

What is acting?

by Ulrike

A young guy got the chance to meet a famous, well-known actor, a favourite of his, on a set during the shooting of a movie. He was made welcome. The young guy was very excited and nervous about this meeting, which meant a lot to him.

The famous actor couldn't help himself. There was something special, extraordinary about this young guy. The situation was familiar, but at the same time, odd in a kind he was not able to identify. Maybe he was remembering himself, back when he was young and eager.

This wasn't going to be a promotion talk, as usual, but something deeper. Maybe he doesn't know.....

Young guy: "Oh, I'm so happy to meet you. I can't really tell you how much - it is absolutely unbelievable....."

Famous actor: "What do you think? Who is standing in front of you?"

The young guy looked puzzled. "It's you, the famous actor...."

Famous actor: "No, it's me. It's the individual himself. No costume, no make up, my own voice and gestures, all me. I'm not playing a role, now. Or would you prefer someone acting in front of you, when there is no other audience?"

The young guy knitted his brows, shaking his head. He hadn't expected a statement like this.

Young guy: "No, but I like your acting, very much. You are a model for me. I wish I was able to be like you, somehow."

Famous actor: "Well, well, you want to be an actor."

Young guy: "Yes! Preferably a film actor."

Famous actor: "Why?"

Young guy: "Why..... I like to slip into a role, be a hero, a knight, a time traveller, an evil guy wearing these great cloaks and boots... and changing roles more often, as in theatre."

Famous actor: "And tights?"

Young guy: "Tights???? The famous soliloquies, like Hamlet, you mean. 'To be or not to be, that is the question'...."

The young guy made a sweeping gesture with his arm, as if holding and talking to an imaginary skull in his hand, and spoke with a strong loud voice.

Famous actor: "How will your arm feel when you have to reprise that monologue again and again, countless times, 50 times or more?"

Young guy: "Why should I have to do that?"

Famous actor: "Because the director orders you to do it, for he thinks, maybe, that you didn't try hard enough to transform, to bring his imagination to life. Maybe you have to sneeze, or someone else is sneezing, or a bird is lands near by, a spotlight blows, some one has forgotten to take the water bottle away from the scenery, someone creates a running gag, unknowingly ... and no one can help themselves - they all burst out laughing.

"And tell me, is this the way you think you will improve your voice, repeating this again and again? Less is often more. The use of your body is your capital, so you have to take care of your resource, be economical with it. Even if you speak very low (*he lowered his voice*), you can transmit a lot of power and strength with your voice ... and you can drive the set sound people insane.

"It's a great challenge to call up emotions on order. When you hear the word "Action" you have to change into the character of the role, and perform the stipulated emotions.

"You have to be able to toggle between one kind of emotion and another, within a second, from shouting for joy, to being deeply grieved, like flipping a switch. You have to know the range of emotions. You're tenderly reciting *Rilke's Love letter*, adoring your partner, then suddenly sense danger. You change into an aggressor, shouting, fighting, maybe roaring - without consideration of your own personal feelings."

Young guy: "Ah, you're right. But I can revive characters from world literature, acting a play from A to Z."

Famous actor: "But if you are shooting a movie, it's different, you know. You don't shoot a play from A to Z. It's filmed out of sequence."

Young guy: "But I can choose the roles I want, the ones with a common thread or theme."

Famous actor: "No, you definitely can't do that, usually. You have to take what comes. You have to earn money, to pay bills. Sometimes, you'll be really happy that there's something, anything. So you can't restrict yourself to a particular character. More variety, you know?"

Young guy: "Yes, and with this variability, I'm able to be part of sets all over the world, with international casts, and get the chance to learn about other cultures."

Famous actor: "Yeah, but somehow, hotel rooms look pretty much the same, wherever you are. Only the view out the window is a little different.

"How can you experience a different culture when you have to stay on the set from the early morning until night. You are there to work, not for a holiday, see?"

“Mosquitos in tropical heat, barefoot on icy ground, bathing half-naked in unheated water, running half-naked in outdoor shots ... these are very extraordinary experiences.

“But today, there is computer-generated imagery. You’re acting inside a blue or green box, so there is little need for you to be in outdoor shots anymore.”

Young guy: “I can do on dialogues.”

Famous actor: “Which dialogues?”

Young guy: “You know, two or more people talking to each other...”

Famous actor: “Not within a movie. There are no real dialogues. One actor does his part of the dialogue, then the camera moves, and your partner does his part. When the shoot finishes, it will be cut to fit together.

“Or consider an international shoot. You have to deal with a Tower of Babel. You don’t understand anything, even what your opposite is talking about, because the language is one you don’t speak. Then all you can do is mime, try to catch the body language of your opposite. No chance to ad-lib, because of the script. But you can use this experience in voice acting.”

Young guy: “What do you think is the greatest virtue an actor should have?”

Famous actor: “Patience and endurance.”

Young guy: “Why?”

Famous actor: “Oh, for a variety of reasons. First, just to get a place in drama training, if you are not a natural talent. Afterwards, you have to get an offer, overcome the obstacle of the castings. And if you do make the list, there are rehearsals, physical training, hours and hours for fittings and make-up.

“So you get dressed and made-up early in the morning, or even the night before. Then you have to wait for a little scene of 2 minutes or less, which is shot in the late evening.

“When the movie is finished, no one seems interested in hiring you. They couldn’t imagine that you have the ability to play a bad guy, if you played a lot of young, smart guys before and vice versa.

“Discipline has to be part of your professional skills as well.”

Young guy: “What about heavy make-up?”

Famous actor: “An interesting experience, if your chin allows you to do so, and your girl friend likes these special leftovers from the glue, all over. You learn to multi-task. It changes your appearance completely. When you look into the mirror, it seems as if someone, or something, absolutely strange looks back at you. You need to get used to that. Even your mother wouldn’t recognize you.

“But it isn’t just something you can hide yourself behind. You have to develop a new skill set of body language and gestures.

“Of course, you have to train and learn to articulate yourself again, maybe wearing dental prosthesis which are part of the makeup.”

Young guy: “What’s about the recognition of your face? Isn’t that important for an actor?”

Famous actor: “Ah, yes of course. But you get recognition of a different kind. The casting teams observe how you deal with such a situation - sitting in the make-up chair for more than half of the night. Are you able to offset and handle a lack of sleep, yet still do intense work over a long shooting day?”

“It’s more difficult to be recognized in foreign countries, which will dub your voice using a voice actor in their own language. You can walk unrecognized along the street, in the park, eat ice-cream, pick your nose, lick your fingers, have a bad day, go shopping - without ever seeing yourself in a photo, video, a newspaper, or on social media.”

Young guy: “But what about costumes?”

Famous actor: (nodding) “Come on, let’s explore the costume stock. What was it you told me at first, that you wanted to be? I remember, a knight. Wonderful, look here is the department for Sir Lancelot & Co. You are the same size I was your age. I think ... here’s the proof, beautiful chain link armor. No Lancelot without this kind of costume. I hope you breakfasted properly.”

He handed the chain armor to the young guy, who sagged a little.

Young guy: “That’s a heavy weight.”

Famous actor: “Right. It weighs about 33 pounds (15 kg). By the way, they will chafe, here and there too. Dressed like that, you also have to ride a horse and sword fight.

“Come on, here is a sword. En garde.”

He faced the young guy, faked a sidestep and stopped.

“Before you start with these weapons, you have to train, gain some savoir faire, become easy handling them, so that no one gets hurt. You have to practice exact choreography sequences with the stunt team coordinator. You may also have to be able to lift and carry your partner, mainly the female ones.

“If you are part of a cross-dress comedy, you may have to wear female clothing and high heels. In a historical costume drama, you may have to be dressed like a Beau Brummell dandy, or wear a corset as a person in uniform from the Victorian age. In a cloak-and-dagger play, of course cloaks and daggers, but also large hats and cavalier boots. For science fiction, it can be anything imaginable. By the way, can you dance?”

Young guy: “You mean like Charley’s aunt, a Dickens play, Mr. Darcy or The Three Musketeers? Impressive!”

Famous actor: “Yes, after a movie is completed, the PR campaign starts. At lot of interviews, videos, Comic-Cons, things like that. At last, there is the movie premiere, red carpet accompanied by dress regulations very often, including the award presentation ceremonies.

“But I don’t like that dinner jacket and tuxedo stuff. I created my own style, without tie or bow-tie. But you have to pay attention. Women often appear wearing impressive evening gowns, which often have trains. So for this, the experience of your acting in historical stuff can be useful.”

Young guy: “There’s a lot more than just acting.”

Famous actor: “Yes. Acting isn’t just a job. It’s a multi-tasking, passionate challenge. You change from the ground up with every role. Slipping into a role, making a character alive by applying body movements, gestures, speech, behavior, make-up, costumes, and so on in a unique way, is marvelous.

“You can convey great emotions, and sometimes, in very rare cases, you get the chance to develop a character over more than one movie. Acting is something magical, but at the same time, it’s an illusion. You are a part of a great team, where all are giving their best, so that it comes to life. And sometimes you can make lifetime friends.”

Young guy: (*hesitant*) I don’t want to be nosy, but what about a private life? How is it possible to link this kind of public profession to a private life, having a wife and family, you know?

Famous actor: A very good question and every actor deals with it in different ways, good or maybe not. It doesn’t matter if you are very successful, maybe at the zenith of your career, or if you have to endure a time when you seem to be forgotten - a private life at its best gives you support. If you are flying high, it keeps you grounded. If you you are depressed and hurt, it will be your shelter, where you can lick your wounds. You have to be yourself there, not playing a role, so you can’t get lost.

“In my profession, there is a very fine line that separates genius from insanity. That’s why you often read about actors using drugs or committing suicide. That’s the dark side of this profession.

“For me, I can tell you, I’m a lucky one. I found a wonderful woman, she’s been my wife for decades. We have shared the rough and the smooth, have lovely children, a dog, family and friends.

Young guy: “You told me a lot of interesting things worth considering. Would you recommend younger people take up this profession?”

Famous actor: “I wanted to show you that there is no light, without shadow.

“Let me answer your last question with a quote from Rainer Maria Rilke’s Letter to a young Poet:

“Go into yourself. Find out the reason that commands you to write; see whether it has spread its roots into the very depths of your heart; confess to yourself whether you would have to die if you were forbidden to write. This most of all: ask yourself in the most silent hour of your night: must I write? Dig into yourself for a deep answer. And if this answer rings out in assent, if you meet this solemn question with a strong, simple “I must”, then build your life in accordance with this necessity; your whole life, even into its humblest and most indifferent hour, must become a sign and witness to this impulse.”

As he just finished his quotation, he started, feeling a warm tongue licking his face.

“What the hell is going on here?” He looked around.

“Uh, Nigel old boy, old dog, I think I took a nap. Come on, let’s go inside. We’ll have company today. Let’s dress up for the party.”

Walking over the lawn, accompanied by a running, jumping dog, he was suddenly taken aback as he recalled the dream. He could clearly identify the face in his dream. It was himself, in his early years, talking to himself now. With a big smile on his face he entered the house.

Happy birthday!