

DOING: THE INTERSECTION OF WRITING, ACTING AND DIRECTING

The writer Simon Rich, in a recent interview around the launch of his FXX series *Man Seeking Woman*, said:

“When I got to ‘SNL,’ I was really just a magazine writer. I wrote stories for *The New Yorker* and I published a book or two, but I’d never really written for actors. Actors are a game changer; they have an incredible ability to elevate mediocre material. Working with actors really kind of changed my approach to writing. You start to think about every scene differently and you start to write with performers in mind. It really improved my writing. I feel really grateful that I get to do that kind of work.”

So what is it that the actors bring that elevates the written material?

It is simply the *doing* of it.

Acting is not saying - it is doing. It is the doing of the thing. As Sanford Meisner put it, “the foundation of acting is the reality of doing.” The power is in *really doing*. Even “doing nothing” has to be really done! It’s so much harder than it sounds. It’s only easy/simple for babies and animals. After seeing an actual dog in the “Snickerdoodles” scene Zheng Lu Xinyuan expressed her reaction poetically:

The first rehearsal.

The dog. So honest.

Good actor/ress has the same power with even just the presence.

Eat, talk, sleep.

I like the trivial of life that triggers us.

For animals doing comes naturally. They lack self-consciousness, therefore they are always, and only, doing.

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The doing of talking:

Even talking has to be “done”.

It is part of the actor’s job to make writing not *sound* like writing. That is difficult to achieve. The “disconnect” of saying someone else’s words causes the actor to dissociate and become self-conscious. We can eliminate this self-consciousness by *doing* the words rather than saying them.

People don't speak in words they speak in thoughts. Speaking the thoughts with intention: the intention to achieve a result, to reach another person - is the essence of doing, rather than saying, the words.

The key here is that the actor's focus is on another person – not on himself.

Meisner advised actors to “put the attention onto someone else.” This shift of attention turns *speaking* into *doing*. It also transforms *listening* into *doing*. It renders “doing nothing” active and alive.

Directors and actors have a tendency to *re do* what the writer has done. To underline the writer's intention or redo what was done in one scene in another scene where – having already been done - it doesn't belong.

Our job as directors is to encourage the *doing* of the text. We must identify the moment when a thing is done, and ensure that the actor really does it.

I imagine that the lesson Simon Rich learned is that the *doing* of a text is much more than the saying of it. I imagine his writing will grow as he challenges himself to write doable actions rather than mere clever sayings.