

The Superlative Actor
(or *The Famous "Ist List"*...)
a Matthew Harrison essay

Okay. Fine.

Due to popular demand...here it is. Dusted off and ready to go...

...the famous "ist list"...

Scenes and screenplays are always built around heightened circumstances, that is to say, bigger than every-day-life stories. They are *superlative* – meaning of the highest order. (Please read my essay "The Incorporeal Actor" in which I outline the three most important types of words for actors - the second being the superlative adjective/adverb).

At the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York, Richard Pinter use to call superlative moments *shock of existence* moments: the kind of circumstances that remind you that you are alive – the kind that shock you back into existence:

- proposing to your wife at sunset on the beach
- discovering your husband's letter from his girlfriend
- meeting the daughter you never knew you had

As actors, we act these kind of *extra-ordinary* moments. Therefore, as actors, we must "shock our existence" every time we hear "action", or "places", or "rolling". But as actors, we do so within the *character's* circumstances, within the *character's* experience.

And so, we must live our actual lives constantly and consistently shocking ourselves in a way that keeps us resonating and prepared to act out whatever imaginary circumstance is handed to us within the story.

The beautiful thing about this work is that in defibrillating ourselves over and over for the sake of charging our instrument, we get to see the real world crisp, awake and alive on a daily basis. There is no time to tentatively walk around the edges of our lives. We must hurl ourselves head-first into the deep-end of our lives, our selves, and our imaginations so that we are prepared to do the job that we are trained to do when called to do so: act out a scene truthfully with as great an understanding of that character's life as we can.

This does NOT mean you need to live an insanely manic life full of reckless abandon. In fact, it is absolutely vital that your home life (non-acting life) be simple and calm, full and clean, and healthy and happy. Tragedy and drama in the real life of an actor *always* translates as melodrama, self-sabotage, and self-indulgence on the stage and screen.

What it does mean is that you need to live your life *caring* about what you see, what you do, who you meet, what you experience, how you live, who you love, what you need, what affects you, what you believe in, and how you imagine things.

It means you need to be present enough in your real life to register the shocks when they happen, to memorize what triggers moved you, to ignite your imaginary world, and to be a master of your instrument...you.

Or...in the words of Socrates: *gnothi seauton*. Know thyself.

The “ist list” was a series of one hundred and twenty questions I use to hand students in class as a way to research themselves – to study themselves. *Ist*...because the questions were superlative questions which always contain superlative adverbs and adjectives like most, worst, best, greatest, least, hardest, fastest... “ist” words.

It served three purposes:

- as a way to get actors to research *personalizing* imaginary circumstances that often appear in scenes and to be prepared for them when they occur
- As a way to train actors to think and see life in a superlative way (actors say they start hearing the questions everywhere)

And lastly (and really, most importantly)...

- As a way to get actors to either:
 - (a) acknowledge the fullness and richness of their instrument (themselves), and thus take away the insecurity of “not being enough”, allowing the actor to settle within themselves so that they can settle within the work; or
 - (b) acknowledge that they are not living their lives in a full and rich enough way and that they must take steps to change the negativity, addiction, and self-sabotage that makes them minimize their lives.

In effect, the “ist list” serves as a sheet of personal psychological triggers for the actors - what I call in my classes *hooks*. I call them hooks because the actor “hooks” on to the emotional trigger to pull themselves into the scene as a way of understanding the character’s emotional underlying truth (along with a physicalized hook, this is the technique of “emotional preparation”...again, a whole other essay).

The list is actually longer than the number of questions because many of the questions can and should be answered two ways: (1) as experience; and (2) as imagination.

Take the question: “What’s the hardest thing you’ve ever had to say to anyone?” This question could and should also be re-phrased as: “What *would be* the hardest thing you *would ever* have to say to anyone?” Sometimes experience is the greater shock - sometimes imagination. Always, it’s different for different people.

And...the answers to many of the questions will change overtime for you. They must. With new experience, new imperatives, and life fully and richly lived, your desires and affections and values ought to be constantly be changing. The actor can re-visit the list periodically. But the very exercise of thinking in this way means that the actor will always be resonating with truth, honesty, and a deeper understanding of life.

The first three questions are the essence of it all...at the core of who you are:

- Who is the one person you love most?
- What do you want most out of your life?
- What do you believe in most?

In fact, these three things are the only things that *really* mean anything to you:

What do you want (life objective), *who do you love* (life relationship) and *what do you believe in* (guiding life principle) will shape, define, and dictate your choices in life.

From those three questions comes all of your acting. (The “three things that mean anything to you” is the subject of a whole other essay...)

From those three questions come all the rest of the questionsfrom the profound to the silly. Most apply to all people. Some are redundant. Some are surprisingly difficult.

Try and answer all of them as honestly as you can. This list is just the tip of the iceberg...there are many, many, many more questions out there. Keep adding to the list.

Have fun. Good luck.

Matthew Harrison
www.actorsfoundry.com

THE “IST” LIST

- Who is the one person you love most?
- What do you want most out of your life?
- What do you believe in most?
- What would be the best thing anyone could say to you (has said to you)?
- What would be the worst thing anyone could say to you (has said to you)?
- What single event in your past has affected you and defined you most?
- What do you love most about your self?
- What do you hate most about yourself?
- What is your worst self-sabotaging mechanism?
- What does the loudest voice in your head say?
- What is your worst fear?
- What is your biggest secret?
- What is your wildest, most fantastical dream?
- What is the cruelest thing you have ever done to yourself?
- What is the cruelest thing you have ever done to someone else?
- What is the nicest thing anyone has ever done (could do) for you?
- What is the nicest thing you have ever done (could do) for someone else?
- What would be the hardest thing to sacrifice?
- What is the only thing you would never sacrifice?
- What is the last thing you will want to see/hear/feel/say before you die?
- What are the top ten most vital things you must get done before you die?
- What would you most likely die from if it happened today?
- What is the most beautiful corner of the world you have ever seen (you'd like to see)?
- What is the worst hell on earth you have ever seen?
- Where is the most dangerous and terrifying place in the world you have ever been?
- Where is the most dangerous and exciting place in the world you have ever been?
- Where is the safest place you have ever been?
- What is the one thing that you are most proud of?
- What is the one thing you did that you never thought that you could do?
- What is the one thing that you are most embarrassed of?
- What was the hardest thing you have ever had to do (will ever have to do)?
- What is your biggest regret?
- What was your biggest lost opportunity?
- What are the biggest challenges you have yet to face?
- What was the biggest decision you have ever had to make?
- What was the biggest decision you were unable to make?
- What was the dumbest decision you have ever made?
- What was the best decision you have ever made?
- What was your biggest success?
- What was your biggest failure?
- What was your biggest mistake?

- What was the most physically painful experience you have ever had to suffer?
- What was the most physically incredible feeling you have ever experienced?
- What is the body part you love most on yourself?
- What is the body part you love most on someone else?
- What is the body part you hate most on yourself?
- What is the body part you hate most on someone else?
- What is your biggest pet peeve?
- What are your other pet peeves?
- What is your sharpest and best childhood memory?
- What is your sharpest and most painful childhood memory?
- What is the silliest thing about you?
- What makes you feel the smallest?
- Who do you hate most?
- Who do you admire most?
- Who do you trust the most?
- Who are you most jealous of?
- Who do you compete with most?
- Who was your first romantic love?
- Who makes you the most anxious?
- Who makes you self-conscious?
- Who gives you the best advice?
- Who is the hardest person to ask a favor from?
- Who is the ugliest son-of-a-bitch you've ever met?
- Who is the stupidest fuck you've ever met?
- Who is the person you most respect professionally?
- Who is the person that intimidates you the most?
- Who is the sexiest person you know?
- What is the sexiest thing about him/her?
- What is the sexiest thing he/she does to you (did to you/could do to you)?
- What is your nastiest, dirtiest sexual fantasy?
- What is the best joke that you have ever heard?
- What lie do you always use?
- What do you deny yourself most?
- What is your biggest prejudice?
- What was the most amazing sex you have ever had?
- What was the most amazing meal you have ever had?
- What was the most amazing party you have ever been to?
- What was the most amazing sunset you have ever seen?
- What was the most amazing adrenaline rush you have ever had?
- What was the most amazing sleep you have ever had?
- What was the most amazing dream you have ever had?
- What was the most amazing fright you have ever had?
- What was the most amazing idea you have ever had?
- Who is the most famous person you have ever met?

- What is the most horrible story you have ever heard / read?
- What is the most inspiring story you have ever heard/read?
- What is your most favorite movie, book, restaurant, coffee shop, food, drink, shirt, pastime, music, toy, view, writer, room, time of day, website, actor, island, gadget, child, philosophical idea, garnish, city, house, nightmare, sport, flower, car, teacher, street, TV show, animal, vacation, spa treatment, weather, smell, board game, quote, color, photo, playground, body part, joke, me time, sound, shape, weapon, pillow?
- What was the most gruesome image you have ever seen?
- What is the hardest news you have ever had to hear?
- What is the most scared you have ever been?
- What pet did you (do you) love the most?
- What is the last thing you would wish on anyone else?
- What would be the most depressing idea you could have?
- What is the one thing that you could never accept in a relationship?
- What is the only reason that you would kill another person?
- What was the biggest humiliation you have ever experienced?
- What was the biggest surprise you have ever experienced?
- What was the biggest joy you have ever experienced?
- What was the biggest disappointment you have ever experienced?
- What was the biggest crisis you have ever experienced?
- What was the biggest rage you have ever experienced?
- What was the best thing you have gotten away with?
- What is the hardest pill you have ever had to swallow?
- What would be the one and only thing worth giving up all your dreams for?
- When was the most nervous you have ever been?
- What is the most lost (physically)you have ever been?
- What is the most lost (emotionally)you have ever been?
- What is the most depressed you have ever been?
- What is the most money you have ever made?
- What was the most revolting thing you've ever had to do? (or would have to do?)
- What is the most precious object you own?
- What was the most valuable object you have ever lost?
- What is the weirdest thing you own?
- When are you most insecure?
- When are you most confident?
- When were you most rejected?
- When was the loneliest you've ever been?

And finally...

- What makes you feel the most you in life?

Now, this is just a start. Keep going...