

## Majoring in Show Business, with a Minor in Theatre

### Lynne Topping Farrell

I've been on the road for three days with my audio cassette of Aunt Dan's monologues droning on and on. I buy my gas, cigarettes, and service station snack food on one of five credit cards that must be maxed out by now, but miraculously keep accepting new charges. I strategize my arrival: I'll stop at the rest area between Indy and Terre Haute, clean up, do my hair and make up, change into better clothes, put on a happy face and present myself at the theatre office. According to Equity rules and regs they were supposed to send me my travel money before I left Vermont, but they didn't and I couldn't bring myself to confess my dire straits to my alma mater. I have two dollars and thirty-five cents in my purse, but surely they'll hand me my \$225 as soon as I check in. Maybe even in cash. Equity makes these rules for a reason; they must know that.

I had been poor for almost seven years by then, ever since walking out on Hollywood for the third and last time in search of a life with rules I thought I could live by. Actually, I was poor before I left—who am I kidding? As long as there was some money, I hung on, hoping for the best, hoping to be saved by a more lasting success just around the corner.

The campus! Nostalgia, sickeningly sweet, circles my heart. Academic angst, like last winter's dead leaves, lies harmless in the corners of my mind. Visions of young faces, even my own, flash before my mind's eye too close, too clear, too tangible. My Tempo with a hundred and thirty thousand miles on it takes all the right turns as if it knew where it was going.

I spent my early years in show business dumbfounded over how different it

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was from school. I felt betrayed by my professors for not preparing me for anything remotely related to what confronted me. With both a bachelor's and a master's degree in theatre, I was utterly clueless. I knew nothing about show business or earning a living. I'd never had a head shot or been in front of a camera. All I knew for certain was that I had to live in New York or Los Angeles, but I didn't know what came next and I didn't know who to ask.

Almost thirty years later, with the benefit of hindsight and good friends, I sat down to take a long and honest look at my journey from star student to working actor. Conversations with ten colleagues, memories from a long-past summer of rotating rep, and citations from various other sources interweave with the primary narrative to expose themes of persistent unrest among professional actors. The result is four distinct narrative threads converging on such crucial concerns as business sense, beauty, substance abuse, relationships, labor unions, and higher education. Observations, analysis and advice surfaced with equal parts pragmatism and idealism, suggesting a potentially discreet passageway through the minefield of the entertainment industry.

There it is. They call it the New Theatre and it's beautiful. Unpretentious and practical, a real theatre instead of an improvised space like so many of those off Broadway rooms we tried to make work. I park and try the gently curving sidewalk that leads to the front doors. Inside it's quiet, serene, deserted, and yes, holy. I feel like I should feel when I'm in church: humble, grateful, awed. My God, I love this business.

*"I love being a part of this band of merry visitors. This is what we do—we visit these characters in their lives and we try them on like coats and dance in them for a while. We are the players—the shamans—but only visiting until it's on to the next life."*

*"This is the life I have always wanted, and for this I am grateful."*

*"I can't pay my bills, I'm neglecting my children, my parents and my friends. I'll be unemployed again in six weeks, and I wouldn't trade this job for anything in the world. When you get it right, there's just nothing like it."*

*"It was meant to be . . . to get paid for doing what I love to do."*

*“As soon as I audition for something, anything, it becomes the most important thing in my life until I hear whether I got the job or not.”<sup>1</sup>*

I cross the lobby to the house doors. They’re unlocked and I step inside. The empty theatre waits. Such luxury. I note the lighting instruments, so numerous they crowd the grid. Black drapes, clean and new, camouflage the bleachers arranged for three quarter thrust. How long has it been since I actually rehearsed in the performance space?

I remember hauling a suitcase full of props across town in the heat of summer to a studio I’d rented for twenty-two dollars an hour to rehearse a play that was going up as a showcase. With one eye on the clock and the other on the door, my friends and I would get down to business and try to make the most of our precious time. We were spending money we didn’t have, to put up a show for “donations please” in the hope that someone would come see it. We were actors looking for an audience, putting all our faith in our own magic.

I say a silent prayer before withdrawing again to the lobby. A light from an office down the hall beckons me and I approach the half open door. Knocking lightly, I present myself to a woman seated at a desk. How strange that she doesn’t seem at all welcoming. She’s probably just having a bad day. Don’t take it personally, I tell myself.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“I’m Lynne Topping.”

“I know.”

O.K., so maybe it is personal. She hands me my keys and an address. I assure her that I can find it, don’t worry, after all this is my hometown. And then I hesitate before saying:

“Is there anything else I need? Phone numbers, a schedule?”

My travel money, I think but don’t say. After all, I’m their star for the summer. I’m the hometown girl who made good. I’m a success story. I feel like an imposter. If I was really a star, I wouldn’t need that travel money. Would I?

“Nope. That’s it. Gary just left, so I’ll give him a chance to get home and then I’ll call and let him know you’re in. Or you can call him from your apartment.”

“O.K. Great. Yeah. I’ll give him a call after I get settled in. Thank you. It’s really great to be here.” At least I have plenty of cigarettes. I’ll be all right until tomorrow.

When did success get to be all about money? When acting became a profession and not just my college major, it became about money. Screen Actors’ Guild (SAG) states unequivocally that most card carrying actors don’t make more than \$7500 a year from SAG jobs.<sup>2</sup> And ninety per cent of SAG members need some other source of income in order to pay for food and shelter—not to pay for a decent wardrobe, or new head shots, and forget about 401k and IRAs, I’m talking about just enough money for food and shelter—subsistence level living. Robert Cohen writes, “The number of self-supporting career actors—those who can be said to make their living as actors for at least ten years in a row—is not more than 2,000 or 3,000 people! This is hardly a profession; it might be better described as a club.”<sup>3</sup>

I was lucky. I was successful. I made a substantial living exclusively from acting jobs for eight years—not good enough to make it into the club, but certainly better than most.

Saved by Gary and Diana’s unfailing hospitality! They’ve invited the whole company for dinner at their house. I didn’t know that David and Jerry would be here. It’s a reunion of old acting friends from that long-ago academic life. We erupt into laughter looking into each other’s faces searching for and finding evidence of our own youth. We’ve changed, but not that much. The young actress I’ll be working with introduces herself to me and I love her instantly. We’re going to be good. An incredible feeling of well-being floods my heart. For the next three months I’m an actress again with a company of old and new friends. It just doesn’t get any better than this. I feel as if I’ve fallen in love, as if nothing stands between me and nirvana. For the next three months I have roles to perform, a contract, the security of old friends, a place to live, health insurance, and a paycheck. It’s a little like winning the lottery, a little like being back in school.

The abuses of show business wreak havoc on the lives of all but a very few actors:

*“deafening rejection”*

*“they said I’m not pretty any more.”*

*“looks like a fat boring Jewish girl”*

*“over the hill at 27”*

*"They just don't like you." "I watched this business destroy my husband."*

*"they can smell your desperation"*

*"they bait you, bribe you, hype you and lose you—if they notice you at all"*

*"stabbed in the back" "broke my heart" "robbed me blind"*

*"I'd never been treated like shit before—*

*I kept thinking there was some mistake."*

Olympia Dukakis remembers, "The first time I was on stage I was the Spirit of Young Greece . . . I had two doves, and they were supposed to fly out into the audience and they crapped all over me. I should have known then what show business was like."<sup>4</sup>

My summer of rotating rep in my hometown was typical of the bipolar lifestyle of professional acting. The alternating mania and despair I experienced all summer long—that summer of being an actress again after years of trying to create a saner life—was a microcosm of what my whole career was like. There have been other similar experiences in the years since then, when between temporary employment and temporary relationships an acting job would fall into my lap as if by fate and for a few months I would be an actor again.

"Please find a seat, if you haven't already. Our guest this afternoon is an alumnus of our theatre department—one we're real proud of. She was a part of our very first summer season, some fourteen years ago, when she originated the role of Audrey in Don Nigro's *The Curate Shakespeare As You Like It*. She completed her master's degree here back in 1977, the same year she won the Irene Ryan Award at the American College Theatre Festival. She went straight from the Kennedy Center in Washington to Hollywood with a Universal Studios contract under her arm. She subsequently starred in the daytime drama, *The Young and the Restless* for many years, and also performed a dozen or so guest starring roles on prime time shows, made-for-TV movies, and other daytime dramas in New York and Hollywood. This summer we're fortunate to have her as Aunt Dan in Aunt Dan and Lemon, Titania in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Nurse Kelly in *Harvey*. Please welcome Lynne Topping."

I take my seat and throw out an ambiguous but sincere

“Thank you!” A trendy looking young woman raises her hand and I invite the first question.

“I don’t know how to say this exactly, but, well, if you’re supposed to be so good, like, what are you doing here?”

I try not to hold it against people who automatically assume that if I was any good I’d be anyplace else but wherever I happen to be. It’s a common misconception about the business of acting that all talented actors are working actors and ply their trade in New York and Los Angeles, perhaps Chicago, while those other schmucks get stuck somewhere like Terre Haute, Indiana, in the summer.

“Well, I didn’t turn down a movie deal so I could be here, if that’s what you mean. But for an actor to have an Equity contract to do some great plays with a group of talented people, in a fabulous space—this is what we live for. There’s nothing I would rather be doing right now.”

I knew she wasn’t buying it. I knew she thought that if I was “so good” as she put it, I’d be out there in Hollywood starring in a major motion picture or at the very least cranking out some sitcom episodes or selling toothpaste, something truly validating like that. After all, how good could I really be if she’d never heard of me?

Was I an imposter? A pretender? A charlatan? I guess that depends on who you’re comparing me to. When I look over my resume, I’m not impressed, but some people are. I don’t need to denigrate the few professional credits I have, especially when there’s so many others willing to do it for me, but I also have no problem saying that my measly little resume doesn’t reflect my talent, my skill, or my passion. It reflects my past.

Now that I’m old enough to think about my acting career in decidedly past tense terms, I both mourn and feel a sense of relief that my professional career as an actor is behind me. At fifty-five, and with no truly noteworthy credits to my name, I don’t even dream of any other outcome. With that realization I find myself trying to make peace with having fallen so short of the life I once hoped for. I’ve stopped peering ahead to the next job and instead turned my gaze back on the past in the hope of seeing clearly and honestly what transpired during those years when I was a player in the game.

What went right? What went wrong? How could my life as an actor have been different? Knowing what I know now, what exactly would I do differently? And what is success anyway? Squaring off with those old demons of regret, those merciless, finger pointing, ridiculing, bloodthirsty demons ready to devour whatever

remained of my crippled little ego, was one of the most painful emotional journeys I've ever embarked upon. So I called on my friends to help me make peace with my professional shortcomings and redeem those years by exposing some of the foibles commonly committed by recent graduates of universities and conservatories with a major in theatre and the courage to attempt a professional career. As long as the academy neglects to earnestly investigate ways to subvert the myriad personal and professional hazards awaiting inexperienced actors, whether they're heading to New York or Los Angeles, the stage, screen, or television, we will only succeed in turning out tomorrow's unemployed actors by the droves. As a hopeful future professor, I see myself confronting some thorny issues surrounding actor training, not the least of which concerns how and when to broach the subject of show business, that perilous industry pervading the life of any performing artist.

I enlisted ten friends with varying degrees of professional acting experience, some with ongoing careers, others like myself, who no longer claim Acting on their 1040s as their vocation, to reflect on their careers by answering some open-ended questions. All my questions were posed and answered via e-mail so that respondents would have time to consider their answers in privacy and hopefully without the influence of that defensive knee jerk reaction ingrained into actors over the years to show no weakness, always make it sound a little better than it actually is, never let them see you sweat. If there was weakness, I wanted to hear about it. And I did. As soon as the responses started coming in, I discovered that I'm not the only one to see wasted opportunities with a growing clarity and deepening sense of remorse. The process of excavating past mistakes—remembering and admitting those telling moments when we chose door number three and got eaten by the tiger—created a lot of anxiety for several. One confessed to waking up in a cold sweat thinking about “what might have been, if only I had . . .” We can't go back, but maybe we can help someone else along the way. As I pass further and further into the realm of the un-castable, also known as “former leading lady now over fifty and not a household name,” my need to share this collective wisdom has grown. I did one thing right all those years ago—I made lasting friendships and those friends redeem me now.

I love working with David. I respect his talent and trust him implicitly on stage. The hard part about working with David is keeping your composure and not cracking up. A brilliant comedic actor, David just got his Equity card—earned the hard way, one point at a time with lots of paperwork. As the only two Equity actors in the company, David and I decide that I will be in charge of sending the necessary reports to Equity regarding our host's compliance with Equity rules. We both understand that this is nothing more than a formality since we wouldn't dare complain

about any violations. As David put it succinctly, “We’re just so fucking happy to have a fucking job, do they really think we’re going to complain about not having a private dressing room?”

However, before that summer was over, I felt differently. I wouldn’t grumble for fear of being labeled a diva, but a little privacy pre-show would have gone a long way towards my being able to do my best work. After all, as the card-carrying, spot-lighted, “really good” actress that everyone expected me to be, the fact was that my performances were compromised night after night by lack of privacy that prevented me from preparing the way I really needed to. I felt like I had to be friendly and accessible so I wouldn’t appear to be self-important, conceited, better than thou. I was expected to perform like a professional while being treated like a student, or worse, like an amateur. And, of course, I wasn’t supposed to actually need the money.

### *Money and Success*

“David, did you get your travel money?” I whisper the first day of rehearsal.

“I flew. They sent me a plane ticket. You didn’t get your travel money?”

“Not yet.”

“Oh, shit. Ask for it! Come on, Lynne! They owe you for the trip. You have to ask for it.”

So I do, as casually as I can manage, and soon I have a check for \$225, which I promptly cash. With a full tank of gas and a stocked refrigerator, the first level of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs fulfilled, I’m ready to move on to Love and Self-actualization.

Money has been the nemesis of almost all my friends at one time or another. After all, we were theatre majors. Money management was for future businessmen and women of America. We were Artists. We were career minded, not money conscious, a distinction that resulted in money issues falling into two familiar categories: feast and famine. When the money was coming in, we didn’t know how to budget or invest, and when the money wasn’t coming in, we didn’t know how to get it.

It’s hard to talk about money without talking about success. While there’s a difference between being “critically acclaimed” and a “box office success,” one can’t be the former without at least getting cast in the first place, and a working actor is one in a thousand. I believe that success, as the term is commonly used, is



about money. When I hear a friend say “he’s very successful,” she doesn’t mean, “I saw him in a show last week and he turned in a brilliant performance.” She means he’s making a lot of money.

We needed money like everyone else, but not just to pay the rent. We needed money to finance our careers. When you’re playing for big stakes, the nickels and dimes just don’t seem to count for much. What mattered was ascending to the fabled next rung on the ladder of success and that cost money: money for clothes, classes, photographers, publicists, managers, dentists, dermatologists, health spas, and anything else that would help to project that aura of success, so important in an industry where so much rides on so little, where even the big shots are terrified of a hint of waning success for fear it might be contagious. This was no time to be saving for a rainy day. This was the time to lay down tracks that led to perpetual sunshine, no matter what the cost. This was the time to build on that little success, to go from daytime to primetime, from TV to film, or from Off Broadway to Broadway. Those of us who were lucky enough to have secured an on-going high paying job (a television series or even a long-running play, which pays much less than TV, but is nevertheless one of the few ways for an actor to garner a steady paycheck) invariably spent that money trying to create more success. We were gamblers and putting all our resources on the one-thousand-to-one-odds dark horse, our very own self. Some of us were also dressing the wounds of past failures, patching up a battered ego, trying to buy love and respect, rekindling the fires of confidence that had been dampened by too many months without pocket money. We were walking a fine line between the trappings of success and the path to success.

*“Forget the career—I could have set myself up for life with the money I made all those years ago instead of wasting it trying to turn myself into a star.”*

*“I didn’t save any money. I thought that it would continue forever.”*

*“I never wanted to think about money so I let everyone else tell me how to spend it. Even when it didn’t make sense to me, I did what others told me to do. And I lost a lot of money that way. It’s my own fault and I have to live with that.”*

*“I went from a six figure annual income to collecting food stamps in less than three years. Try to make peace with that.”*

*“I left a starring role on a soap opera, the best paying regular job I’ve ever had, because I was newly in love and the producers*

*were writing my future husband out of the show. I didn't want him to feel bad."*

*"... and there I was hosing down docks for five dollars an hour when somebody recognized me from the series."*

For anyone trying to launch a career without the advantage of wealthy, supportive parents or instantaneous success, the so called "day job" or "real job" must be secured. Unfortunately, the conflicts generated by negotiating a "real job" while pursuing a career can make decent employment hardly worth the trouble. There is the understandable conviction among actors that one can't afford to be distracted by a job when one might get called in for an audition literally any minute. This conviction prevents actors from committing to meaningful employment and keeps them at the mercy of jobs like warehouse or office temping, waiting tables, parking cars, or weekend and evening shifts at retail stores.

Actors with a flair for teaching, college degree, high GPA, and references might be able to take advantage of the growing market for tutoring. Potentially lucrative and gratifying, tutoring also requires an entrepreneurial spirit and a degree of involvement that could easily interfere with one's primary objective: to be an actor. Still, a job that bolsters self esteem instead of tearing it down could be worth the effort.

One way or another, unless an aspiring actor has other forms of income, substantial ones at that, this dilemma must be addressed. Happily, actors come with abilities that defy typecasting and their solutions to the money problem will be as diverse as those talents and aptitudes—as long as they recognize that this is a real problem that needs to be solved.

*"Worrying about money is just as bad as doing drugs. It takes you off focus and away from your path. There is no perfect world but when you come close to the edge of financial trauma, instincts pop up and make something happen. But it may not be acting."*

*"I was on an office temp job and on my last day the manager came to my desk and said she'd like to talk to me about a full time permanent position opening up. I felt like she was threatening me! A real job would mean the end of my career. I felt like running. And did, of course."*

*"I called in sick at my lucrative day job so that I could go to an audition. It was really a difficult thing for me to do—call in sick and lose a day's pay and risk the job itself so I could be one*

*of eighty guys at a cattle call. I agonized over it for three days, but finally said to myself, "Why did you come to NY? Was it to work in a photo lab or to be an actor?" I was cast and later did my first Off Broadway role for the same company. If I'd been rational and gone to my photo lab job that day, I might not have had any sort of career at all."*

The arts, whether it's theatre, music, painting, photography, writing, or any other form of artistry, is the only occupation where to be considered a success (by one's peers, at least) only requires that you actually earn your living exclusively within your field. No one asks an accountant, "Is that all you do or do you supplement accounting work with house painting or waiting tables?" Success for an artist means being paid a living wage for practicing your art.

*"Success for an actor is when they can continually earn a living—that they can live on!—doing what they love to do. Big success is tied into big bucks, big PR, when you are a known entity, but that doesn't always come, or much less stay. But if you've had a tad of the above, you fall into the success category."*

*"Financial success in acting is being able to pay your rent, have it be your job for a few years. Artistic success is personal, but for me it means getting to work in front of an audience in a juicy role once or twice a year."*

*"Success to me is when I have an honest and natural experience on stage, during filming, or even at an audition or during a rehearsal. That's success as an artist. Getting paid for that experience means you're a professional. Getting paid enough to live on means you're a success."*

*"Success as an actor would be just working in the theatre most of the time—going from one job to the next."*

*"Success is having the luxury of choice when it comes to acting jobs."*

*"Success is doing what you want to do and making the money you require to live a comfortable life."*

I think I would feel more successful if only I was vested in one of the actors'

unions. It takes ten years of making a minimum of \$7500 a year from jobs falling under the jurisdiction of either SAG, American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA), or Actors' Equity Association (AEA) to qualify for a pension. I have nine years with SAG, five years with AFTRA, and two years with Equity, so I'll never collect a pension from my years as an actor. Several years ago the unions ruled that members would be allowed to combine qualifying years from the three different unions. I was thrilled! I called Pension and Welfare but was told that some of my qualifying years were before the cut off date, so this new rule didn't apply to me. The woman on the phone comforted me with the promise of a \$5000 death benefit that would be paid to my beneficiary.

### ***Business Acumen***

The scarcity of money sense among my actor friends was nothing compared to the ignorance we exhibited regarding simple business sense. In our defense, it was the seventies, and Robert Cohen's *Acting Professionally, the Raw Facts About Acting* was in its first edition and one of a kind. Since then, a plethora of books explaining the nuts and bolts of show business have flooded the market, and most college and university drama departments attempt to acquaint their graduating seniors with some practical advice about the profession they are entering—too little too late, perhaps, but still better than when I was in school. However, what I term “business acumen,” knowing when to advance and when to retreat, how to balance courage with common sense, which cards to play when, is as subtle and unique an ability as any talent. Business acumen isn't about how to get a headshot; it's about picking out the right headshot from two or three hundred proofs. Nor is it about how to get an agent, but how to get a good agent, the right agent, at the right time.

*“My teacher from college was F. Murray Abraham and he got me an interview with his agent who was with one of the three top agencies in the city. All my previous interviews had been with small agencies who always wanted to know who I had worked with, who I'd studied with, who I knew. So I went into this meeting with a list of names in my head. But this agent wanted to know what my favorite kind of character was, how did I approach each role (he went through my resume one line at a time), what did I struggle with as an actor and so on. I couldn't recover and sounded like an amateur. He refused to take my calls afterwards.”*

*“I signed on with a powerful manager at the start of my career, before I had an agent.”*

*“I had a small agent and a big agent interested in me and I signed with the big agent. They talked a big game and made lots of promises but a year later they dumped me after doing nothing. I wish I’d signed with the little guy.”*

*“I allowed myself to be seduced away from my first agent, then my second agent, then a manager, then a publicist. As soon as you start making money everyone wants to get on board. I didn’t understand about loyalty and competition among agents. Now I know it happens all the time and if you were interviewing agents and managers they would tell story after story of the actor they helped who dumped them after their first taste of success.”*

Back then we all bought into the “meant to be” philosophy. We were fatalists, idealists, romantics, egotists, and anything but pragmatists. We hadn’t taken any general business or marketing classes, much less a show business class, and with a few lucky exceptions, didn’t come by this wisdom naturally. I’m reminded of the child who steps up to bat, but when the pitch is thrown, he squeezes his eyes shut. That’s how blind most of us were to the opportunities that came our way.

*“My thinking was limited. When a producer or director talked to me about another possible show he could see me doing, I let the ball drop. I guess it was part of that ‘close my eyes and hope for the best’ mentality.”*

*“I should have taken networking seriously from day one. When I’d get called back, I wouldn’t even know the casting director’s name.”*

*“As many schools do, Julliard has a ‘scene night’ for all of the agents, casting, networks, etc. Each member of the class gets two scenes to show their stuff. I picked scenes that I thought were interesting and contrasting, however, they did not contain what I learned later was absolutely necessary for a woman to boost her success: sex, sex, more sex and comedy.”*

*“I turned down a job because it wasn’t a starring role—even though the director had asked for me! I had a chance to be his problem solver, but I was afraid he would think of me as a bit part player instead of a star. He never asked again.”*

*“I did stand-up comedy. There was a time when up-and-coming comedians performed at local clubs for exposure without pay even though the owners of the clubs were charging their customers to see us. So the comedians went on strike. I was approached by management to cross the picket line. I declined and never worked at the nightclubs again which could have helped my career. I still feel that I maintained my integrity though.”*

*“I turned down a feature article in People Magazine because they wouldn’t give me the cover. It seemed like an important distinction at the time. It would have been great publicity even without being on the cover.”*

An accountant needs to know math, but the math is useless without a sophisticated understanding of what math to use where and how. Similarly, acting philosophy and technique is rendered meaningless if you can’t get an audition, so to train an actor for the arduous life ahead, why don’t actors study marketing? Simi Horowitz: “Repeatedly, I’m told by actors who run successful businesses that the experience has made them more successful actors because it has [unwittingly] taught them how to market themselves.”<sup>5</sup> Certainly, none of us had studied marketing before embarking on our careers, but a few of my participants instinctively made wise choices that shaped their future success.

*“I went out on tour (against my agent’s advice) with a company that I direct for twice or thrice a year now and for the last ten years. Not only is it a fulfilling and creative endeavor, but I get to rehearse at Chelsea Studios and inevitably run into other people working on other projects—good business connections that have led to other things.”*

*“I adjusted my dreams and took whatever came my way. Work begets work. It’s true—even a small role, played well, will open doors for you.”*

*“I worked with a private tutor to help shake free of my series character after the show got dropped.”*

*“I learned to take big chances in auditions and not just do what everybody else did.”*

*“I accepted a really low per/show salary on my first soap contract. I think they started using me a lot just because I was so cheap to use. It was great, because I’d have these little scenes—not much to do—but I was learning. Before long I was working three and four shows a week and people were starting to like me—the fans and production. It was like coming in the back door, but who cares, as long as you get to come in?”*

Perhaps show business should be approached like playing the markets; the admonition to think long term is sage advice. The quick strike may come, but it can’t be counted on. An actor with the means to earn a respectable living in the off hours will have staying power and remain in the game long enough to realize dividends. The “I’m going to give it a year and if I don’t make it I’ll do something else” philosophy is for thrill seekers. The serious actor looks for ways to continue practicing the art for a lifetime—“making it” notwithstanding.

### ***East or West***

If I could go back and make one change, it would be to relocate my base of operations from Los Angeles to New York. My strength was on stage, but my “big break” at the Irene Ryan sent me to Hollywood and the camera where I was as rank an amateur as they come. Six years of majoring in theatre had provided me not one single moment in front of a camera. I felt as if all my weight was on the wrong foot, as if all my talent was waiting in the wings for a cue that never came. In short, it came as no surprise when Universal released me from my contract after one uneventful year. Fortunately, within a few months I waltzed right into a major role on *The Young and the Restless* and what higher education and Universal Studios failed to do for me, *Y&R* did. I learned how to use the camera, how to make TV dialogue work, and what it meant to be recognized at the supermarket. If I had been shrewd, a month or two before my contract came up for renegotiations, while I was still a budding soap star, I would have gone to New York and found an agent who would represent me not only for film and television, but also for stage. Instead, I settled into the southern California lifestyle, the privileged lifestyle of a working actor, shopping in Beverly Hills, seeing my picture at the checkout counter, answering my fan mail, waiting to see how my storyline developed, surrounded by my friends and enjoying the beach. I was seduced! I was ignorant of the direction I had chosen, not fully understanding that I had inadvertently made a career-defining choice and, even though I was now doing rather well on camera, my element was the stage. New York isn’t the only place where theatre thrives, but it’s where an actor goes to get cast in principle roles for LORT houses, off Broadway and Broadway, and as long as that’s true, New York will remain the unchallenged mecca of American

theatre. Location. Location. Location.

*“I chose LA over NY because it was more comfortable for me to starve in the sunshine than in the cold snowy winters of NY. I imagine I would have been more aggressive in NY than I was in the easy laid back environment of LA.”*

*“I waited too long to leave for LA. I wasted several years in NY when I always knew that I wanted film and TV.”*

*“I left NY and I left LA. If you’re not there you aren’t taken seriously anymore. You’re not in the mix and you can’t keep up on what’s going on.”*

*“I kept my suitcase packed and for awhile actually lived in New York, Miami and Los Angeles all at the same time. An actor must be willing to go wherever there is work.”*

*“I went to England to further my training after college. Thirty plus years later, I’m still in England, still plying my trade, and enjoying it immensely.”*

*“I should have stayed in the New York area so I would be closer to Broadway which was my ultimate goal. Instead I opted to pursue money and climate comfort (Los Angeles). I chose to go where I thought I would be most comfortable. Should an artist ever feel comfortable? Probably not.”*

Indeed. An artist who lives and works inside the comfort zone is an artist afraid of taking risks and, arguably, no artist at all.

### ***A Marketable Look***

Show business may be the only industry in America that is still getting away with unabashed discrimination. To be too old, too tall, too fat, too gay, too white, or too Black in any other job market spells litigation, but, to an actor, physical appearance is no less a commodity than capital is to a corporation. I don’t like it, but what upsets me more is the way that Hollywood standards of beauty are affecting society at large.

My daughter has a friend attending law school in San Diego, and she went home recently to visit her parents. One evening, she told her friends that she



needed Botox because she was developing a line in her forehead. She went on to lament that her breasts were sagging and would have to be lifted within the year, and while she was at it, an implant in her upper lip would make all the difference. It would be disturbing enough if she was a twenty-four year old actress, but she's a twenty-four year old law student—albeit, a law student in southern California. Clearly, the desire for perfection as dictated by Hollywood is seeping into other industries and neighboring metropolises.

It's a slippery slope when actors start chasing after physical perfection. Where do we draw the line? Surgery? Drugs? I once worked with a thirty year old actress who had already had a face lift.

*“Since showbiz is such a youth driven biz, going straight to NY or LA right out of high school really seems smart.”*

Health and beauty don't necessarily go hand in hand. Sometimes it's a question of health *or* beauty. I remember one of the many times I quit smoking while I was a full time actress. I gained twenty pounds over a period of about six months. My agent finally told me to let him know when I'd lost it, because he couldn't submit me for anything until I did. I went out and bought a pack of cigarettes. Holly Hughes comments,

I've found something very depressing. Not everywhere, not everyone (and I sure hope I get a job after saying this), but I can't count how often I've seen racism, sexism, gender conformity, and other social diseases reinforced in the name of professional training, how many times an acting teacher's main directive to students is: Lose Weight!<sup>6</sup>

Still, the business is what it is, and your face, your voice, and your body equal your instrument. This is what you have to play with and only a few advance to the level of being seriously considered for a role, while anyone who can be easily eliminated from the crowd because of things like weight, skin, and teeth certainly will be. If it isn't perfect, it's a distraction, especially on camera.

*“There are so many little things that would have been so easy to fix if only someone told me it's all right to not be perfect. So fix whatever needs fixing—don't feel like you don't belong in this business because your teeth need to be capped.”*

*“I didn't know how to ask for help with things like skin, teeth, my hair and clothes. I had a problem with profuse perspiration—but*

*instead of getting help I just tried to pretend it wasn't a problem. It never occurred to me that I could have seen a doctor about that."*

*"I wasn't sure what to do with my curly hair or how to dress. I let my mother and boyfriends dress me which ultimately had the effect of tearing down my confidence. I don't know what I could have done, but hey—I was in Hollywood! There must have been professional help available if I'd looked for it."*

*"There were complaints that I was gaining weight. I had the money and should have recognized that I needed continuous, professional support—like a nutritionist and a trainer. Instead I thought I could handle it."*

*"I committed to weekly facials—at \$100 per—but they kept my unpredictable skin beautiful."*

*"One day my agent asked me if I wanted to get a speaking role someday. I said 'yes, of course,' and he said 'get your teeth fixed.'"*

"Perfection" is one thing, but "what works for you" is another and that can be a fine and difficult distinction to make when questioning why you didn't get that part: not sexy enough, too old, too short, too tall, they wanted a blonde. The difference between correcting flaws and trying to look like someone else can be the difference between confidence and self consciousness. I vote for being yourself as long as you're the most perfected physical self you can be. It's your instrument—be a fine-tuned instrument; but if you're an oboe, don't try to be violin.

*"I had a big audition for General Hospital while I was in LA. I met the casting director the day before when I went to pick up the script, and we had a really nice conversation and things looked good. The next morning I had a friend do my hair and makeup. I arrived at the audition looking gorgeous but like a different girl. The casting director looked at me with total disbelief. If I had gone in as myself, I believe I would have gotten the job."*

*"I dyed my hair dark brown at the insistence of my manager because he said it was the 'season of the brunette'. They exercised their option on me three months later."*

*“I was totally mistaken about what I should look like to appeal to the VIPs who make their judgment about you in about ten seconds. I was ten pounds over weight and had cut my hair in one of those boy-cuts like the models had that year.”*

*“I ran in several marathons—I got in better shape physically and also mentally. It’s given me more confidence.”*

### ***Sex and Drugs***

Constantly shifting ideals, seductions and betrayals of a romantic nature, financial crises, and almost daily doses of rejection can expose the emotional life of the most self-restrained among us, let alone an actor whose skill rests in some part on an ability and willingness to reveal the layers of a tortured psyche. Creativity guru, Matthew Fox, states “. . . the work of the artist in all of us is to be in dialogue with our hearts.”<sup>7</sup> How to preserve a tender heart and develop a thick skin at the same time is a challenge that many address with alcohol and other drugs, sexual liaisons, religious fervor, and one-size-fits-all therapy. The effect of all this “acting out” can be devastating on an acting career.

*“I spent two years drinking myself into oblivion out of frustration instead of taking positive steps like getting an outside job, and signing up for classes, etc.”*

*“I slept with the wrong people for the wrong reasons.”*

*“I was emotionally unstable and along with therapy and religion and a few other obsessions, had nurtured a pretty serious drug problem. I think my lack of emotional health sabotaged more than one enviable chance I had for a notable career.”*

*“I got married—which represented the end of all those ridiculous relationships which only sucked the life right out of me!”*

*“At the height of my alcoholism I got a call from the New York Shakespeare Festival asking me to come in and audition for their apprentice company. The morning of the audition I was too hung over to even attempt it.”*

*“When I got married, I drew a line and no one was allowed to cross it and no one ever did. Not to say that the passion of some*

*actors isn't totally tantalizing and drug-like. They can be hard to say no to. But say no!"*

*"Drugs and alcohol are the robbers of creativity."*

*"My husband acted out his own frustrations and anger by ruthlessly criticizing my every move and spending money like he'd been born to it. In all fairness, I was into psychological abuse back then, so if I'd had one of those grateful, supportive types for a husband, I'm sure I would have left him even sooner than I did."*

In any field, emotional maturity can be credited for keeping success driven people on track, but the profession of acting is in a class by itself. It might be argued that one quality separating the stars from the want-to-be's isn't talent, beauty, or luck so much as it is a knack for keeping a level head in the face of psychological challenges. Stars sometimes pop up in the head lines because of brushes with the law, but keep in mind that the town that forgives Drew Barrymore, Hugh Grant, Winona Ryder, and Charlie Sheen is the very same town that will snub an unknown with a little alcohol problem. Second chances are for the already rich and famous.

### ***Marriage and Children or "Having it All"***

Women of my generation, more than men, struggled with questions regarding priorities. I virtually wasted my twenties and most of my thirties—prime years for an actress—trying to work out primary relationships because deep down inside I still wanted to be a wife and mother, possibly more than I wanted to succeed as an actress. Achieving some fairly significant success in those years made my relationships with men all that more difficult. For one thing, it's hard for an equally talented husband to go to work for an hourly wage at a boring job when his wife is making six figures working three days a week. So I quickly became and remained the breadwinner in the family, effectively upsetting the applecart of the sexist power hierarchy. Shortly after the birth of my twins, I was divorced and searching for dependable childcare to take up the slack left by an absent father and a stressed out, frequently absent mother. But at least I had my girls. If I hadn't had them when I did, I feel certain that my stars never would have aligned so as to allow for childbearing. For one precious year, I was both married and gainfully employed—what turned out to be fleeting circumstances.

*"I decided to stay home when my children were born. I didn't work for six years and it remains to be seen if I ever recover."*

*“If you’re not neglecting your career, you are neglecting your children.”*

*“I suddenly understood why mothers turn into such martyrs. I catch myself thinking things like ‘I’ve sacrificed so much for you!’ You really do have to martyr yourself to be a good mother.”*

*“The best thing I ever did was to have both my children despite the fact that the timing was all wrong. That and marrying the love of my life instead of someone who could help my career. My marriage and my children are still the glue that holds my career together.”*

*“Once I understood what being a mother was really like, I found I wasn’t willing to bring another person into the world who would have that kind of absolute power over my life.”*

I believe that children need at least two adults attending to their needs full time. It doesn’t have to be the mother and the father, but one parent trying to be in two places at the same time will fail either the child or the career. If the single parent can afford a live-in nanny/housekeeper, she or he will have a chance of keeping the bases covered, but finding that perfect household employee is almost as challenging as finding the right partner. Whether you go through an agency or word of mouth, whether you hire live-in or live-out, Mary Poppins is a tall order and the ways it can go all wrong are countless and grave. In the first two years of my twins’ lives, we went through three nannies. The first doted on the babies, but left the house filthy and in shambles. The second kept my house spic and span but dangerously neglected the children. The third loved the children, cleaned the house, called me “ma’am” and stole jewelry, crystal, porcelain, and silver.

Many daycare centers now accept babies, but that, too, is an expensive proposition for any but the fully employed working actor. When the children are old enough to attend public school, the parent will have the more affordable and manageable task of securing back-up as opposed to primary child care, but no parent is out of the woods until that kid is filing his own tax return. Yes, they’re worth it, but successful parenting is an exacting task, and when not done well, it’s as hard to fix as a career in show business gone awry. Politically correct or not, I agree with Debra Winger: “Anyone that says having children is not a sacrifice is pretty much lying. Or they’re not taking care of their kids.”<sup>8</sup>

Even though I’ve tried to be gender neutral in all these references, for the most part, men don’t seem to suffer with the same conflict. Most, not all, men still see their primary role as monetary provider, not caregiver. They serve their family

best by having successful careers and, if anything, become more focused, more committed, more determined to succeed when a child is involved.

### *The Unions*

*“Rule One: only work union jobs. Break that rule and you deserve what you get, which usually means even less pay than they promised you and every other form of abuse you thought was behind you.”*

The first time I broke the rule was that summer in Terre Haute when someone asked me to shoot a local commercial for the summer theatre season. In typical people-pleasing mode, I complied.

“Of course I’ll do it! Of course you don’t have to pay me extra. Don’t be silly. I don’t need an AFTRA contract to tape a sixty second spot!”

I go to the local television studio for the taping and someone shows me to an empty space with a stool for me to sit on and a bare light bulb suspended directly overhead. I look at the light bulb, the camera, and the stool and say, “This won’t work. We need more light and it needs to be coming from at least two different sources.”

The cameraman rolls his eyes and chuckles under his breath. The guy in charge says, “well, this is all we’ve got.”

Once again, I’m supposed to be the pro, but when I tell them what they need to do for it to work, they act like I’m asking for champagne and caviar. I give in and shoot the stupid spot with the light bulb hanging overhead. Sure enough, it looks god-awful. No one says a word about it to me, but they don’t air it either. No doubt they’ve concluded that I’m just not that good after all.

I remember another time when I did an industrial film in Orlando. It was supposed to pay \$150 a day, and I needed the money. They asked me to bring a couple of business suits to wear, which I had no problem with. Then they borrowed one of my suits for another actress to wear. I thought that was pretty tacky, but she was a nice girl, so I didn’t mind. I worked two days and was paid for one—six weeks later under threat of small claims court. I’ve worked a handful of other non-union jobs when I was desperate for cash and, in each instance, the worst aspect of the job wasn’t the fee or even the terms, but the simple fact that they made me look bad. I lived in fear, not that I’d get kicked out of the union, but that someone would see me looking like an amateur.

It's a condition of middle age to ponder how much better one might have fared in this world with more practical guidance and more common sense at an earlier age. I also wonder if common sense and pragmatism are things that a teacher can impart, one way or another, or if we really need to learn everything the hard way.

*"I don't know if youth listens."*

Even though it's characteristic of youth to pass through a know-it-all stage or two, I still earnestly believe that if someone was willing to teach me what I needed to know about the business of show business back when I was in school, I would have listened. Top it off with a field trip to the big city led by a seasoned professional, and I would have had a well rounded fine arts education.

While another generation of graduating seniors rush off to Los Angeles or New York ready to glut up the system with their mediocre talent, inadequate training, and burning desire to be famous, I pray for more schools willing to hire or train teachers who recognize the need to empower their students with more than acting technique. However inspiring it might be to contemplate acting theory and the various creative geniuses who have contributed to the art form, that kind of scholarship provides limited advantage to the actor once he or she leaves school and attempts to make acting a profession. It may or may not help talented actors refine their technique, which could help them get jobs, but even then, before one is in the position of being considered for a role, one will need to clear a dozen or more hurdles of a nature entirely foreign to the art of acting.

The vast majority of scholars don't talk about show business. What Cohen calls "the raw facts about careers in acting" may or may not get thrown into the mix at the final hour of a theatre major's academic career. Instead, there is enough emotional, psychological, psychophysical, vocal, spiritual, kinesthetic, and otherwise philosophical pontificating about the art of acting to paralyze any would-be actor. This kind of scholarship seems to operate under the presumption that there is an art form out there called "Acting" that exists somehow independent of show business. But acting will never exist in such a vacuum. Acting is a performing art firmly ensconced within the entertainment industry. Unlike writing, or painting, or composing, the art of acting requires a team of collaborators (made up of mostly businessmen) and an audience (most of whom don't know Stanislavski from Spolin) in addition to the actor, the material to be performed, and a time and place to perform it.

If theatre departments and acting teachers cultivate theatre scholarship for its own sake, with no intention of preparing students for professional acting, then they need to say so, because I've yet to encounter an undergraduate theatre major with a concentration in acting who isn't either already committed to or seriously

considering acting as a profession. Regrettably, training for a professional career and training for a career in education have little in common with each other. David Mamet may be my least favorite theorist in the world, but I'm haunted by his proclamations: "The life of the academy, the graduate school, the studio, while charming and comfortable, are as far removed from the life and the job of the actor as aerobics are to boxing." I remember walking in the park with my former advisor and talking about an old friend who was in negotiations at the time with her alma mater regarding an M.F.A. In addition to a resume that spans thirty-five years of acting on television, film, stage, and voice-overs, working with top studios, directors, producers, and talent, Jane had also founded a successful acting studio in Redondo Beach and placed several of her students with top talent agencies in Los Angeles. As her interest in teaching grew, she developed and taught, with noteworthy results, a two-year intensive teacher training program aimed at improving teaching skills and student performance as evaluated by the Academic Performance Index in a low income, high risk California school district. Then, to top it all off and demonstrate what else you can do with a bachelor's degree in Drama, a lot of talent, hard work, and raw courage, she designed and led corporate training seminars for some high level clients like Oracle, Qualcomm, and the City of Los Angeles. But she hadn't succeeded in securing a university teaching contract because Jane didn't have an M.F.A. or a Ph.D. To abandon her acting career and various other worthy projects for three years to pursue an advanced degree seemed both impractical and slightly ludicrous, but to land a college teaching position without one was unlikely. So she approached her undergraduate school with a bold, but earnest, request to award her an M.F.A. For awhile it looked like they would agree. She made numerous trips cross country to teach day long workshops for the acting majors in exchange for her "graduate assistantship," which would cover her "tuition" for "graduate credits." It was at this stage of Jane's "graduate program" that I repeated her story as an anecdote while on a friendly, relationship-building walk in the woods with my advisor, who, without hesitation, stated flatly, "It diminishes the degree to give it to someone like that; it's just not fair to those students who sweat it out for three years in school." I replied with something like, "Jane's been sweating it out for thirty-five years in the trenches of Hollywood! Do you think that's easier than three years in grad school?" The conversation quickly deteriorated and there we were, a first year Ph.D. student and her advisor, in the middle of a four mile nature walk, with absolutely nothing to say to each other.

I'm not suggesting that universities should start dubbing actors with M.F.A.s solely based on their professional experience, but I do think it's past time to consider the possibility that the most qualified acting teachers may not have an M.F.A. or a Ph.D. They may, instead, have years of professional experience and an affinity for talking to actors about what they need to know and be thinking about if they're serious about a career. However valuable the theatre scholar's knowledge, if it



was my child packing up and heading to Hollywood, I'd want him or her to also have the kind of education that Jane can offer. After all, who knows better how to empower and protect a young actor in the full blush of artistic passion? Who is the master of fine arts?

Even the most prestigious actor training programs in the country credit the success of their students, first, with native talent—as James Bundy notes, “. . . when gifted actors come in, gifted actors come out, period.”<sup>10</sup>—and, second, with instruction by faculty who are themselves working professionals, not purely scholars of theatre—“The presence, at a few institutions, of expert and experienced faculty who are working professionals is the best possible hope that the talented student will be prepared for a life in the theatre.”<sup>11</sup>

Like Jane and me, several other of my participants spent years fruitlessly seeking employment as acting teachers without the requisite M.F.A. or Ph.D. We all thought that “or equivalent professional experience” meant that people like us, with between ten and thirty years of professional acting experience, all with recognizable credits and admirable G.P.A.s, could at least get short listed. Instead, we've concluded that the ads really mean, “M.F.A., Ph.D., or Tony Award winners.”

Is it possible that most theatre departments around the country would simply prefer that people like me don't get the chance to muddy their academic waters with all this talk of show business? There are exceptions, and I'm happy to report that, at this writing, Jane is teaching “Acting, Auditioning and the Business of Show Business” at Cal State University, Los Angeles, without having first acquired an M.F.A., Ph.D., or Tony Award. I'm sure that if I'd had a teacher like her when I was an undergraduate, I would be telling a different story now. Again, Mamet: “A word about teachers. Most of them are charlatans.”<sup>12</sup>

*“I learned nothing in school that prepared me for the professional arena.”*

*“The schools have got to teach acting for stage and camera. They're different and an actor has to be able to compete in both markets.”*

*“The craft I learned in school ended up in all my professional work. What I didn't get was the business aspect—that I had to find out on my own, the hard way.”*

*“What I learned most was not what went on in class, but rather the subterranean crap that was going on during my third and fourth years. Certain people were subtly being pushed ahead of*

*the rest of us and were meeting with agents before everyone else. It was the same kind of politics as show business only we were still in school. So I guess I did learn something."*

There's no substitute for professional experience and students of acting know this instinctively. I've seen the look in a student's eyes change dramatically as soon as they find out I've actually been on TV. All of a sudden, they start listening to me in a whole new way, because I'm no longer just a teacher. I'm someone who has had experiences that they want to have, and that simple fact makes all the difference in the world.

I found it interesting that, when questioned about their training, none of my friends mentioned Stanislavski, Chekhov, Meisner, Hagen, Strasberg, Adler, or any other theorist they had studied and how those techniques related to their professional careers. The closest anyone came to pointing to the value of their education was the stage time they accrued while in school.

*"The only positive thing for me that happened in school was that I was cast a lot and got to perform. But completely without guidance or any form of competent coaching. I was on my own out there."*

*"School had everything to do with getting experience."*

*"The most important element of school was the opportunity to perform, to apply the work in front of an audience filled house! Where else besides school could I have done that as an amateur?"*

*"I don't think the style of training matters. Any solid, basic, focused method works. You really teach yourself—find out what works for you. Of course, you don't know what's working until you get in front of an audience."*

Mamet: "The audience will teach you how to act . . . The classroom will teach you how to obey, and obedience in theatre will get you nowhere."<sup>13</sup> On the contrary, in spite of all the years I spent in school, I never learned to be obedient, and I was blessed with an incredible acting teacher when I was an undergraduate. My experience with that teacher, in class and on the academic stage, not only taught me valuable technique, but cultivated my belief in my own talent and ability to create. Without that confidence, I could not have even begun to carve out a career.

*“I needed the college environment to be accepted in, to have success in, to build up my confidence.”*

*“An offhand comment can make or break students. A teacher that believes in you and pushes you—that is what careers are made of.”*

*“I had one incredible teacher/mentor who thought I was brilliant. As you believe, so it is. His absolute faith in my ability was all my empathetically hard-wired brain needed for me to throw myself completely into whatever character I was asked to play. Belief creates reality and I believed with full abandon. I was lucky to have someone who believed I was extraordinary, and so, for him and later in life for myself, I was extraordinary.”*

Marian Seldes: “I think it’s all a question of giving the young actor confidence and the place in which he or she can develop.”<sup>14</sup> Maybe good acting teachers don’t teach acting so much as they recognize the talent in their students, confirm it, free it, and fan it like a fire. Education, according to Fox, “is to instill the confidence, trust, and ultimately the courage it will take . . . to live with chaos and transform it, to live with creativity and honor it. If education fails at this, it fails at its most important task.”<sup>15</sup>

A generous, compassionate, and discerning teacher at any age in a student’s life and in any field of study impacts his or her students dramatically and irrevocably. Acting teachers, whatever their artistic or professional limitations, have a good record in this regard. F. Murray Abraham: “An acting teacher saved my life. . . . I was just a fuck-up, I’d been in jail a couple of times and was barely making it through school. . . . she saw something [in me].”<sup>16</sup>

*“My high school drama coach came up to me one day and told me that the community college in the next town had acting scholarships and I could get one. I wasn’t even an actor back then. I was a football player. But he was telling me how I could go to college if I wanted to. He knew I didn’t have any resources and this was a chance for me.”*

*“I had a great teacher in my performing arts high school who insisted that I learn all aspects of theatre, even though I thought I was above it all. I learned how to build sets, hang lights, sew costumes, stage manage, run any kind of board, do sound, be a dresser, and run the curtain. I got my Equity card by joining a show as Stage Manager/Understudy!”*

*“My teacher had the guts to send me to another school to study with Arthur Lessac where I could get the voice work I really needed. I know now that his willingness to own up to the limitations of our department was a unique quality among acting teachers and drama departments in general.”*

### **Generative Theatre**

If common sense, financial responsibilities, and artistic or ethical standards all combine to prevent one from moving to the big city and securing opportunities to perform in someone else’s show, another path is open to artists who have the audacity and the fortitude to produce their own plays. I recently heard this kind of production dubbed “vanity theatre,” the implication being that to produce your own plays is an exercise of the ego, not the artist. When I think of the options available to most performing artists, I find such nomenclature not just flippant and shallow, but steeped in ignorance. How long should an artist wait for permission to perform? There is much to be said in defense of keeping the channel open, putting your theory into practice, reaching out to the community, and generating theatre. That’s how theatres get started. Gary Sinise: “Barbara [high school acting teacher] was really a sort of you-gotta-make-theatre-whenever-you-can kind of person. ‘Don’t wait around,’ she said. So we ended up starting our own theatre, and it’s 30 years old now.”<sup>17</sup>

*“There is damage in waiting too long for the phone to ring. If it’s not ringing you’ve got to come up with another way to work.”*

*“One of the most valuable things I learned was how to produce. My boyfriend taught me that, not school. I produced myself right into many agents’ offices and as a direct result ended up booking work.”*

*“Some friends and I started a little theatre group and did four shows. We started down in the East Village in dumpy little spaces but our last two shows were done on Off Broadway mini contracts. We filed all the necessary papers, paid ourselves bogus salaries, and recycled our meager funds right back into the pot—and this way we all got our Equity cards.”*

*“People think I’m crazy when they realize I’m using my own money and working about 16 hours a day, and then I’m proud if we can break even. But this is just what I do.”*

Mamet wins me over with this bittersweet observation: “Your life in theatre, like mine, will pass before you know it. And you will realize why the old folks reminisce—it’s not that they are nostalgic; they are stunned. It went so quickly.”<sup>18</sup>

I like to dream about Acting being a job that pays \$30-45K a year with benefits and pension eligibility after five years continuous service. In my dream, I could apply for this job, present my resume, interview and audition, demonstrate my ability to fulfill all the requisite duties of “Actor.” Year after year, I would perform roles, some great, some small, some inspired, some not. Other duties might include training apprentice actors, working the house, soliciting sponsors, writing grants, sweeping up. When I’m too old to remember my lines and manage the costume changes, I’ll collect a pension, host cast parties, and become a permanent member of the audience. I get lost in the sweetness of that dream every time, and I promise myself I’ll never give it up.

One more Aunt Dan and Lemon. I’m so utterly exhausted I’m terrified at the thought of trying to find my way through all these monologues one more time. The moment of truth arrives, as it always does, and I step out onto the intimate three quarter thrust of the New Theatre. Somewhere in the rafters of my semi-conscious actor identity I see David, who has seen the show twice already, sitting alone in the third row, and all of a sudden I feel energy radiating up and out of my center and I think maybe I can do this one more time.

Many times over the last thirty-five years, I’ve had to ask myself, “why do I do this?” Sometimes it’s obvious, like when I’m working, when all the pieces fall into place, when the audience loves us, when I “succeed.” But in the face of some new indignity visited upon me or those close to me, when I’m forced to retreat to those quiet corners of my mind where I tell myself things like, “It’s O.K. It doesn’t matter. That’s just the way this business is. It just wasn’t meant to be. It doesn’t mean anything. You’ll be O.K.” that’s when I have to remember why I’m an actor in the first place, what’s driving me, what does matter? What is it that melts my heart and takes me where I want to go? Thank God it’s not fame, money, or respect. I’m looking for nothing less than some new truth I haven’t realized before, some new discovery that I can use to connect with others, and we can all sit around and marvel over how precious and relevant and unifying this new truth is. I find those truths in great moments of great theatre. Fortunately, I also find them within the effort, the process, the mere attempt to be creative. Theatre is the greatest metaphor for life, and the study of one leads invariably to discoveries about the other, narrowing the gap between great moments on and off stage.

As much as I yearn to live my life as an artist, I’m not certain anymore if it’s

not just as fulfilling to be a witness to someone else's creativity. The important thing is that creativity happens, no matter who does the creating, no matter what form it takes, because we need more visible truth in the world.

I'm usually wary of people who refer to "truth" as if it were a color we could all agree on, but sometimes the truth is such a simple thing that I feel no need to put quotation marks around it. My college acting teacher used to say, "Theatre is my church—it's where I worship. And what I want to see there is the truth." (Robert "Buckets" Lowery, 1929-2002) We all knew what he was talking about.

Charlotte Rampling: "[F]ind some truth along the way, something to believe in . . . and decide that's something you'll always revere and never trash on . . ."<sup>19</sup>

*"Do you know what you stand for? That is the question every actor has to start with because that is the foundation you live with. All your power comes from what you stand for, so you need to be able to answer that question and be specific."*

*"I got involved in politics and became an advocate for American Indian Tribal Colleges."*

*"Two years ago I got so sick of feeling so self-involved and so powerless that I ran off to Central America and spent several months doing volunteer work."*

When a student tells me he or she wants to be an actor and I ask why, I'm not posing a philosophical question or stalling for time. The answer to that question, even if the student can't yet articulate it, will be the foundation of his or her professional life. If money is the driving force, I advise pursuing a degree in accounting. If respect and admiration is what he/she is after, I suggest medicine or law. If it's all about fame, there are lots of ways to make a spectacle of yourself. But if I somehow get the feeling that this student truly needs to be a performing artist, the first thing I want them to figure out is how to live in a world that values art only after every other need has been well satisfied. The actor, like the writer, the painter, or the musician, must create an environment where he or she can survive as an artist, where he or she can be creative while moving about in the world, where they can be in the world, not of it. The ideal situation, of course, is to be paid a living wage for practicing your art, but a student should know from the moment he or she declares a major that the odds are against even the finest of actors supporting themselves and their families without another major source of income. If that fact is enough to stop someone from majoring in theatre, they should be stopped. If not, university theatre departments owe those students a theatre arts education that includes, in no small way, an education in the entertainment industry.

Art isn't safe. Art happens out there on the brink of disaster—that's where we need it, so that's where it grows.

The last couple of weeks I spent doing rotating rep in my hometown, that now long-ago summer, left me with some wonderful memories of things that really matter, some great moments that I store in my heart and pull out whenever I have to ask myself, "why do I keep doing this?"

With another Midsummer under our belts, Helena, Hermia, the other fairies, and I crowd into our dressing room and begin putting away our characters for the night. Standing outside the door, the stage manager calls, "Hey, Lynne? There's a man in the lobby that says he used to know you, and you probably won't remember him, but he wants to say hello."

My seventh grade algebra teacher and his wife stand awkwardly in the lobby. "Mr. Cundiff!" My exuberance gets the better of me and I throw my arms around him. Mr. Cundiff was a great teacher. Mrs. Cundiff looks relieved.

"We came just to see you. I wasn't sure if you'd remember me or not, but I wanted to say hello, just in case."

"How could I not remember you?"

After all, who forgets a great teacher? Ever?

One week later I drove to Florida, moved in with my mother, and started looking for a job.

## Notes

1. These responses are taken from email correspondences to the author from ten professional actor friends. Please see information in the text for a fuller explanation of the study conducted with these participants. In this essay, all collections of quotes found in italics come from these participants.

2. *Screen Actors' Guild, Beginning Actors*, accessed 9 February 2004 <<http://www.SAG.com/>>.

3. Robert Cohen, *Acting Professionally, Raw Facts About Careers in Acting*, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2004) 3.

4. Olympia Dukakis, interview with David Bryon, "How Does Your Garden Grow?" *American Theatre* January 2005: 35.

5. Simi Horowitz, "I'll have the Acting Career . . . with a side order of Small Business," *Backstage* 26 Sept. 2003: 30-33.

6. Holly Hughes, "From 'Fab!' to 'Fuck!' How Do You Make Social Change?" *Theater* 31.3 (2001): 62.

7. Matthew Fox, *Creativity, Where the Divine and the Human Meet* (New York: Penguin/Putnam, 2002) 52.

8. Debra Winger, interview with Rosanna Arquette, *Searching for Debra Winger*, VHS, Lions Gate Home Entertainment, 2001.
9. David Mamet, *True and False, Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor* (New York: Random House, 1997) 4.
10. James Bundy, "On the Training Ground," *American Theatre* May/June 2003: 7.
11. 7.
12. Mamet 12.
13. 19.
14. Marian Seldes, interview with David Bryon, "How Does Your Garden Grow?" *American Theatre* January 2005: 35.
15. Fox 207.
16. F. Murray Abraham, interview with David Bryon, "How Does Your Garden Grow?"
17. Gary Sinise, interview with David Bryon, "How Does Your Garden Grow?"
18. Mamet 123.
19. Charlotte Rampling, interview with Rosanna Arquette, *Searching for Debra Winger*, VHS, Lions Gate Home Entertainment, 2001.



# SUPPLEMENT

