

ENGAGING ACTORS – THE VALUE WE ADD

Thousands of years after the roles of playwright, actor, and scenic artist developed in Greece, the role of director emerged in Europe in the 19th Century. That tells us that dramatic artists were happy to sort their business out amongst themselves for much longer than they have been willing to be yoked to a “director’s vision”.

As directors this knowledge should make us humble and responsible. We must continually ask ourselves the question “[what value am I adding to this endeavor?](#)”, and strive to answer it with our work.

One way we add value is by truly *engaging* with the actor. That doesn’t mean we teach actors how to act. While it’s useful to be familiar with an actor’s process we don’t need to lose ourselves in the minutia of actor training. Rather, we focus on understanding the challenges actors face.

The actor must make writing not sound like writing. The actor – confronting a scene of dialogue – must say someone else’s words as if they were his own. In fact, they are not his own and the resulting disconnect leads to self-consciousness on the part of the actor. That self-consciousness triggers an impulse to “step outside” and see how he is doing...how he looks in this verbal masquerade. That “step outside” is noticeable to the audience and distracting to the actor.

Enter the director who, if she has the actor’s trust, can be the actor’s mirror and perfect audience. Ideally, when the actor-director relationship is working, the actor feels safe to explore the boundaries of his character’s behavior. He can do so knowing that the director is watching, spotting for him, almost like a personal trainer. The safety of the trusting actor-director relationship allows the actor to take risks, make discoveries and fulfill his obligation to, as G.B. Shaw put it, “betray himself” for the benefit of the audience.

How does this trust come about? The director must create a safe play-space in which to rehearse. She must value process over result, stress the importance of real talking and listening, and moment-to-moment reality. The actor and director must agree that their task is not merely to convey information via words. They must agree that acting is doing – rather than saying. That it is the doing of the deeds that makes the event of the scene happen.

We focus our attention on behavior, the doing of tasks in pursuit of objectives. We learn to examine and explore the circumstances the writer has put us in, and to make choices on behalf of our characters. Belief follows action: we believe in our characters simply by doing their deeds.

Our characters emerge from the choices we make and the actions we perform.

These are the rules: guidelines of the game of rehearsal we directors play with our actors. Like trainers in sports we push our actors to break a sweat...to go farther in their explorations than they might dare to go alone.

Our dream as directors is to midwife the birth of a great performance – one that is bigger than either the actor or the director, but has a life of its own in the experience of the audience.

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