

ENG 280: Second Place

Writing as an Actor is a Waste of Time, or is It?

By Irina Widmer

“Dear Hello Kitty diary, acting is hard!” This is a statement that goes around as an inside joke in the theatre and dance department. Indeed, acting can be quite difficult at times. As actors, we can use all the help we can get when it comes to bettering our art. One thing that can help with this is writing as an actor. Writing is not something you think of when you think about acting, and to be quite frank, it’s not something you necessarily need. Instead writing can be a useful tool. But it’s up to the actor to decide if he wants to use this tool or not. Of course, there are moments when an actor needs to write, but these moments are rare in comparison to other fields. To look deeper into this matter I interviewed James Tweedale, a graduate student in acting at WIU, to get direct information from someone that has already worked in the professional world. He stated, “Technically, you can get away with not writing.” He said that each actor sees writing differently. It doesn’t have the same importance for everyone, and not everyone takes it seriously. So, the writing an actor does differs a lot from person to person. Even so it can be quite beneficial if you want to succeed as an actor. Why is that so? What kind of writing do you do as an actor?

Like in any other field, communication is key for actors. In the theatre world this communication is mostly done in person, but writing emails is just as important. According to Tweedale, the tasks that are done over email include negotiating on contracts, asking for a spot for an audition, coordinating rehearsals or simply getting yourself known out there. While negotiating contracts, there is a lot of back and forth between the actor and the director or executive director before coming to an agreement. Coordination for rehearsals on the other side is taken care of by the stage manager that asks the actors for their schedule. To get their name out there, the actor can send out cold emails. By definition, a cold email is an “initial email that is sent to a receiver in order to gain a benefit in terms of favor, sales,

opportunity or any other dual-sided gain” (Poriya). In such an email the actor contacts a production or a filmmaker/director to ask politely if he could be considered for a certain role or any other projects that are going to show up in the near future. Since there are thousands of submissions on standard casting sites, the actor tries to stand out in the crowd, by making an extra effort. Jon Dabach, an independent filmmaker that has received cold emails himself, says you should particularly take advantage of cold emailing “if you’re approaching an independent production or you have a particularly special connections to the role or project or even have credits that are impressive.” Cold emails are supposed to be very personal, often you include a personal life story in them, mention personal connections you have to other actors on the project or mention other work you have done. As it is usually common to submit for an audition through the standard casting site, you should be able to elaborate why you’re contacting the director or production directly. You should always remember that “you have to point out why you’re writing the email and going the extra mile to try to get your foot in the door” (Dabach). Otherwise you will waste their time, and they won’t pay attention to an email that wastes their time when they’re surrounded by thousands of others just like it. The email should be started with a small apology, so that you make it clear that you know that this isn’t the common route to take. Cold emails should always be honest and only be written towards a project you have a lot of passion for.

The second instance you need writing for as an actor is writing for the public. It’s not a very common thing to do as an actor, but occasionally needed. For example, in the instance of writing things for your personal website or your social media, to update follow actors or possible directors and production teams on the work you are doing at the time. Bios for programs also fall into this category. For an actor, a personal website is essential for success. The website *Theatre Nerds* states that. “As a producer, the impact of casting those with a personal brand and influence is getting more and more common” (Bailey). As an actor you

are your own brand, and you have to work to create that brand. You have to sell yourself in the best way possible. Your website should include all projects you were involved in and state why you are the perfect actor to hire. It basically includes everything about you as an actor, from headshots to the resume, to press news and photos. It's advisable to keep it simple. So that producer and casting directors can quickly get an easy overview about your acting abilities (Bailey). James also mentioned writing bios. If you have seen a theatre show before, you will know that programs are handed out at the entrance to the theatre. Often these programs include bios for every actor. The bio is kept very short with just a few sentences to give the basic information about an actor. In the article, "How to Write your Actor's Bio" it's written that "an actor's bio is simply a summary of your career." The actor writes these few lines and sends them to the stage manager or an administration member in the office. In other instances, bios are also written for an agent's website, your own website or a press release. In these cases, they can become longer than just a few sentences.

In the acting world, peer reading is not as present as in other fields; an actor is responsible for himself. You're not working under a company with the same old colleagues every day of your life. Depending on what project you are working on, you will work with a lot of different people. However, there are templates on the internet, and you can always ask an actor friend to help you out with your writing. Sometimes a theatre or agency might actually "specify a format and length" of your bio ("Actor Bio: How to Write a Great Bio"). This kind of advice is given in a rather informal way compared to formal peer readings. You should always be ready and have your bio at hand. You never know when you will need it, because you are normally informed in short notice to send one out. According to the website *daily actor*, it should take you about 2 to 3 hours to write a bio. It's very important to give yourself enough time to be professional. Bios are usually held in a rather formal tone and written in third person, according to Tweedale. They are supposed to be "factual, short and

straight to the point” (“How to Write your Actor’s Bio”). Things you should include are credits, awards, relevant training, most recent work, skills, hobbies and personal achievements.

An actor needs to be able to become fully the character he is portraying. Writing a character analysis can help immensely with that. Character analysis can either be written informally or in a more formal tone. Sometimes a director can ask you to turn in a character analysis, but usually they just help to prepare yourself for the role (Tweedale). Almost every actor writes a character analysis in one way or another. Some spend more time on it and others less, but it’s fairly common among actors. If you really take it seriously, writing a character analysis will take up the most time out of all writing tasks. A character analysis is a deep investigation into your character’s past, present and future. As part of a character analysis, the actor needs to answer questions about his character. In an analysis you follow a sort of template that is based on Stanislavski’s acting technique. The analysis includes, amongst other things, the character’s given circumstances, how the character describes himself and how he is described by other characters and the author, the character’s childhood, conditions that the character is in, objectives, obstacles, strategies, tactics and how a possible future could look for the character (Kamminga-Peck). Tweedale reminded me that any analysis of a character consists of 3 steps: it starts with investigation, followed by inference and completed by imagination. This simply means that the actor is supposed to find his answers first with the help of the script. The things that are said directly by the characters or author point you to answers. In a second step you should go back to look for things that are implied by the text. If you can’t answer a question about the character in this way, you have to make up the answer as a last step. The goal by doing this is to “become a fully realized three-dimensional character, with a rich backstory.” The audience is supposed to believe that the character on stage is real and not just a caricature (Cannon and Gardner). The better you

understand your character and why he is acting in a certain way, the more honest your performance will be. A character analysis is a technique that is used by a professional actor to go beyond relying on simple intuition and so that the actor can repeatedly portray a character in the most accurate way possible (Cannon and Gardner).

Finally, there is the writing you do for yourself as an actor. These things are not meant to be published and usually have an informal tone. All the writings in this category are done on a voluntary basis. Therefore, some actors do none of these writings, and others put a lot more effort into it. For the most part it will pay off though as it helps you to become a better actor and shows that you are willing to put in the work as an actor. This will impress the directors and film makers that are working with you and sets you as a good example. It will raise your reputation in the acting world.

Tweedale mentioned the following writings that should be considered as an actor: notes during rehearsals, writing down lines for memorization purpose and journals. Notes during rehearsal are a very typical strategy to remember things that were discussed during rehearsals. They include instructions that the director gives to you but also notes about objectives, obstacles, strategies or tactics for your character that you think of during rehearsal. About half of people nowadays write these notes down on an iPad or phone while the other half prefers writing these notes down on paper. Usually, these notes are written in shorthand. This means that you leave out the words that aren't important and emphasize the words that are. For example, a shorthand writing could be *Quicker, No chicken*. They only need to be understood by yourself, and by being fast with your notes, you can move along more quickly during rehearsal (Tweedale).

One of the hardest tasks as an actor might be memorizing your lines. It takes a lot of dedication and time to do that, and sometimes you don't get that time because things need to

move fast. One thing that can help with memorizing lines is to write your lines down on paper. While you are writing down your lines by hand, you're automatically thinking about them. In the process you start to memorize them. Beware, though, to "make sure you focus on writing your lines out and your lines only. It will let you focus on you without having the distraction of other actors' lines" ("6 Simple Tips").

Journals can be yet another great tool as an actor. There are two different types of journaling: you can either journal about your progress as an actor and what you achieved on a personal level, or you can write down ideas that come up about your character. It can be either of the two or both combined. It's all the actor's personal choice. Some actors like to do this, others are not comfortable with it. However, Tweedale says that it can help you to brainstorm and to inspire you to come up with fresh ideas and other ways to express them. You can also set goals and review yourself. It's simply a great way to reflect. By writing these thoughts down, you can always go back to them and access them at a later point. You write down your stream-of-consciousness. Tweedale puts it like this: "As an actor I think of myself as a journalist. By journaling, I have discovered a lot of things about myself." Being an actor, we get to play characters that help us reflect on our own choices that we have made and are going to make. Sometimes we might even discover that we aren't that different from the character we are portraying, and we realize that we deeply relate to that character's life (Kamminga-Peck). In that instance, a journal can help to order your thoughts and to cope with past life situations.

Acting in itself is all about the collaboration of actors on the stage. It's about being in the moment, about paying attention and giving the right response to the actions and words of the other actors. Therefore, verbal communication and nonverbal communication through gestures are such an important of the acting world. Acting is very much about being alive. Writing doesn't seem to have any place in this kind of setting; it doesn't seem alive enough.

Even so, the more you look into it, the more you find moments in which writing is essential. It's present in the small moments, like when you write down your lines or notes during rehearsal. It's also present during the big moments, like when the actor gives himself time to analyze his character and discovers profound details about that character. Writing these thoughts down is immensely helpful. Of course, writing is not a requirement for us like it is in other fields, but it can become just as important for the development of each actor. I asked Tweedale how important writing is to an actor on a scale from 1 to 10. He said, "I would say it's a three out of ten. It's not essential, but it can help." He also explained to me that you only write about one to three hours a day as an actor. Indeed, we write much less than other fields. However, as the interview went on, I discovered that at least for me, writing as an actor is not a waste of time, and it has the potential to become immensely helpful for me. However, as I said in the beginning, the writing differs a lot from each person. Each actor has to make his own decision on this. Writing requires time. And it's each actor's responsibility to choose how he wants to spend his time.

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