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### **Nurture Your Imagination**

Remember when you were young and play included imaginary games of Cops and Robbers, Hospital, Spaceship or whatever? Whether with friends or by ourselves these games would seem more real than regular life. For many of us, our childhood was the peak of our imagination. We were able to slip from reality to fantasy, and then back again effortlessly with total commitment and enjoyment.

The most important part of your instrument as an actor is your imagination. It's your imagination that helps you "buy in", to identify with what is, in fact, a fantasy. As a very young child, you would not know the distinction between reality and fantasy at all. They were equally potent, equally authentic experientially. As you grew slightly older and you were playing make believe, if an adult sincerely asked "do you really believe you are a doctor or a time pilot?" you would pop out of your game, consider them crazy and say "of course not" with childhood disdain. You would then go right back into the game with complete and effortless commitment.

As you mature into adulthood, you go through a painful but necessary stage of development. You learn that not only are reality and fantasy distinct, but reality is more important. However, in order to act we must be able to still access our fantasy life. We need to find a path back our child-like ability to identify fantasy as being just as real as reality. To find this path, we must actively nurture our imaginations. It is a source of great creative joy when you can learn how to do it.

#### ***"Believe" - sets the bar too high.***

So why do many actors often have a hard time "buying in" imaginatively. I think one of the primary obstacles is that you are told (by other actors, directors and acting teachers) that in order to act you must also fully "believe". Even though the point of acting is to make the audience believe, you feel you are not a good actor unless you also can totally believe in the fantasy. It is a relief once actors realize that they do not have to believe in order for the audience to believe. The problem with setting up "belief" as the Holy Grail of acting is that, as an adult, you know you are working on a fantasy created by someone else. To persuade yourself to "believe" it is real is actually an impossible task, and a waste of energy. If you truly "believed," why would you stop when some stranger yelled "cut?" How would you hit your marks or ignore the audience and camera? With practice you can allow your imagination to so involve you in the fantasy that it doesn't matter anymore whether it is real or not. If you set up "believing" as the standard, you simply make the load too heavy for your imagination to bear. It often refuses to show up at all. So it's best not to use the word believe; instead, use words like "play, identify, buy in." Let yourself play. Let your imagination go, and it will take you on wonderful rides. Everyone has an imagination, but it is a delicate instrument. It doesn't respond to pressure and obligations. So if the imagination is so important to our art, yet so delicate and difficult for adults to release themselves into effortlessly, how do we nurture it?

#### ***"Don't trash your imagination."***

When I am teaching, it always amazes me how easy it is for actors to- what I call- "piss on their imaginations." An actor is doing a scene or an improvisation, after it ends I ask them to give feedback. The first thing that comes out of their mouth was that "it stank" or "I didn't get there". It is so easy for actors to be deeply self-critical. When they say those types of things, they are being critical of their own

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### **Nurture Your Imagination (continued)**

imaginations. It is the adult conscious voice coming in. The voice inside you that knows what is real and what is not. It is the voice that hates to play. How can the imagination stand up to such withering criticism?

It simply can't. You have just spent a given number of minutes working on a scene, engaged in imagined activity. Then you negate everything you have just done. Instead you should teach yourself first to go with what worked. What did your imagination help you achieve and discover in those minutes? Be specific in identifying what worked and then identifying where you fell short. Your imagination can respond to specific criticism and self-analysis. It can never respond to generalities, so learn to never speak in them. This will help the creative, imaginative side of you to gain confidence in itself.

#### **"Yes, *BE* in your head"**

Another way your imagination can help us recreate authentic behavior is when you first get the script. The first time you read the scene your imagination already has begun to work, whether you are consciously aware of it or not. Learn to trust that it is happening. Your imagination and your intellect are separate but they are linked parts of yourself. Encourage your imaginative self to engage in the reading of the script. Doing this does not negate your intellect either. Both are important to the actor. I hate it when acting teachers use the term "don't be in your head". Actors almost always translate it as an instruction not to use your brain, because they believe it will stifle their emotions. Apart from the fact that it isn't true (a deep understanding requires the use of the brain to release emotions), buying into the misreading of the term also stifles the relationship between the intellect and the imagination. The two are allies not enemies. You need to use your brain when you act. What people actually mean by "don't be in your head" is don't be self-conscious. I advise banishing the term from your vocabulary.

#### **"Start daydreaming!"**

When you analyze the script you are looking for the facts of the character's existence as developed by the writer(s). Those facts (marital status, place of birth, etc.) create the parameters within which your imagination functions. Once the analysis is complete, you can release your imagination to continue the work and fill in the experiences. There are many specific exercises I have developed too detailed to explain here, but the general principle is easy to pass on. Do you remember being in school and looking out the window and daydreaming? That activity so frowned upon is utterly useful for the actor. Start daydreaming again, except do it as the character. That is the essence of what I call "character memory". For example you can imagine where you (as your character) lived, your room as a child, etc. Using specific experiences articulated in the script you can fill in the sensorial details. Begin to imaginatively own the life force of the character you are playing. As you develop an imaginative history of the character, something amazing will happen. You will begin to feel like them.

It is your job as an actor to recognize the vital importance of the imagination to the practice of your art and to profoundly nurture, respect and support it.