

Creating You

“There is vitality, a life-force, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is; nor how valuable it is; nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it clearly and directly, to keep the channel open.”—Martha Graham

Take off the mask

A vital part of the artist’s journey is the path to finding yourself.

To discover and embrace who you really are.

To connect to your power by taking off your mask.

To let your core shine through to illuminate every part of your work.

How liberating to take the risk to be you!

Embrace your vulnerability

Often actors are embarrassed about what makes them unique. Many actors are afraid that they are not enough. They think they are “too nice” or “not nice enough” and try to hide themselves behind a “confident” cover or a “nice” cover or an “attitude” cover of what they think they should show, when in fact what they need to show is their truth. Insecurity, pain, sexuality, anger or remorse can be the actor’s most effective tools. The things we regret or embarrass us most in our lives are often the most powerful and useful experiences we can draw on as actors.

Dare to bare your true self

One of my actors was cast as the lead in a feature film. The director chose him over well-known stars because he had an unbeatable combination of elegance and fierceness. When I went to see the film, I

realized this actor had not revealed the powerful, unrelenting side of himself that is essential to his character. The reviews were mixed. The actor wanted to know what I honestly thought. I shared my wish that he had shown his fierceness in the role. He then revealed that his family didn't like that wild and out of control side of him. He wanted the audience to like him. But, the simple truth was that if he had auditioned with the performance that wound up in the film, he would never have been cast in the first place.

The embarrassing or uncomfortable qualities of actors are often what audiences connect with. When you bring the essence of you to a character, the audience thinks, "Wow! You're brave to show what you're really like! Fantastic!" Audiences love to see real behavior on the stage or screen—the craziness of Jack Nicholson, the self-deprecation of Ben Stiller, the painful shyness of Diane Keaton, the quirky intelligence of Sandra Bullock, the haunting quality of Benicio Del Toro, the private painful side of William H. Macy. These actors have great range, but they are cast repeatedly because they bring their uniqueness to every role.

Who am I?

How do you put your finger on the pulse of who you really are? Take the time to step outside yourself, search your soul, and examine this character you play in real life. Search the same way you would playing a character on stage or screen. Go on the hunt! Ask your closest friends to be brutally honest: "How would you describe me in three different words?" Be even braver and ask your family. Dig into yourself to ask, "Is there anything secret that I'm afraid to reveal?"

Here's a great exercise that I learned from casting director, Karen Kayser. Get together with other actors and record interviews with each other on a video camera. In the replay, stop tape as each person appears on the screen. Ask everyone's first thought when that person is seen on camera. In what kinds of professions could that person be cast? Nurse? Farmer? Doctor? Construction worker? Businessman? Mother? What about age range? What kind of person does this actor look like? The nice friend? A sleazy guy? An abused wife? The young heroine? Don't be afraid of being brutally honest. We categorize and evaluate people every day in real life, audiences do it from their seats and casting directors do it from behind the table.

In an interview in *Screen Actor*, the Screen Actors Guild magazine, Karl Malden illustrated the importance of knowing your type. He said, "*The biggest lesson I learned was that I wasn't a leading man, that I was*

a character actor...” So I said, “If I am going to stay in this thing, I’d better be the best character actor I can be.”

Develop your unique qualities

“You’ve gotta be original, because if you’re like someone else, what do they need you for?” —Bernadette Peters

Training to be your own best creation is an ongoing project. Look for teachers who not only work on strengthening your acting skills, but who help you to discover the individuality that makes you “You.”

My Method teacher, Pat Grantham, used to make observations about the actors in our class; how we looked and what was special and singular about each of us. Even if it were a beginning actor, she would find something, but I observed that it was always truthful. When we walked into a room or performed, we knew who we were and what was unique about each of us.

Eliminate weaknesses

You have a responsibility to the audience to illuminate truth. Your strengths affect people. Your weaknesses lessen the impact of your performance. Why would we want to watch anyone who mumbles or has sloppy speech? If you are from the American South, Europe, Long Island or elsewhere, and you do not have a good Standard American accent, then you have dramatically reduced the number of roles you might be considered for. If you have been told more than once that you have poor posture, can’t be heard or have a speech problem, take it to heart and work to correct the issue.

The importance of your appearance

“Acting is a tough business and you need to be in good shape mentally and physically” —Juliette Binoche

Actors who are fit and good-looking will always have opportunities but there have also been exceptions to that rule. These days it really seems that the exceptions are the rule. Now every “type” has the opportunity to be a star. But actors should consider being physically able to survive the rigors of work on stage or set.

For those of you who fit the beauty roles or handsome male type, your appearance is the first impression before your work is seen. How you take care of your body is an indication of how you feel about

yourself, and many decisions to represent or hire an actor are based on that first impression. Agents and casting directors see so many actors, that even being slightly out of shape can be a strike against you. It's the unspoken rejection. Actors don't want to believe it, but it's the painful truth.

If your goal is to be a leading television or film actor, remember the camera adds weight. You should be slimmer, but eat wisely to be prepared to endure stressful working conditions and long hours of rehearsing and performing. Crash diets will only exhaust and age you. If you find that you need to drop some pounds find healthy, long-term ways to lose weight.

When you are out of shape, your appearance also reflects on those who represent you. An agent once critiqued a class that included an actress the agent represented. The actress had gained a few pounds and the agent, horrified, shared with me how upset he was. As talented as she was, she had to work hard to get herself back in the agent's good graces.

Bring yourself to the role

Typecasting

Most actors don't want to be "typecast" or "pigeon-holed" by casting directors. However, if you bring too many qualities to an audition you will confuse the casting director, and lose the opportunity to do roles that are tailored to your core. Typecasting is about targeting your essence, the very things which make you special and different. Figure out which category of "type" you belong to.

If you figure this out in advance of stepping into interviews and auditions, you will have a distinct advantage. Yes, agents and casting directors may typecast you, but it is you who led them to your creation—you.

Always start with you

Some actors are afraid they may be just playing themselves and not being true to the character. When an actor brings their emotions to a role, it can actually expand their range into parts of themselves that they suppress in everyday life. If the character is much different than the actor, then the actor must find those parts of themselves that are like the character and stretch them until they have a complete human being. They become the character, and the character becomes them. But this must evolve from the actor. If you can't find the truth in yourself, how

are you going to bring the truth to the character? Ask yourself, “How am I like this human being?”

Our feelings evolve from six primary emotions:

Love • Hate • Joy • Sadness • Power • Fear

We all feel these emotions to a greater or lesser extent. You may feel rage at your boss, but you wouldn’t act on that rage by committing murder. But you can do anything you choose in your imagination, including killing your boss. You have the capacity to play anything and must feel the fullest extent of the emotion that your character is feeling. Is it more inspiring for an audience to watch the actor “acting” like the character, or to believe the actor is the character in the moment?

Frame yourself

Use your tools wisely

Use your headshot, resume, reel and monologues to frame yourself in interviews and auditions. If you use these tools skillfully, agents, casting directors and directors, will immediately “get” you when you step into the room. When a role appears in the breakdowns that is your core, they will call because they know who you are.

An actor shared his new headshots with me. His photographer had captured a wide range of different types, from “edgy and street smart” to “nice guy.” The core of the actor happened to be the “nice guy,” the cute, guy-next-door type. However, his manager loved the dark, raw shots and chose the most sexual and dangerous-looking picture to represent him. The actor was called in for many auditions from the new headshots, but he wasn’t getting cast. Why? Because in an audition room full of “edgy” actors, he was at his weakest. In a room full of cute, nice guy types he had the advantage, because he really was the “nice guy.”

Leave a lasting impression

An actor I worked with decided he was tired of being called in for the “good guy.” With his agent’s permission, he made a major decision to show his real core, which was unconventional, fearless and chauvinistic. His agent received a call from a major casting director saying, “Never send that horrible, disgusting actor to me again. How dare you!” But a few weeks later the same casting director called back

and said, “Do you remember that actor you sent me a few weeks ago?” “You mean the actor you never wanted to see again?” the agent asked. The casting director hesitatingly responded, “Well ... yes. We have a role that we think he might be perfect for.” She got him in a big way. He left a lasting impression, and when the perfect role came in, he was the first actor the casting director thought of. Even though she didn’t like the guy personally, he was the one she needed for her to be successful. She had to have him.

Acting is a challenging profession. If actors can see themselves as industry professionals do, they can make themselves more castable without compromising their artistic ethics and ideals.

The power of knowing who you are. Isn’t that a creative idea?

