

A Screen Acting Workshop MEL CHURCHER

Foreword by Jeremy Irons

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Workshop 1

Introduction

I was an actor once, so I know what it's like to go in front of the camera. I know about the actor's nightmares the night before filming, the butterflies in the stomach, the panic that rises when you forget your lines, the dry mouth, the racing heart, and the performance that's over before it began.

A long time ago, I started teaching and directing and trying to calm other people who were going through what I used to experience. I began to see how the responsibility of trying to be 'good actors' was getting in their way. How seeking a feedback that they were really 'feeling' was leading to the opposite effect. How when they said it felt 'too easy', it had suddenly become real and powerful.

I first worked as an acting coach on a film around twenty years ago and since then I've been standing around on a set for months at a time, watching the monitor for twelve hours a day on more than forty major films and television productions. I have been lucky enough to see many different directors at work and to watch how the actors' performances grew and changed with the input of those around them. I have also taught thousands of actors and would-be actors in

workshops and studios both in groups and in one-to-one sessions. Out of this work came my first book, *Acting for Film: Truth 24 Times a Second*, which is a thorough overview of all aspects of film acting. Now, I want to share my practical workshops, designed to prepare you further for your work on camera – work that is not only magic and instant but also long and tedious.

Marlon Brando said, ‘Acting is the least mysterious of all crafts. Whenever we want something from somebody or when we want to hide something or pretend, we’re acting. Most people do it all day long.’

Drama schools are a wonderful way to train, but they also fill you with so much information that it is sometimes hard to let it go in the moment of performance. You have to trust that, once you have done all the homework, you simply need to believe in the situation and ‘be there’. Just do what you need to get what you want – like life. And let the preparation take care of itself. You need to be able to go back to having total belief in your imagination as you did when you were five and knew that the ghosts were after you at the bottom of the garden, or the spaceship would arrive at any moment to whisk you away, or that the area under the hedge was the hut you had built on your tropical island.  **Introduction**

Most of us run around through life worrying about the future or dwelling on the past. Whatever your role is doing, you, the actor, have to be in the here and now in order to inhabit that role. It is a precious accomplishment to stop time. The actor and director Maria Aitken says of comedy, ‘There is only one moment and that moment is now’; D. H. Lawrence talked constantly of ‘the living moment’; Eckhart Tolle wrote a bestselling book called *The Power of Now*, and to quote T.S. Eliot’s poem ‘Burnt Norton’:

“ What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

An actor has to find that power – to stop time, to be present in the present. That is the joy of our work. That is why we train.

If training hardens into one ‘technique’ or ‘method’, it ceases to be fluid and personal. You have to find what works for you and create your own perfect mix. Over time, by being eclectic and going down many different routes, I’ve discovered what I find the most helpful advice for actors working on screen:



You should be as clean and as open as a child. And play the game with the same commitment and energy and total belief as a child. Make no decisions about how to play.



You need to find ways to engage your whole body in that game, to store specific muscle memory, pictures and sense awareness. It is not enough simply to think about the part.



You have to separate the preparation from the doing. You add to your subconscious during preparation, and you are solely in the present, engaging with your role’s conscious thoughts, during playing.



You have, at the deepest level, to be working from yourself. Which brings us back to my first point. Children are not confused. They play their roles as if they themselves *are* the roles. Then they stop and go to tea.

What would I most like you to experience in the moment of doing your work in front of the camera? A freedom, an ease, a simplicity, a spontaneity and a release from knowing and deciding. To be as free in ‘the moment of now’ as you should be in life. It is as if you stand by a closed door, knowing where you belong in the world, knowing who might be waiting inside, responding to a need that makes you open the door and go in. But with no knowledge of what will happen next.

The Natural versus the Unnatural

Playing, imagining, empathising is natural. The child plays through the imagination and belief in the situation that the game has conjured up. We care for others because our imaginations say, ‘What if I were in this situation...?’

Reading squiggles on a page, learning the words they represent and then having to speak them exactly as they are written is not like life. Being asked to move to a particular spot, gesticulate in a certain way and then speak those lines of love in front of a camera and several hundred technicians is not natural.

In life, we never speak or move without an impulse, a need. To take prescribed words and moves and then to have a need so strong and so precise that it can only result in those words and moves is an unnatural act.

No one can teach you the natural but the unnatural can be learnt. You can wake up the child in you to release the natural and acquire the unnatural craft of the expert you must become. You need to mix the folly and bravery of the child with the wisdom of the sage. And it will be a joyful lifelong endeavour!

You are Unique

Nobody does ‘you’ like you. You are unique. You are your best asset. When you go to an audition, you are not in competition with other actors. Only you can offer your particular viewpoint of the world, your embodiment of the role. The other actors are offering their unique visions. Which version the director chooses to buy is a different matter. You may not get the part but it is as if the director chooses Aphrodite over Athene or Dionysus over Apollo, the Nile over the Tigris or the Thames over the Loire, Brando over Bogarde or Garbo over Monroe. Although only one person can be chosen for the role, no one else will play it like you. So no one is competing with the way you will play it.

What you must do is release the brakes you put on yourself. You need to trust your power of belief and thought. You need to believe that you and the role are one. Then your interpretation of the part will come fully alive and the director can make an informed decision. Directors are not psychic and can’t see the talent inside you unless it is revealed. And when you get the part, you want the role to be as alive and extraordinary and unique as you are yourself.



See how alive people’s eyes and faces are in life! As Georgia talks about her quarry dive, the pictures in her head are so strong that she uses gestures all the time to recreate them for her audience and in reaction to what she sees and how she feels about it. Ana’s eyes move upwards as she sees the pictures in her head again. Notice how, as she empathises with the dog’s plight, she actually ‘becomes’ the dog. Will feels his fear again as he sees the bungee jump he has to do. He feels the rope around his ankles and sees the drop beneath him. Marion relives her ordeal moment by moment. Watch her ‘see’ the big ship and then her son and

dog in her canoe. Daniela relives the absurdity of her story even before she tells it and the vivid pictures it evokes make her laugh helplessly – so we laugh too.

What About the Character?

Scripts with an Arc



‘...so you see Max, I’m really you and you’re really me...’

‘I’m a dude playing a dude disguised as another dude – you’re a dude who don’t know what dude he is.’ So says Robert Downey Jr. as Kirk Lazarus in the film *Tropic Thunder* (2008).

I’m going to be controversial here. I hate the word ‘character’ – as in, ‘finding my character’ or ‘it’s a character part’.

I do end up saying it occasionally in the course of a workshop because it's sometimes hard to find an alternative – but I prefer the word 'role'.

So often, when actors think of their 'characters', it is as if they hold up a cardboard cut-out in front of themselves. 'My character...' they say, 'My character would/wouldn't do this or that... he or she is not like that... he is a bastard, she is sweet...' They talk about the 'character' as an idea in the third person and often judgementally – 'She is in love with a romantic ideal', 'He is a bit of a nerd.' Is the role really so self-aware that they could say that of themselves? Or are you simply standing outside looking in at the 'character', instead of being in their shoes? What if it was *you* – you 'as if' you've led the life they've led and are in this situation now?

I've lost count of the times that someone has come to me through a casting director or an agent because, although they are so right for the role, they never get cast. This person sits in my front room, beautiful, sexy and a bit edgy and I think, 'Why are they here when they are already eminently castable?' Then they pick up the script and the interesting human being in front of me vanishes. Suddenly, there's a very ordinary, very needy, two-dimensional creature reading a script too fast, a little high-pitched, leaning forward towards me.

'Why have you changed your posture/voice/attitude?' I ask.

'Because the character would be younger/needier/tired/sad and so on...'

But you, yourself, are so much more interesting than that, would be my comment.

So I film them talking about themselves and their recent encounters and they are always exciting to watch. Their eyes

sparkle. They light up when they talk about something they are passionate about, or someone they love. And you can see them ‘seeing’ them. There is humour in their eyes, warmth, a little cynicism. They laugh when they tell you the sad things. Their voices are alive and connected.

Then I ask them to go into a monologue they know. Instantly, as I watch the monitor, the face drops, the eyes go dead, the humour drains away and the voice is disconnected.

We play back the recording. They are always amazed. ‘Which is more interesting?’ I ask. But we both know the answer. 🎬.1.3

You can see the life draining out of people when they begin the unnatural task of speaking text and how it comes back vividly when they allow *themselves* back into the work. 🎬.1.4

Thinking of the ‘character’ can block you.

Staying Alive

The trouble is, as actors, we want to be good. We are responsible people and we try really hard. We want to know we are being honest. We concentrate on whether we ‘feel’ real rather than on what we want or what we are trying to do.

But in life, when we have emotional feelings, we generally ignore them in order to pursue what we want. We don’t sit around trying to ‘feel’. The feeling happens anyway but it is a consequence of, or a side issue to, the business of pursuing our actions. We shouldn’t be striving for some reassurance that we are connecting up with our feelings because that sends the energy back into ourselves instead of out into the world.

When we interact with others and the world around us, our energy goes *outwards* to deal with the situation. When we

meet an obstacle, we try to get what we want in a different way. For example, if you asked your lover, ‘Do you love me still?’ your energy would not be directed at how you feel. That would happen of its own accord. What you would be doing would be watching and listening for every lie, every sign of unfaithfulness or for the comforting reassurance of love. If your lover evaded the question, that would be an obstacle that prevented you getting your need, so you would try to get this reassurance by taking a different action. You might try hugging them, hitting out, running away hoping they will chase you, or simply asking the question again. But you would take action in the immediacy of that specific moment. You wouldn’t stop to check you were ‘feeling something’. Yet that is what many actors do all the time, even if they aren’t fully aware of it.

When actors are really connected to the moment, they say, ‘It feels too easy, I don’t feel anything is happening.’ But when they see the work back, they find to their amazement that so much more is actually happening than when they were ‘trying hard’. When I run workshops for directors I always warn them that when they get a great spontaneous take, the actor will come to them afterwards and ask them to go again because they ‘didn’t feel anything’!



Get a friend to film you talking about a real experience about which you have clear memories and pictures of what happened. Talk to your friend holding the camera, don’t look straight into the lens. Your friend can interject comments and questions as they wish.



Watch your eyes light up with the memories and when you mention people you love, the way you

smile before the words come out. Look how your eyes flick upwards to see the pictures in your head, how geographical you are, how physical you are, your tendency to laugh at the worst part of the story. See how alive you are. See how well you listen!



Go back in front of the camera and start recounting your real experience again. Now go seamlessly into delivering a monologue you know. Watch for your eyes going dead, how the humour at the side of your eyes can disappear. Is your voice as resonant or has it become thinner in tone, lower in volume? Are you now fixed in a gaze at your friend or are your eyes still seeing those pictures in your head and the world around you? Have you started to crane forward, is your face moving more, are your eyes screwing up?



Keep going back and forth between the learnt lines and the real story until you can see the life come back. Maybe it was a funny story and the monologue was sad – try it with the same energy. Is that possible? Could it be more interesting? In the role, could you still have a sense of irony, an awareness of the absurdity of it all? Do you prefer to watch it that way? If your real story was sad, did the way you told it surprise you? Would you have told it like that if you had seen it written down for the first time on the page?



Be brave; don't go into the monologue with fixed ideas. Try to keep *your* life and view of the world. Have the same energy on the learnt lines as when you were recounting real events.

Keep seeing how alive people are as themselves. 🎬 1.1, 1.2