

The WORKING Actor

(the *SIXTY FIVE THINGS AN ACTOR CAN DO* list)

a Matthew Harrison essay

I saw a lecture once by a psychiatrist who specialized in workplace depression. When asked about actors, he had an interesting perspective. He had studied actors and had come to this conclusion: actors are workaholics. They are driven, ambitious, and constantly thinking about, talking about, and obsessing about their careers. If given the chance, they would work eighty hour weeks and rarely take a break. They are addicted to their jobs and place that priority above all else. But, continued this psychiatrist, your typical actor is a “non-working actor”. She is either between gigs, or between agents, or with an ineffectual agent. She auditions once or twice a week if lucky, and like most actors, faces rejection the majority of the time. So...the conclusion of this psychiatrist was: actors are prone to depression because they are workaholics without work. Addicts without a fix. The only two remedies are: quit the addiction...or...find a fix.

“Be *proactive!* Create your own work! Make your own success! Get working!”

Sure. We hear this all the time. Well, easier said than done. We all know that: “Going to the gym, leaving a message for my agent, and re-watching Star Wars: Episode 2 before going to an industry party...” isn’t how we should be filling our days. But *what* exactly should the actor be doing? How, exactly, does one create one’s own success? If it’s a full time job, what should the actor fill their time with? In my workshops, the students and I have spent time collecting and organizing ideas and tasks so that the actor can set up a specific work schedule and self-arranged program...one that suits his or her specific end goal.

The “*Sixty Five Things An Actor Can Do List*” is a great way to get active, do creative work, be an artist every day, and be an actor on your own terms...not defined based on any other person’s whim or opinion. With goals, self-ascribed objectives, and hard work...auditions and other “business” takes on a less important role, balancing out your career.

Many of the “things to do” are fairly obvious. Others, hopefully, will provoke you and give you new ideas. The point is: you will be busy...

WARNING: this list is suggestive. It’s a way to help actors without a game plan get back into their game. The danger is that an actor will think that this is a *must do list* and attempt them all at once, feel overwhelmed, fail at everything, and then give up acting altogether.

Another mistake an actor can make is to take a "*wash*" approach - doing as many different things as she can, all at once - the idea being that the more lines you have in the water, the more likely you are to catch something.

A far more effective approach is the "*magnifying glass*" strategy: where you focus all of your drive and energy on a single point. Soon you will get the smallest of flames. Add a little more fuel, fan the flames and the fire will spread. Before you know it, you've got a roaring bonfire. In other words...

Work one step at a time. Make a program for yourself. Set a schedule.

Define your end goal and work backwards from it, working step by step to get to where you want to be. Your end goal is: "*to be a series regular on a drama.*" Great!

Now, how will you get there? Book guest star parts and get experience. Good. How will you get there? Give the best auditions you can. How? Get over your nerves in auditions. How? Improve your technique and de-mystify the room. Now look at the list of things you can do, and make a program for yourself, with weekly and monthly ATTAINABLE goals.

If you want to improve your audition skills *and* write a short for yourself to act in, because your end goal is to write, direct, and act in your own feature so you can "*have a career like Billy Bob Thorton*", well that's great! Make specific times in the day and in the week for both. Outline a point by point strategy. Get organized. Get specific. Set goals for yourself. Don't over extend yourself. Do what you can in a planned and step by step way. That's working efficiently.

And enjoy yourself.

This is acting. It's about working at something that fills you with passion.

So have fun...

PRACTICAL THINGS TO DO

1. ATTEND CLASSES/WORKSHOPS. Obviously. Training is key. Getting new perspectives from different teachers is valuable. Getting up in front of your peers, absolutely invaluable. And...
2. WORK WITH A COACH. Work one-on-one, once a week, with a private coach who gives you personalized insight into your craft. Like piano lessons for piano players. Of course, classes and workshops and private lessons cost money...something we often don't have. So...
3. ORGANIZE AND ADMINISTER A CLASS/WORKSHOP. Two students approached me, said they would like to organize and administer workshops for me. In exchange, they get to attend for no fee. Guess what? It worked. We're still going.
4. ORGANIZE A STUDY CLASS. Everyone pool a few dollars and hire a teacher for yourselves. It'll cost way less than going to a school. Or
5. ORGANIZE A SCENE STUDY GROUP. Direct and critique yourselves. Do scenes from film. Or scenes from stage. Or monologues. Or maybe pick one writer and focus on she/he for a few weeks. Maybe bring in a guest teacher one out of three classes, save on costs.
6. PRODUCE A SCENE NIGHT. Hire a director to come in for the last rehearsals of your scene study group, raise some funds at the door and with program advertising, pay back the director's fees. Or, better...
7. TALK YOUR AGENT INTO PRODUCING IT FOR YOU. Showcase her talent - get yourself seen - get someone else to pay for it.
8. PRODUCE A PLAY. It's not as hard as you think. Acting isn't acting until put into practice. Get yourself on stage. And do it right: advertise, hire a good director, get a decent venue and set, and get reviewed. In other words: fundraise. Raising capital takes a little creativity, but isn't that hard. Throw a "casino night" or auction off local celebrities or host a beach party. Get advertising for your programs. Produce a play with a hook into a theme or premise that guarantees a major corporate sponsor or cause. Produce a locally written play and save on copyright fees (that might have long term profit involved). Find alternate venues and save on theatre rentals. Do the play out of your home. One of the best plays I ever saw was Stanley Katz do Wallace Shawn's "The Fever". In his living room. Or/and...

9. DO A ONE MAN SHOW. Keeps the budget cost down. Work with a director you trust. Even better...

10. WRITE A ONE MAN SHOW. Or get a writer to write it for you.

Of course...

11. AUDITION FOR PLAYS.

Here's how:

12. ALWAYS BE WORKING ON THREE MONOLOGUES.

One contemporary comic. One contemporary dramatic. One classic. Always be working on them. Get others to help direct you. Hire a coach for some private sessions to work them up. Start a monologue study group. Practice them at a scene night somewhere. When you're absolutely certain that they're ready...find three more.

Where do you find monologues...?

13. READ PLAYS. Go to *Biz Books*. Go to the library. Get on line. Find the Broadway Guide for recent years and skim through story summaries...find a play that turns your fancy with a character that you relate to...and then find it.

14. START A PLAY READING GROUP. Choose one playwright and become experts. Or one genre. Or theme. Oh, by the way...

15. WATCH ALL TEN EPISODES OF "PLAYING SHAKESPEARE". All twenty hours. Then watch it all over again. John Barton is a genius.

16. GO SEE PLAYS. The number of actors I know who never see plays astounds me. See one a month and at least you'll have seen twelve at the end of the year. See two a month, and you'll be a theatre aficionado. Listen for monologues. Find scenes that excite you and do them. Also, when you see a play you love...

17. MEET THE DIRECTOR. Give her/him your headshot and resume. Get a number to call for the future when they are holding auditions.

By the way...

18. GO TO OTHER ARTS. See the ballet. See the opera. See the symphony perform. Go to museums. Go to book readings. Find your inspiration anywhere you can. Get connected with art.

Back to theatre auditions...

19. CALL THE *EQUITY HOTLINE*. Listen for local auditions, union and non-union. And...

20. DO GENERALS. The Playhouse, the Arts Club, The Belfry, Shaw, Stratford, anywhere. Call them. Do generals.

21. WRITE AND PERFORM A STANDUP ROUTINE. Standing at the "open mike night" at Yuk Yuk's or Urban Well, delivering your funnies... terrifying...exhilarating...and a great acting workout. Then, when you feel like you're ready...

22. PRODUCE A STANDUP NIGHT. Rent a theatre for a night, hire a sure-fire-funny, well known comedian to headline. Invite everyone you know including agents, casting directors, and let it rip. After that, you'll never be nervous for an audition again. Or maybe...

23. TRY IMPROV. Join a group...or better, jump up on amateur night and crash and burn. You'll learn a lot about listening to the other actor.

24. PRODUCE A CABARET SHOW. Put it all in one night: scenes from a play; stand up comedy; some improv sketch comedy; the showing of a short film; a little dance; a little live music. Invite people. When Michelle (my wife) and I first moved to Vancouver, we produced three in a year. We acted in front of an audience, connected with people, and enjoyed ourselves. And raised money for a play.

But, you say, you want to focus on film right now? So, fine. Then...

25. PRODUCE A SHORT FILM. Find a writer/director and a camera and go for it. Get it into festivals. Sell it to CBC. Can't find a script? Advertise in the paper "looking for scripts."

26. GO TO SCRIPT READINGS. The Cold Reading Series. Final Draught at Doolin's. The Alibi Room. Go. Read. Listen to scripts. Meet writers.

27. START A SCRIPT READING SERIES. That's what I did.

28. JOIN A SHORT FILM CONTEST. The Reel Fast. The 24 hour Film fest. There's even a horror short fest. Get involved. It's fun. It's acting. You meet young, future directors. Maybe even get a scene that can be used as reel material. Most importantly, you're clocking time in front of the camera. Like an airplane pilot, you need to practice. How about...
29. START A SHORT FILM CONTEST. Ask Cathy Duborg how that worked out for her. Talking about film festivals...
30. GO TO FILM FESTIVAL FORUMS AND TALK BACKS. The Vancouver Film Festival, The Whistler Film Festival. Listen to directors talk. Learn their lingo, their thought processes, how they talk to and about actors and film in general. Directors are your immediate collaborators. Get inside their heads. Maybe even...
31. TAKE A FILM CLASS. Learn about the camera. And...
32. ACT IN STUDENT FILMS. UBC. SFU. VFS. The Art Institute of Vancouver. Drop off your headshot and resume to them.
33. PRACTICE IN FRONT OF A CAMERA. Re-do your auditions with friends and colleagues. Or, ask your agent to give you audition scenes. See what the casting director sees. Objectively critique your own work. Look at camera angles. Practice auditioning. Better still...
34. RENT AN AUDITION STUDIO. Once every two weeks, rent Shoreline, Casting Workbook, or Second Avenue. A room is 30\$ a half hour. A good investment. Run auditions with a partner. Sit in the casting director's chair. De-mystify the room. Practice. I did this consistently throughout my first years as an auditioning film/TV actor. Invaluable. And it's fun to see your name outside the door next to the casting director's. By the way...
35. BE AN AUDITION READER. That's how you really de-mystify the audition room AND get paid. Many of the casting directors need readers. Call them. "What?! Call the casting director!?!". Yes. Or get your agent to submit your name as a reader. What have you got to lose? As a reader, you get to watch hundreds of auditions. Good and bad. You get glimpses of feedback and how producers, directors, and casting directors think.

Also...those theatre directors that you've met seeing those plays you're seeing every two weeks? Offer your services to them as a reader.

36. DO LOW OR NO BUDGET INDIES. Great practice. Good demo reel material. And once in a while a low budget-no pay indie hits the festivals and gets big notice. Either way, it's a no-lose situation where you can experiment with your craft with little negative consequences. Tell your agent you want to do them. Go to indie fests like the "Celluloid Social Club" and introduce yourself to the writers and directors. Can't afford to take time off to do a no budget film? You can't afford not to. Find a way. Get sponsored to do the film. Raise money. It's your job.

37. READ SCREENPLAYS. Get on line to www.script-o-rama.com or www.dailyscript.com or any one of those free screenplay sites.

Here's one of my favorites...

38. RUN SCENES FROM SCREENPLAYS. Choose a screenplay with a character in your type. Find one scene. Break it down. Memorize and rehearse it like an audition. Film it. Then watch the actual film. See what the actor did with that scene. Notice the differences and the similarities. Also...

39. WATCH ONE SCENE OVER AND OVER. Find the details. Study the editing. Learn the process of filmmaking.

40. START A SCREENPLAY READING GROUP. Read the screenplay. Discuss it. Then watch the film. Discuss the performances. Maybe...

41. STUDY ONE PERFORMER AT A TIME. Declare this month "Paul Newman" month and rent every Paul Newman film you can get your hands on. Or "Johnny Depp Month". Or "Diane Lane". Or declare next month "Soderbergh Month" and see everything he's directed.

And here's the biggest one...

42. WRITE A SCREENPLAY. If it's good, who knows? Get it produced. It worked for Matt and Ben. It worked for Billy Bob and Sly.

But even if you're no Lawrence Kasdan, writing a short, or even taking a stab at writing a full length feature will not only make you think about your own casting, but it'll also give you great respect for writers and storytelling. Most importantly, it will give you a much clearer understanding of how scripts and scenes are structured. By the way, very important...

43. READ STORY BY ROBERT MCKEE. As an actor, you MUST know the structure and technique of script writing. It's your job to make the story come alive. Know how it was constructed. In fact, go to www.wordplayer.com and read essay #5. Which reminds me...
44. READ EVERYTHING. You're actors. Your job is to tell stories, show humanity a little bit about itself ("hold the mirror as 'twere up to nature!") So you'd better ingest as much story and humanity as you can. Read biographies. Read autobiographies. Read essays, journals, diaries. Read history. Read novels. Read "Hero With a Thousand Faces" by Joseph Campbell. Read historical novels. Read poetry. Read philosophy. Read the Sunday New York Times. Read, read, read. And, if you feel you really, really have to, read one or two "acting" books. But only one or two.

And if you really, really, MUST watch television...

45. WATCH DOCUMENTARIES. What a great way to ingest real human behaviour in extreme circumstances. Also watch the news, because you need to...
46. FOLLOW CURRENT EVENTS. If the actor is part story teller, she is also the fourth estate: the artist whose job it is to be the conscious of our society. Inform yourself. Have opinions. Strive for a better world.

ARTISTIC THINGS TO DO

47. KEEP A LOG BOOK. A blank-paged notebook. When you have a moment of high emotion, a moment of interesting behaviour, an idea, or a thought that resonates deeply with you...write it down. When you hear interesting dialogue, a quote that moves you, an idea that scares you...write it down. When you see a picture in the newspaper or a magazine that affects you, makes you want to vomit, delights you, terrifies you...paste it in the logbook. Log all things during the day that strike your humanity in some way. Create a ledger of the world. When you're done with it, put it in your closet and start another. You can refer to it if you're looking for inspiration for a scene or character, but really what you want to do is train yourself to invest in checking in with what affects you and makes you tick. Shock yourself into feeling alive at all times. In the past, I've covered my walls with clippings and photos and quotes, but this tends to scare away dinner guests. Keep it all in your logbook.

48. KEEP A LIST OF HOOKS. Psychologically we all have “hooks” or “triggers” which are the specific keys to our instruments. An image, or sound, or something someone said in your past...our imaginations are filled with “hot buttons”. It’s the specific image that makes us cry at movies which triggers us. It’s the thing we’re “sensitive” about and react to if we hear/see/say it. What are yours? Each and every time you stumble across one, WRITE IT DOWN. Own it.
49. EXERCISE YOUR IMAGINATION: DO A PREPARATION A DAY. Really, you should be doing dozens a day naturally. The magical question, and actor’s best friend: “what if...?” When you read the news, hear someone’s story, see a scenario in the real world, ask yourself...what if? What if that was me? What if I had cancer? What if my wife did? What if our child is born with Down’s Syndrome? What if I’m losing my mind? What if I sold my film? What if I could travel anywhere in the world? What if...what if...all day long. WRITE THEM DOWN in your logbook. Now, take the time to do one specific one all the way, like you’re preparing a scene, and know you’ve tuned that key of your instrument. Another way is to...
50. EXPLORE NON-TANGIBLE NOUNS. Take a word like “wealth” or “love” or “power” or “fear” ...a noun that you cannot physically touch. Define it for yourself. Explore what it means to you. Find the hook in it for you. Become intimate with ideas like “racism” and “forever” and “beauty” and “time”.
51. CREATE AN ACTION LIST. Make a list of actable verbs (partner-related verbs like “to teach”, “to seduce”, “to poison with dark thoughts”) that resonate for you and turn you on artistically. Increase your lexicon.
52. PRACTICE TRANSLATING INTO ACTIONS. Take an emotional result, like “jealousy”, or worse: “insouciant condescension” (!!!) and translate them into actable doings, in other words, verbs. So “jealousy” might be: “attack to cover fear of loss” ...and “insouciant condescension” could be: “to look down on an inferior because I hold the truth.”
53. EXPLORE PHRASES. Take “Thank you.” Imagine five different scenarios for the word. Practice thanking someone. Take the phrase “Don’t give up”. Imagine why you’d say that. Practice it.

54. CONFRONT YOUR FEARS. Afraid of heights? Walk across the Lionsgate Bridge then write down how the experience affected you. Afraid of rejection? Go fall in love.
55. EXPLORE YOUR JOYS. Sit on a mountaintop and watch the sunrise. Play with your niece. Always wanted to be a rock star? Hire a band on your birthday and sing your vocal chords off for four hours in front of everyone you know. That's what I did.
56. SHOCK YOUR SENSITIVITY. Love puppies? Go to the SPCA and hear the crying of the caged animals. Volunteer at a clinic and hold a three month old with AIDS.
57. WRITE AN "IST" LIST. Worst. Best. Most. Least. In other words, superlative adverbs. Answer a hundred questions and keep adding new ones. Two lists: one imaginative. One historical. The worst thing that's ever happened to you. The worst thing that could ever happen to you. The hardest thing you've ever done, or would ever have to do. You're best lover. You're fantasy best lover. The prettiest corner of the world. The most expensive thing you've ever bought, seen, wanted, stolen. The strangest person you've ever met. Answer literally hundreds and hundreds of these. Between the what ifs, the hooks, and the ist list, you have a full and deep instrument with an active and AVAILABLE imagination.
58. STUDY PEOPLE. Okay...this one gets much misunderstood, the old: "I spent the day at the coffee shop studying people." Uh huh. But what were you doing? Study people behaviourally, meaning, study their physical behaviours and then translate them into actions you can do. From that, deduce their underlying psychology, and translate THAT into actions that you can play.

For example: the girl working at the coffee shop won't look at you when you're ordering, and when she makes your coffee, whips the hell out of the steamed milk, mercilessly. But, she seems like she's exhilarated by her actions. After leaving the coffee shop, I re-enact her violent milk whipping and realize that she's dominating and controlling that milk because she feels she has no strength or control in the real world, which is the reason she doesn't look me in the eyes when I order. Write this down. Practice it.

By the way, THAT is what you should be doing while you wait tables, or during your eight hour shift at Video World.
And...

59. PRACTICE CHARACTERS. Imagine the coffee shop girl in the real world, partially anthropophobic (afraid of people) and a control freak of anything outside the sphere of other humans. Spend an hour acting in her shoes, going to stores, interacting with people. And...
60. STUDY PICTURES OF PEOPLE. Portraits at the museum. Pictures in a photojournalism book. Shots you found in a box at the flea market. Study a Rembrandt and figure out the behaviour behind the portraits. What are they doing. Find their action. Discover their voice and mannerisms. Write their story. Bring them alive.
- Talking about character...
61. LEARN A NEW ACCENT. My favorite tapes are the David Allen Stern Acting with An Accent series. Get good at them. Most importantly...
62. LEARN PSYCHOLOGY. We are creating real life on the stage or screen. Real people with real psychology. Know that all people are in contradiction with themselves. Know that choices are often subconscious. Read about people and their choices. One way, is to...
63. GO TO THERAPY. I'm not kidding. Explore your thoughts and analyze yourself with an objective point of view helping you. It will not only help you, but open the world of psychology to you.
64. LISTEN TO PEOPLE. Your job is to tell people's stories. Live people's stories. So? Ask people their stories! The elderly. The bus driver. The lady who sells you muffins. Your grandmother. Absorb all the information you can. Ingest the world around you. On that note...
65. GET CONNECTED. Unplug your ipod. Turn off your television. Roll the windows down on your car. Look people in the eye. Take in the world. You want to be an actor who lives truthfully on a stage or screen? Then go for walks and PAY ATTENTION to the truthful lives around you.

Good luck. Have fun.

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