

The Educated Actor

A Matthew Harrison essay

Read. Read a lot. Read often.

You must ingest as much about everything as you can. Your job as an actor is to create real humanity and tell story that reflects back to audiences the human experience so that they can learn about themselves. It's a massive mandate. You should be humbled by it. You should be scared by it. And your humility and fear should drive you to educate yourself so that you become a life-specialist...

When working with successful actors, three things always strike me: they work hard; they are smart; and they are extremely well-read.

So, actors are always asking me "what should I read...?"

For starters, our job as the fourth estate (the artists: to demonstrate to society the state of society) means you'd better be on the ball about society, about politics, about societal trends. We live in a corporate-powered consumptive society at loggerheads with rising environmentalism in a world of secular versus fundamentalist religious conflict all who have voices in a digitalized democracy.

So. You'd better know about. Find out. If you don't already read the news daily on-line or the daily paper, you must at the very least read:

- the *Sunday New York Times* (even Starbucks carries it)
- the *New Yorker* and/or *Harper's*

In order to tell story with knowledge and accuracy, actors need to be intimate with story structure and specialists at scene analysis. You don't need to have written a screenplay. But you MUST know how they are written. So...read:

- *Story* by Robert McKee
- the fifty essays at www.wordplayer.com

For story origin and design, you must read:

- *Hero of a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell
- *The Writer's Journey* by Christopher Vogler

It would also be smart to know:

- *Bullfinch's Mythology*
- *The Old and New Testaments*

But to really know how to break down scenes and deeply invest yourself into your character and your character's story, you must be a specialist in psychology. Besides going to therapy, besides accompanying a friend to a twelve-step meeting, being in a relationship, talking to your parents and siblings, listening carefully to people and how they behave and interact and make choices in life, studying things like *boundaries* and *judgment* and *ego*, watching the news, interviews, and documentaries...read:

- *Man and his Symbols* by Carl Jung
- *On Relationship* by Krishna Murti
- *The Rites of Man and Women's History of the World* by Rosalind Miles
- *Relationship Rescue* by Dr. Phil (I kid you not - very insightful)
- *When Going through Hell, Don't Stop* by Douglas Bloch (on addiction)
- *The Deepest Blue* by Lauren Dockett (on depression)
- psychology texts dealing with behavioral, relationship, personal issues

Another crucial way to research real people and their lives and feelings, choices, and psychology is to read biographies and autobiographies. Everything and anything you can get your hands on. Some of my favorites include:

- *Galileo's Daughter* by Dava Sobel
- *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* by Alexandra Fuller
- *Tom: the Unknown Tennessee Williams* by Lyle Leverich
- *Tuesdays With Morrie* by Mitch Albom
- *Federico Garcia Lorca* by Ian Gibson

And, obviously, a novel can be a wonderfully insightful window into human behavior and psychology. What better way to spur your imagination than to dive into other imaginary worlds. All time favorites include:

- *Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera
- *A Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez
- *The World According to Garp* by John Irving
- *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho
- *Demian* by Herman Hesse
- *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant

Of course, read plays and screenplays (free screenplays: www.dailyscript.com)
For personal inspiration, read:

- *Letters to a Poet* By Rainer Maria Rilke
- *The Vein of Gold* (and *the Artists' Way*) by Julia Cameron
- *Creating Affluence* or any other book by Deepak Chopra

In the end, *perspective* is the key to the understanding of the human experience.
So read:

- *A History of Knowledge* by Charles Van Doren (my all time favorite)
- *A Brief History of Time* by Stephen Hawking
- any history book that deals in people and perspective, not just facts

Obviously, the sociological, psychological, and historical information that you are acquiring needs to be translated to the stage or screen. Read:

- *Great Directors at Work* by David Richard Jones
- *A Sense Of Direction* by William Ball
- *On Directing* by Harold Clurman

For Shakespeare, you absolutely need to read:

- *Playing Shakespeare* by John Barton (and watch the BBC series)

And, if you absolutely, really really, definitely *must* read books on acting...be very selective. There are many, many, many books that all say the same thing or are just plain confusing. If you've begun the educational process above, you will be armed with what you need as an actor on stage or screen - a knowledge of life. However...for inspiration, read:

- *Advice To The Players* by Robert Lewis
- *A Respect for Acting* by Uta Hagen
- *True And False* by David Mamet
- *The Art of Acting* by Stella Adler
- *My Life in Art* by Constantin Stanislavski
- *Being An Actor* by Simon Callow
- *On the Technique of Acting* by Michael Chekhov
- And, of course, see the documentary *Actor's Foundry: Acting with Matthew Harrison* and read the essays at www.actorsfoundry.com

Those are my choices of must-read books for actors. But this list is only a starting off point, a way to begin your life-long journey of digging into the fabric of what is life. And what is art. Add to the list. Make your own. And keep reading...