

## Being An Ego-Less Actor

A Matthew Harrison essay

There is *immersing yourself into the work* and there is *making the work about you*. The difference between the two is the major gulf between art and egoism, between professionalism and amateurism, and between getting the job and not getting the job.

In the past few acting workshops, “ego-less acting” has popped up as a theme. The idea being *love the work...don't love yourself in the work*. In the workshops and in several of my recent coaching, I've been working with accomplished, well-resumed actors who have fallen into a self-proclaimed “rut”...who feel they've become desperate and have brought a “stink of desperation” into the audition room. The “ego” has reared its potent and ugly head. It has become clear to me that ego-driven work is pandemic among us actors and a direct cause for pain, frustration, and failure.

By “ego” I don't mean *arrogance* or *self-centeredness*. We're not talking about an actor who is fundamentally *egotistical*. No one likes to work with that kind of actor, no one has the right to be such an actor, and such an actor will get nothing from this essay or this kind of teaching. (On the other hand, we know that powerfully egotistical people are plainly masquerading as such and are in fact compensating for some equally powerful insecurity that lies deep inside. Perhaps if the *egotistical* actor can find the courage to acknowledge their self-importance/self-hatred duality, then they can read on...)

The definition of “ego” we're exploring here is the *self* in any person, the conscious “I”. And what the actor must get clear is that she must set boundaries between the *self* and the *self-in-the-work*. These are two distinct people with two completely different roles. But because the nature of the work involves being judged at every audition, every class, and because in the end the critics write reviews about *us*, and because the final product is *us* seeing *us* on screen, the boundaries between, say, Actor Jane and Personal Jane get blurred and washed away. The “I” or “ego” inevitably rears its insidious head.

Watch how Personal Jane gets mixed up with Actor Jane:

“I need to get this job.”

“I need to impress this casting director this time or else...”

“I *bombed* my last audition, and if I have to *naïl* this one.”

More subtle:

“This role is *perfect* for me!

“I *have* to work with Al Pacino before I die.”

“They *love* me!”

That last one shows up all the time and is particularly dangerous. They don't love you. And if you really need their love, your ego is in some very, very deep trouble. They don't even *love* your work. Hopefully they *respect* your work, your ability and talent,

and understand your castability and so you can all communicate as professionals who are trying to responsibly create the best product under budgetary constraint.

Actor Jane and Personal Jane need to stay away from each other and let each do her job.

Actor Jane's job is to act. To be absolutely prepared for each day on set, or for rehearsal on stage, or for the first read-through of a script, and for each and every audition and appointment: off-book, rehearsed, with a clear understanding and analysis of the scene, its structure, where it fits in the bigger story, and be able to articulate it in the room in a concise and professional way as a character statement. Actor Jane needs to know the character's heart, mind, and soul, and explore her own imagination and experience for inspiration on how to do justice to the character she's playing and the story that she's telling. Then Actor Jane needs to do her job: walk into the audition room, or onto the stage, or onto set, face off another actor, or actors, or reader, and effect change in them in order to attain something as dictated by the script, moment to moment, beat by beat.

Where in all that does Actor Jane have time to try and impress anybody about how great she is or how badly she needs the role?

When I was in theatre school in New York, I used to work at the *Ridiculous Theatrical Off-Broadway Company*. Every night, back stage before his entrance, I use to watch Everett Quinton mime ripping the negative, self-critical, troubled ego-Everett out of his body so that he could walk out on stage and deliver his interpretation of Bottom the weaver in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Here was a professional of the highest caliber, as personally pained and insecure and needy as anyone, literally allowing only the Actor Everett to step on the stage, leaving his ego behind.

Actor Jane enters the audition room as the authority on how Actor Jane will interpret this part and look in the role. She is a product that they either think is appropriate for their project...or not. But Actor Jane doesn't need anybody to *love* her. Actor Jane will be respected because she comes in and does her work. In this way, Jane NEVER bombs an audition. She works too hard and is too good at what she does.

Why people "bomb" auditions, or get in "ruts", or "choke" on set or stage has nothing to do with the Actor in them at all. It's the Ego in them that does the damage.

Nervousness is the most obvious symptom of ego-driven acting. Needing to do well, succeed, get a break. Let's be clear: these feelings are natural and normal and can't be denied. In fact, they ought to be allowed to breathe, understood and accepted. But NOT in the audition room. Making the audition mean more than it does ("if I get this role, I'll finally prove to my parents I'm a somebody"...you laugh, but it's very common); making the consequences of not getting the role bigger than they are ("my agent will drop me")...if these or any other ego-driven thoughts are inside Actor Jane as she walks into the audition room, onto stage, or onto set, how does she have the ability to focus on acting? How can she be clear-headed enough to face off another actor and effect change in them in order to attain something, moment to moment, beat by beat, if she has all those negative ego-driven voices going on in her head?

Those little voices that ring through your mind while acting when you're less than focused...? You know them? The voices that say "*I'm fucking up*", or "*she doesn't like my work*", or just as bad: "*the director is nodding his head...I think he loves me*"?

Those voices are created by the gap that opens up like an echo chamber in your mind when Actor Self isn't working all alone but has been joined by The Ego. The voices take up energy that is non-character related, non-work related, and now Actor Jane isn't *in the moment* at all, but somewhere thinking about herself, and her worries, and her anxieties...and the camera or the audience knows.

So...be professional. Don't drag your baggage into the room. Focus on the work...

Easier said than done?

I don't think so. It takes a major shift in thinking, but in the end, NOT bringing your Ego into the room is way, way easier.

Here's how:

**DON'T LET THE "ACTOR SELF" BE LAZY:** Do the work needed for your auditions (or time on set or stage) and be as prepared as possible so that your Ego doesn't have time to question your ability, your authority, your right to be there. You **MUST** be an expert on scene analysis, story, structure, character and your craft. You must be trained and highly skilled at maintaining focus and doing actions in order to achieve an objective. You **MUST** constantly work your imagination so that you can, on command, willingly hurl yourself into the art of make believe.

On that last point, let's be very clear: you need to be constantly deepening your understanding of your *self* and the world around you so that you can dig into your own personal experiences and imagination so that you can *personalize* the scene. But *personalizing* a scene so that you can understand, empathize, and become a character in certain circumstances is the polar opposite of making the audition or scene *personal* in a negative-ego-driven way.

**GIVE "PERSONAL SELF" ITS TIME:** You need to deal with whatever negative thoughts and voices that ring in your head. You need to take ownership of your need for love, and acceptance, and maybe even adulation. Or your need to succeed. Or your need to please. Or whatever your personal need is. Find its origin. Take it out and deal with it. Own it. Therapy helps. Lots.

**GET ACTIVE SO "ACTOR SELF" IS BUSY AND "PERSONAL SELF" APPEASED:** Create your own success so that the audition or set or stage becomes less important in real terms. Write a script. Shoot a short. Produce a play with you as the lead.(If you haven't already, read *Sixty-Five Things An Actor Can Do* by yours truly.)

In other words...make work about WORK. Not your SELF.

Here's a tip: in the audition room be the authority as an actor by talking story: tell the director, casting director, producer what you think your "character statement" is (objective + relationships + consequences). Get into the habit of communicating with the director and others about the work. Not about you.

Another thing to do is give yourself CHALLENGES for each audition. Examples: To really effect the reader. To concentrate on the arc of the scene (The director Michael Robison told me that he always looks for the arc of an audition, that is: how the actor plays the changes in the character.) To get more physical with your blocking. Anything that keeps you focused on the work and not on yourself.

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Now here's the key, the magic...

When ego-less acting is attained, something beautiful and surprising happens...

The pressure is off you to be *brilliant* or *amazing*. You can shed that need for *acceptance* from anyone. You can stop questioning if *you're good enough*. All you need to do is act. Do your job. Master your craft. And...

When you get out of your own way and stop stinking the room up with your Ego, and instead fill the room with your good acting...the real, deep, and personal YOU that you never really knew how to access actually shows up.

In other words when you get *you* out of the way of the work, the real You shows up.

And that's good acting.