

The LIVING Actor

by Matthew Harrison

This weekend, I had the most incredible coaching experience. The actor I was working with is an older English gentleman who was a distinguished and rather well known actor in the nineteen sixties and seventies. It was an honour to prepare him for his role in a new film - his first acting part in fourteen years. The reason that he hasn't acted in so long is the same reason that he came to see me for help...he suffers from chronic depression. Despite his experience, amazing personality, and *gravitas*, the voices (or black snowballs as I call them) in his mind are very active, causing him to panic. His anxiety gets the better of him and so he's unable to focus on anything, especially memorizing lines. Not to mention delivering them. This has kept him from doing any work for a decade and a half.

In trying to perform the scene, his outside anxieties, internal anxieties, negativities, worries about family, car, house, his past...everything kept flooding in and washing away his concentration. He couldn't get through the first half of one page without giving up. It was heartbreaking to see this once great actor sabotaging and destroying his work because of his mindset.

So I approached the scenes with him as I usually do with any actor. We broke the scenes down technically:

What is the point of the film (the theme - the core)? What is the circumstance of the scene? What is my overall objective? What is my scene objective? My moment to moment objectives? What is my subconscious internal objective (often in contradiction ironically to my external overall objective)? What is my relationship to the other characters? To the plot? To the environment? How does the scene break into its three acts? What is the arc or change in value (how does the scene turn or change)? What is my major realization and the big decision that follows?

Then I did as I always do. Figured out the actions of the scene. But...despite that I was working with an accomplished artist...and because he was unable to focus...I slowed the process down. We ascribed an action (a partner-related verb) to each and every moment in the script. We wrote out the list of verbs for one two page scene onto a piece of paper and practiced each action over and over.

For over an hour and a half.

"Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so overdone is from the purpose of 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."

So this actor emptied his mind of everything but the verb...and DID the verb.

And boy did he do it. For five minutes, the scene was alive. And intense. And focused. And I saw him laugh for the first time when we were through. For Five minutes, he was able to push through his fog, push through his envelope of fears, anxieties, and negativity...through his chronic depression and personality disorder...and escape into Acting.

For five minutes he was free of himself and his head and grounded into the world.

And it made me think: We're all just a little like that, aren't we? And if HE can do it, what's holding back the rest of us?

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I was working with an actress in class this week who has been fighting me for weeks. She finally had a huge breakthrough and fell deep into her own truth, unlocking her defense mechanisms and releasing her protective acting habits. Scared of the power that her blocks have had on her, she's been muting them, stuffing them down, refusing for them to ever show themselves. (Of course in doing so, they've been showing themselves like graffiti on a white hospital wall.) Now that she's taking ownership of these blocks, I told her this:

Take out your pain. Take out your past. Take out the wounded part of your self. Take them out for a long and healthy walk. Air it all out in the sunshine. Let them run around the corral and breathe and let the light shine on them. Then you take away the compulsion to call it 'negative' or 'positive' - and instead you just call it what it is: a part of you. It is the "ugly" parts of you that make you beautiful. Because they make you human.

Every once in awhile I get this feeling...I'm in the middle of my day, going through the routine of my life...and then WHAM! Suddenly I have the intense realization that I'M ALIVE. It feels like I've been sleeping for days or even weeks, and that something, something I can't explain hits me, something which makes me land back inside of my self...and I now have a full awareness that I'm conscious of the world and all the life around me. Like a child discovering the universe around them, really seeing that the sky is blue. That cactus needles hurt.

Do you ever get that feeling?

I sure hope you do. And I say: you should not only acknowledge that feeling...you should encourage that feeling. Create that feeling. Wake up. Wake up now, Time is passing by at the speed of Life. Wake yourself up.

That's why you became an actor.