, the relationships, and the character’s psychology, the counterpoint might be something like: “feels unworthy of love and attention from the opposite sex”... maybe stemming from her relationship with her father referred to explicitly in the story or implied in the script...so that the character’s full analysis in this particular moment is: “to seduce and invite sexually through a challenge, despite the fact that she feels unworthy of love and attention from the opposite sex.”

Now that is a fully-realized, dynamic, and interesting character (Ingrid Bergman as Alicia in Hitchcock’s *Notorious*).

Another term often used is *capping*. To “cap” your emotions is to stifle them or push them down so that you can get your objective achieved:

Standing here on stage at the podium, I have to push  
down my nervousness so that I can deliver the speech  
the way I memorized it.

Capping is closer to the idea of counterpoint...but still a generalization that can mislead. If an actor is busy pushing down emotions or trying to “not feel something” they will have taken the focus away from the imperative and all consuming action that they need to be playing in order to achieve the objective. It’s very confusing for an actor to worry about capping while they are simultaneously working on getting something else done. And seeing as it is impossible to do two things at once, “capping” can lead to real confusion...

It also can lead the actor down the road of worrying about emotions... and in real life, people almost never register their emotions or self-analyze (the way we actors love to do...)

Stay away from the generalities and get into specifics. Your character implicitly is pushing down emotions by playing a single action that "plays against" their counterpoint:

Standing here on stage at the podium, I deliver my speech  
the way I memorized it...despite the fact that I know I don't  
have any idea what I'm talking about.

You see how the general feeling of "nervousness" is now replaced by the specific source of the nervousness? Instead of capping an emotion, (a very actor-centric approach to the work), you actually get the job done in spite of your self (a realistic approach to how real people function psychologically).

One warning. Be careful...I am not in any way implying by my examples that counterpoint is always *negative*. Much of tragedy results from a negative action over a *positive* counterpoint:

- To sacrifice her despite how much I love her (*Othello*)
- To give up despite the fact that I know that I'm the best (*Broadcast News*)
- To refuse to help even though I have the moral integrity (*The Insider*)

Whether positive or negative, the tension created by the point/counterpoint (what I have been referring to for years in class as "top/bottom") is what makes story exciting...it's what makes characters real...

Sometimes in scenes, the counterpoint is very obvious (in fact, many stories are actually *about* counterpoint...*Remains Of The Day*).

Sometimes the counterpoint is alluded to or revealed somewhere else in the play or screenplay, even if only mentioned in passing about back-story.

And sometimes, there is no evidence of any counterpoint at all...if this last case is true, it may be that the underlying truth is there somewhere and you just haven't dug enough into the story to see it.

But, it's not impossible that you are working with lesser material (some quickly penned, derivative, cliché-infested movie of the week script let's just say...). If this is the case...it is up to you to *create* the counterpoint. Ask yourself: "what

is my character doing and why?" - and then inverse it - and there will be the counterpoint you need to play.

Now...sometimes, but rarely in a script, the tension between the point and counterpoint finally get to be too much and smash together, revealing the underlying truth in the form of a confession or breakdown or breakthrough.

If this happens to your character (usually the lead), it probably happens late in the second act and at the character's lowest or highest point. Usually there will be tears or yelling or ecstatic laughter or some huge emotional response...

Ironically, actors are usually most afraid of and excited by scenes with these moments of emotional release. We train to be emotionally available for these moments and relish them in class and on stage or screen. But these moments, I repeat, are exceptionally rare in real life and also rare in story. Though they may be cathartic and invigorating for the actor, the challenge in acting is the subtlety and nuance of the contrapuntal moments throughout the majority of the story...

The actor needs to prepare the emotions and massive truths (that the character holds deep down) from within themselves (please see my essay: "The Superlative Actor")...and then when they feel the full force of these emotions...*submerge* them into the counterpoint.

It's what audiences want to see...in fact, audiences know instinctively when they are watching a contrapuntal actor. They feel it. They say: "that actor is so good...so deep and realistic...people are just like that!"

All the actors you admire -Meryl Streep, Russell Crowe, Kate Winslet, Ian McKellen, Helen Mirren, Gwyneth Paltrow, Sean Penn - all these actors are constantly and consistently working in a contrapuntal manner, in conflict with themselves, playing against some deeply-lined opposing truth. This is what makes them interesting, human, dynamic...and psychologically realistic.

Watch Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada*...imagine how horrid it would have been if a lesser actress had played that character straight, the way she is written on the page, without the "I'm lonely in my empty life" counterpoint (which we see smash through in her brief breakdown after her husband leaves her.)

Watch Chris Cooper in *Breach* and see how everything this hard-assed FBI agent does, stemming from his need to be respected and loved (from his sex tapes to his treason) is in spite the fact that he's a "moral, Christian, family man".

In *The Departed* Mark Walberg was nominated for an Oscar not for his blustering and yelling...but because this actor attacked and insulted *in spite of the fact* that he had the greatest respect for these undercover guys.

Roger Moore's *James Bond* will evaporate into history, but Sean Connery and now Daniel Craig as 007 will be immortalized. Why? Roger Moore always knows he's going to win and never seems in any personal conflict whatsoever. And so his character is unapproachable - I know no one like him in real life.

But Daniel Craig's Bond is learning the nasty ropes of being a secret agent "despite his gnawing moral conscious". This makes him realistic. Likable.

And Sean Connery's 007 always throws himself into the fray, despite his worry (as evidenced by that furrowed brow and fearful look) that he actually doesn't know what he's getting himself into and might probably just die. And so, with very little special effects and gadgetry to help get us excited, Sean Connery, all alone with his counterpoint, keeps us on edge.

And that's good acting...

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