

Approaches To Acting

Ego and Indulgence

Most actors are no more self-indulgent as people than anyone else. Why then, is ego, or its related term, self-indulgence, such an obstacle in acting? The self-indulgence we're talking about is a little different than what the term means in daily life. Maybe it's clearer to think of it in terms of just being "indulgence" - like people faced with a nice pastry. Eat it all or keep to that New Year's resolution?

A monologue can be seen as a seductive pastry. It promises a feast of sensations; emotions from A-Z, vivid images, the chance to be part of a story. But an actor has to be disciplined, to keep to all those New Year's resolutions. In the actor's case, those resolutions are: I'm doing this for others, not for me, I have to tell the story clearly, not get lost in it, I am expressing the character, not just living inside her. Think about when you were young. Something awful happens, and your mother asks you to tell her what's happened. Perhaps your voice got all choked with the emotion of remembering it, and you started speaking too fast, and your Mom had to stop you because you weren't making any sense. In order to gain her sympathy - and to get her on your side - you had to start again, slower, with more control, and try to tell the story instead of just re-living it. That's just what actors do, only they don't get a second chance.

In the ball game, you see what happens when people get carried away with the joy of it or their sense of power; they lose control and the ball drops. Tension, anxiety, and stress have the same result; they're the same thing, in acting terms, as joy. They're indulgent, because the person falling prey to stress or tension is merely living it, concentrating on themselves. They're not doing anything to change it, to gain control. In other words, they're stuck inside their own feelings. When these feelings are negative, like worry or stress, it's hard to believe that this can be called indulgent, but it is, because it's cancelling others out of the equation. An actor who concentrates on feeling the emotion of the piece, rather than balancing that with its clear expression, isn't a bad person, or even a bad actor. But they are indulging themselves at the expense of the piece and at the expense of the spectator.

Indulgence is most often a symptom of a young actor, often one who is in love with the art, and who finds in acting an outlet for all the pent-up passion that is so hard to express in daily life. Who could resist the opportunity to let it all out? Actors, however, are obliged to progress to the second stage of acting – acquiring effective means of expression. Then comes the third step - finding ways of expressing these truthful feelings in ways that are not predictable or conventional. Opposites and discoveries become critical at this point in the process. At this stage, the actor is mature.

Experienced actors also fall prey to ego and indulgence, in a slightly different way. Their personal experience may lead them to subjective choices on the part of the text they are interpreting, or even to a choice to ignore the dimensionality of a text in favour of an “agenda” the actor feels is appropriate.

The classic example of this is the “Hitler example”. Hitler was a terrible man who did monstrous things. If an actor is required to portray Hitler, his job is not to tell the audience what a monster he was: the spectator's job is to make that determination themselves (and yes, that means there's a danger they may come to a different conclusion). The actor's job is

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to portray the human who was a party to all these acts, to raise the question of how a human – no different than anyone in the audience – could ever precipitate such horrors. The actor, of course, is entitled to his or her convictions. But they are not the convictions of the character, and the character, not the actor, is what the audience must see. The character's agenda must be expressed and opened to question, rather than having the actor patronize the audience by telling them what to think and refusing to question inherent assumptions.

A lot of theatre for young audiences (TYA) in Canada is rife with writing and performing that is earnest, sincere, and highly indulgent. The performers come in with a simplistic agenda and pretend that it is the only way to look at an issue. Many teachers who invite productions into their schools are adamant that it should be so; they do a disservice to their students. Political or "agenda" theatre runs this risk as well; the failure of "agit-prop" is that it preaches to the converted. There is no dialectic; no exchange of views; no chance for the spectator to question what she sees, or question herself.

It's easy to see how this all happens, because it's human nature to assume you're right and everyone else should behave the way you do. Who would criticize a play that speaks to the issue of spousal abuse? That's socially edifying, isn't it? Well, no, not if it demonizes the abusers (both women and men). What's there to ponder then? The dogmatic individual (and most of us are dogmatic) says, "that's because there's no pondering needed." But ALL issues are more complex than they appear. ALL human behaviour is open to question – and benefits from the questioning.

Who would not say Hitler was a monster? Well, say it on the street. No one will contradict you (I hope). Don't say it on the stage, because actors have a higher calling than merely indulging their own point of view and foisting it on a paying crowd. The actor takes the chance of *being a pariah* – that is, of questioning things people sometimes feel should be left unquestioned. Like the fool in King Lear, who skates that fine line between speaking out of his place and fulfilling the fool's traditional role – of poking holes in Lear's (and by extension, our) dearly-held assumptions.

No one should be told what or how to think. An indulgent actor commits this crime.

So, how to address this tendency and correct it? One way to see immediate improvement is to focus on opposites. Opposites are the amongst the most explosive weapons in the actor's arsenal. Imagine playing Hitler as raging egotist, a petty, vindictive, irascible man – who has a small talent for art and a wounded sensitivity that we can recognize in ourselves. No monster there. If you manage such a portrayal, you will shock and surprise the audience. Those who came looking for reassurance of their comfortable assumptions – that evil monsters have nothing to do with *them* – will be angry. They will denounce you, because they know you are speaking a truth they don't want to acknowledge; that Hitler was human being, and that, by extension, his crimes are our crimes.

Or imagine playing a victim of abuse, a rape victim, or a character who has been told she is mentally ill. The indulgent choice is to play the victim, to tell the spectator this is a *bad thing, and don't you feel sorry for me?* Using opposites (and discoveries), an actor playing these characters tells the audience their character may have been victimized but she is *not* a victim,

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that she deserves the audience's respect, not just their sympathy. Most of us in daily life would far prefer respect to sympathy. Respect carries equal status; sympathy does not.

A shocking opposite – what if the woman you're playing, a rape victim, *laughs*? *Well, that's just not right, I mean, my gawd, she's been raped.* So you're telling the spectator that rape victims *never* get over the trauma, that there's no hope, that they give up and give in? Very edifying. If you want to change the spectator's political view, wagging a finger in his or her face is a lot less useful than showing them a character who continues to fight, who is not one-dimensional, who hopes and dreams and yes, laughs. Rape victims are not saints; they are humans to whom something terrible has happened. Don't play a saint; and don't play the event – play the character.

The above examples demonstrate why acting is not for the faint of heart. If a person doesn't want to cause waves, or risk disapproval, go into public relations – it requires the same skill set, without the guts. If you think the world should be nicey-nice, if you don't like to get into the mud of your character, it's time to think about children's television. That's performing, and it has its own merits; just don't call it acting.

Thus the best way to avoid indulgence in acting is to regain control of perspective. Your expression of a character should enable the spectator to perceive that you are doing the piece for them rather than for yourself. Stay on track by continually trying to affect your loop partner. Remember, convincing him of the depth of your feelings is only one tactic. Once you've won or lost with it, you've got to try something else. That way we, as spectators, watch all the ways the character is reaching out, rather than marvel at how deeply the actor is feeling their emotions. That's the difference between indulgence and generosity as an actor.