

**The EXPOSED actor**  
**a Matthew Harrison essay**

Ours is a public job. We do and feel for others to watch. And, yes, it is...exploitive.

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The new teacher at the Actor's Foundry commented on how marvellous it is to work with our actors because they are so emotionally available and honest, that they are generous and upfront about their experiences and their emotional life. I told him that it's not always the case...

Awhile back I had a new actor in class. Very talented. Very experienced. And very tight in her emotionality. She knew what my classes were about - she was there to learn how to open herself up emotionally for the work. And then I started the class exercises...

To get the actors focussed and emotionally prepared for the scenes, I had them pair up, face each other and relate the story elements (the *Character Statement*) to their personal experiences translated through their imagination. Then they physicalized this through a hook (a *doing*).

Standard fare for my class, and the natural process of using the self to get to the character.

One of the actors in class was preparing for a scene about being violated, having her power stripped from her, and being cornered without an escape. For her exercise, she got down on the floor and physically re-enacted the rape that had actually occurred to her as a young teen, an abuse at the hands of an extended family member. This actor committed to the exercise, was triggered into the emotional place where her character was living, and so was prepared to be as close to the character's mind set as possible, thus honouring the story (this is the "Aha!" moment, when an actor says: "Aha! Now I get where the character is coming from!")

This actor was doing her job: getting to the visceral heart of her character's circumstances so that she could live the scene. In other words, she was getting the story into her gut - making herself believe the character's world...the *make-believe* world.

And, yes, to do so, she lay on the floor and put herself through a painful emotional experience... a horrible imagination exercise.

It was excellent work.

But the new woman in class had a huge reaction. She screamed out. She couldn't stand to watch what was happening, and sobbing, she stormed out of the class and into the hallway. Finally, when she rejoined the class, she accused me of being "exploitive".

I took time to respond. I thought it through. In fact, I mulled it over until the end of class.

And then I gave her my answer...

Yes. Absolutely right. She was absolutely right. What we had done with this actor who had been raped - making her re-enact it in the room - making her re-visit the emotional and physical violation - it was *entirely* exploitive. That's exactly what it was.

What happened to this woman was horrific, wrong, and inexcusable. It never should have happened. It never should happen. To anyone. Anywhere. Ever.

But it had.

It had happened to her. And we can't go back in time and un-do it. She can't deny it. Refuse it. Or pretend it away. It affected her deeply. In fact, the emotional damage it did to her defined her future relationships with men, fissured her relationship with her parents, and put her on the defence with people, a psychological fall-back position she still traps herself in over a decade or more later. This thing happened to her and took powerful ownership of her.

But now? Now she bites into it, grabs onto it, and shakes it around. Now she owns it. And she's translating into scene work, into her craft...and turning what was negative and destructive into something positive and creative. She turned it into art...and made the world better with it.

The opposite - to hide it, to seclude it - is to allow it to exploit you.

A poet friend of mine heard me talk about the kind of places we go to in class during the emotional analysis step of scene work. I told him how we embrace and learn to love what we once defined as weight and now come to define as our fuel. In his writing workshops, he teaches similarly, teaching his writers to open up, dig in, and expose their internal material.

He handed me a poem that inspires him to keep doing this inside research, a poem by Mary Oliver that she wrote when working through her own grieving process of having lost her lifelong partner. The poem is called "Heavy":

It's not the weight you carry, but how you carry it--  
books, bricks, grief--it's all in the way you embrace it, balance it, carry it  
when you cannot, and would not, put it down.

So I went practicing this. Have you noticed?  
Have you heard the laughter that comes, now and again,  
out of my startled mouth?

How I linger to admire, admire, admire  
the things of this world that are kind, and maybe  
also troubled--

This is from the same poet who once wrote: "Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness. It took me years to understand that this, too, was a gift."

Why a gift?

Because underneath all pain, underneath all trauma...there must be joy. Because LIFE is precious. Life is a joyous gift, brief and exciting.....and it's all you've got. So anything that reminds you that you are alive is wonderful. Anything that triggers you deep inside to scream: "I'm Alive!" is worth investigating, nurturing, and exploring.

Even the dark stuff. Even the buried stuff. *Especially* the dark stuff. *Especially* the buried stuff.

The "dark stuff" in this way becomes light. We take that which makes us human, the experiences of suffering, of loss, of doubt, of pain...and we gift it back to the world, to the audience and show them what being alive is all about.

And so, in this way, we find that there is no "dark stuff". That all stuff, in the end, is light.

In fact, the very idea of "dark stuff" is harmful and helps set a dangerous myth that is out there, a dangerous myth that must be eradicated: the myth of the actor digging so far into his or her psyche, too far into the darkness, that they never come back up. The media nurtures the myth of the "tortured artist", the suicidal rock star, the addicted actor in and out of rehab.

It's a sham. It only exists to put artists at an arm's length - to make the work of the actor seem dangerous and scary and slightly insane - giving those who aren't pursuing their dreams of a life in the arts a way out.

The healthy artist knows that exposing and exploiting the depths of past pains and material in the imagination, to "stare at the abyss", is a beautiful way to rejoice in life.

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Now...hang on...

None of that is what the new actress in class was reacting against. It's not the rummaging around our emotional landscape, experiences, and imaginations that she was reacting to...it was the public display in class that she took exception to.

And others, too, have been scared by the idea of "opening up" in front of others.

So, let me approach my answer both technically and then philosophically:

An actor who "works from secrets" ...will look like they work from secrets. The actor who harbours their scene personalization, experiences, imaginations, and inner life...will get stuck in that harbour and never let their emotionality sail. It's far too easy to become inward when locking oneself inside.

At some point, the actor **MUST** expose the inner life, for two reasons:

It's no secret that many actors want to (*love to*) have breakthroughs – those times when their emotional blocks are pulled down. And for good reason - the actor's instrument needs to be free and available and can't be constrained by any serious personality blocks that create insecurity or fear of certain kinds of scenes, or create coping habits that take over their scene work. But even for a more seasoned actor, there are always walls that the actor doesn't even know of...walls of resistance...walls that incarcerate dangerous material. Over time, these walls become so deeply implanted, that the actor becomes unaware of them at all. And though she *feels* as though she's open, emotionally free, and self-knowledgeable, these walls still hold in otherwise valuable material, or else block the actor from being free in specific types of material.

And so, the actor needs to expose their inside stuff to someone...a coach, a colleague, or class. In exposing the self, the actor can not only open up what's been trapped inside resistant safety mechanisms, but discover that there are safety mechanisms at all.

The second reason is this: even if the actor knows herself well and knows what emotional experience and imaginative work she needs to work from for a scene, it is in the exposing of it to someone else that it becomes specific. We are lazy by design. After mulling it over in the head, it will lose its power, its electricity, and eventually, and its specific meaning. To find it again, over and over, it needs to have its specificity and its power.

In other words: emotional history gains power through exposure.

Many actors feel that it's the opposite: that experiences lose power over time...that they "don't want to use up" their emotional material, and that's why they safeguard it, horde it, and hide it.

But they have the psychological process exactly flipped upside down.

We do not, ever, lose our emotional experiences... our insecurities, traumas, dreams, joys, losses, pain, and triumphs. If they are the real ones, the real deep biting, deeply joyful ones...they carry meaning forever. That's why the World War Two veteran, at ninety plus years, still weeps for his fellows lost in the war. That's why mothers still glitter when recounting breastfeeding their babies, now grown into adulthood. That's why relationship pains from past heartaches still dictate how a person will react to a new partner, many years after the fact.

We ARE emotional material. We don't lose it.

What we do is we learn to live with it. We move around it. Hopefully we learn to own it.

What we do lose is our specific roadmap to it. We generalize the memory. We generalize how to use the IMAGINATION to find a way back to it. And THAT is what the secretive actor is afraid of "using up".

Instead, expose it. Talk about it. Let it out. And find new ways to say it, speak it, show it, and do it every time, and you will always remain a viscerally alive, emotionally available actor.

Re-read the sentence, back on the second page of this essay:

*What happened to this woman was horrific, wrong, and inexcusable. It never should have happened. It never should happen. To anyone. Anywhere. Ever.*

But it did happen to her. And, tragically, rape still happens. Sick as it is, sad as it is, rape still happens. Here and around the world. As do other forms of violation, sexual, and psychological abuse that lead both women and men into feeling powerless, intimidated, and cornered without an escape.

But...by doing what she did for the scene work, by doing it for the class, by *exposing* herself, this actor taught the rest of us just how sick and horrible rape is...by showing us the result of it, by exposing the real behaviour, real humanity, and a glimpse at the real and horrifying truth of that kind of violent crime. She taught us.

We were better for it.

That honest emotional behaviour will translate into the scene and into the work...and the audience will be deeply, *actually*, be touched by the humanity in the actor. They may not know the actor's personalization, but they will get the depth of her understanding.

And so, they will be better for it.

That's what we do as actors...we expose the truth of being alive and we hand it back to audiences in forms of drama, comedy, adventure, romance. That's our job. To feel these private things publicly and so hopefully help make this a better world. The purpose of our playing...

...whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere,  
the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her  
own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.

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Now, here comes the philosophical answer:

If the premise is that, as actors, exposing oneself and one's truth makes for a better world...

...wouldn't that be true for all of us, artists and non-artists alike?

Wouldn't it be better if everyone shed the last vestiges of the Victorian Morality that still lingers in our society and simply told our stories to each other, opened our hearts to each other, and exposed our truths to each other?

The more we talk about rape, about addiction, about self-destruction, about violence, about pain, and heartache...the more we put it out there and on the table...the less it will occur.

And...the more we share our joys, our dreams, our stories...the more joy will be spread around.

It seems pretty simple to me.

It seems to me, as a society, we have been evolving way past the ideas of shame and embarrassment of our emotional “baggage” and been finding pride in our emotional definition. But, it seems to me that much of society’s remaining brutality, violence, and anger is a result of repression of feelings, miscommunication, misunderstanding, and the “hidden under the bed” philosophy that occurs because we label much of emotional experience as shameful.

The only two remaining reasons to withhold one’s truths, experiences, and feelings are both born of fear – the fear of being rejected for being who you really are – and the fear of betrayal... that the exposed material could be used against you.

The answer to the first is this: you are your emotional truth whether you hide from it or not. What makes you beautiful, what makes you real, and what makes you human are your flaws, your failures, and the “weight you carry”. Embrace them, and you embrace yourself. Reject them, and you reject yourself. Real people are attracted to people who are real. Only fractured people will reject you for being you. If they reject you, they weren’t worth it.

And the answer to the second is this: how can you hurt me with something that I have already exposed and confessed in the first place? As soon as I’ve given it light, it is no longer a weapon that can be used. I am a child of a delusional borderline schizophrenic. I often wonder just how much I’ve inherited...if maybe I’m crazy as well. There. Now what...? If you call me crazy, do you think that hurts me in any way? I’ve already said it!

Own it. Say it first, and the power is taken away from it.

If we as a society could overcome these last fears and insecurities and live openly and generously – if we could really tell it like it is and not be afraid of the consequences – than this would be a far healthier, happier world. I think that’s a good way to live.

And certainly, that makes good acting.

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