There is no off-season for artists

Throughout theatrical history, including up until quite recently in the West, actors enjoyed off-seasons of various kinds. The Greeks clustered their activity around the various festivals which marked the passing of seasons; an entire year of work could go into these productions, if you were a member of the Chorus, but not if you were one of the sons of Thespis (and they were only sons) charged with playing principal roles. Medieval theatre embraced a similar clustering around religious festivals and events such as the Feast of Fools. The more professionalised actors of the Elizabethan troupes worked less in the rheumy outdoors of the winter months. The emphasis shifted with the proliferation of indoor theatre plants, and the summer became a season when permanent troupes rested or travelled on tour. With the development of the repertory system in Europe in the 18th century the idea of a summer break gradually became incorporated into the plans of theatre administrations.

But in this we are talking of *employment*, and actors, alas, have always had breaks, forced or otherwise, that are all too frequent. What I am talking about here is the idea of constant training. The term “off-season” refers in sports to that period when athletes train and recuperate in equal measure from the rigours of their performance schedule, in order to improve and prepare themselves for the competition that follows. Few actors work on their craft during off-seasons of whatever kind, if they are lucky enough to have one[[1]](#footnote-1). Other corporal artists such as dancers train continuously throughout their careers, singers too. The idea of training after one has graduated into the professional ranks seems to have been generally disdained alone amongst actors.

Actors are curiously romantic creatures. I don’t mean this in a positive sense. Acting is, above all, a craft whereby an artist learns how to optimise the expression of their talents. Why do so many actors with whom I’ve worked claim (at least implicitly) that they no longer require training having been paid for their first job? There are even places I’ve worked, such as Newfoundland, where a healthy streak of contrarian libertarianism, honed over more than 400 years of predations from colonial overlords, resulted, until very recently, in a stubbornly held belief that actors require no training at all, simply the benefit of repeated experience. After all, in the olden days if one ran off and joined the circus, they didn’t go to circus school, did they? This may be true for a certain kind of autodidactic actor, but only rarely do such actors rise above generalised mediocrity. They are stuck in the miasma of the mediocre, with occasional bouts of brilliance, because their sheer ignorance of what has come before, of alternatives to established orthodoxy, their hazy knowledge of the fundamental precepts of artistic acting, and their inability to perform consistently—because inspiration is a fickle mistress--limits them to an optimisation of the predictable. This is romanticism masking anti-intellectualism and aesthetic laziness.

There are directors who prefer to work with such untrained actors, because they are so easy to manipulate. Such actors can be relied upon, when flattered, to produce a reasonable level of mediocre representational acting, the kind of acting which passed for many years as “good” at the tatty rep companies in England throwing out dozens of productions a year, or the multifarious Shakespeare festivals around the Globe where actors untrained in the Bard could take the director’s word as gospel, having none of their own with which to defend themselves. According to Stanislavski, the Representational Actor polishes the form, having found it in rehearsal, and never returns to actual creating thereafter. It’s the most insidious form of performance in the West, because it looks so persuasive. Audiences fed a steady diet of representational acting never develop the discrimination necessary to demand better.

Actors, to paraphrase Artaud, are “Athletes of the Heart.” They are athletes; they must train like athletes. If being an artist means experiencing an artistic perspective every day, then being an actor means training for your performance every day you are not on stage or before a camera. A performance run on stage, or a period of filming, is a “season”. No contemporary athlete working at the highest level allows themselves more than a brief vacation. The era of “playing yourself shape” (i.e. game condition) is long past; too much is at stake, financially, for the athlete to take such risks with their instrument. Our societies love to disdain the vanity and self-absorption of Hollywood stars, but if one were to take a look at the truly onerous level of training even a mid-level celebrity has to maintain over successive periods of intense scrutiny—filming, the publicity tour, awards season—we would not be so quick to dismiss these hard-working individuals. We don't need to judge their relative levels of talent, or engage in earnest discussion about why cosmetics matter so much; it’s enough to note that these people, by and large, maximise their chances of success (of whatever kind) through *constant training*.

How could an actor like Nicole Kidman step into a singing and dancing role in Baz Luhrman’s *Moulin Rouge!* after more than ten years in Hollywood without a singing or dancing performance? My guess is, like most actors in Hollywood, she had maintained her singing and dancing technique through regular training[[2]](#footnote-2). North American actors, particularly, because of the chaos of our training systems (universities, community colleges, conservatories, private academies, all with widely differing emphases on various philosophies and skills) are seldom ready to step beyond the most elementary realism at an audition or in performance. And, while realism forms the basis of most television and film, this is becoming less so. Post-Brechtian acting is becoming more popular and prevalent in response to the needs of a society drenched in irony and sceptical of what is placed before them. Brecht anticipated this. His actors spoke to audiences directly, encouraging them to question the received conservative orthodoxy of established theatrical structure. Yet they could still create psychologically dimensional characters, while stepping in and out of the world of the play.

Actors who do not train constantly erode their base of expression. They become brittle, in both physical form and emotional outlook. They lose *plasticity*, the ability to take your instrument and apply it in a multiplicity of aesthetic environments. Plastic actors who maintain their instruments—emotional, physical, intellectual--can dive fully into the world of performances of any style or genre, because their technical base will meet its demands.

1. This will be hotly denied by professional actors in larger urban centres, who have access to many kinds of classes. The number of actors who actually take them would be, by my estimate, no more than 20%. The number of actors who take them repeatedly would be less than half that. The actor cannot rely on classes. She must apply the discipline to train alone, in addition to whatever she can find. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kidman received her early training at the Philip Street Theatre in Sydney and the Australian Theatre for Young People, and trained in ballet from age three. She was thirty-four when *Moulin Rouge!* was released. There are no openly identifiable musical productions on her career listing at ***imdb*** between her early training and the film. http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000173/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)