

## **THE UNSHAKABLE SKILL SET**

*By Tom Todoroff posted Sept 14, 2011 on backstage.com*

We all have two equal and opposite needs in life: for certainty and for uncertainty. The former dictates that you must be professional in your preparation and punctuality, while the latter insists that you be unlike hundreds of other actors who have already been seen for this role. Success requires that you acknowledge and embrace this duality.

This is also true of every relationship you will ever know. We all yearn for the other to be reliable and trustworthy yet exciting and unpredictable. Never boring. Our relationship with ourselves follows this same blueprint. Think of the times when you've been overzealous with your exercise, diet, organization, etc. The desire to "tear it up" a bit becomes urgent and must be fulfilled. Thereafter, balance is regained.

This duality lies within us all: the wish to love and nurture ourselves and the darker urge to self-sabotage. The light and the shadow. Our current cadre of scandal-plagued politicians is the unfortunate embodiment of the latter half of this principle.

In your work, the duality of life dictates that there are essentially two choices: positive and negative. Every morning, gravity negatively insists that you stay in bed. However, your heart positively challenges you to greet the day and go forth and create your life anew. We all have both the need to belong and the need to stand out. Seek out and welcome life's duality everywhere. The audition room is your ecstatic opportunity to stand out and shine. It's not about being liked or getting good feedback. It's about winning the role.

### **The Five Motivations**

There are essentially five motivations that bring the audience to the theater or cinema: to laugh, to cry, to learn or be enlightened, to be scared, or to be turned on sexually. To take the audience on this journey, you, the actor, need to have an unshakable skill set, one that comes from regular training and constant discipline. If you don't keep going to the gym, it shows. Acting is best when it's invisible, but that doesn't mean nothing is happening.

You must also become a text detective. However, to possess any behavioral insight into characters in a written text, you must first (and continually) delve into and explore your own motivations. The true actor is first and foremost a deeply curious psychologist, sociologist, anthropologist, and archaeologist—never a narcissist.

We find ourselves living in a graceless age, when cynicism, sarcasm, entitlement, and lack of real skills are poor substitutes for wit, intellect, generosity, and vulnerability. The work of the actor has never been more important. Your task is to bring the audience home to themselves and remind them of their true feeling nature. Fully inhabiting your feelings is like cancer prevention. Early detection is everything. We pay for our mastery of denial.

You must make us laugh, cry, think, scared, and hot. It's your job. These are five highly active intentions and never entail asking permission. If the work doesn't achieve at least one of these intentions, it's ineffective, with the end result for the actor and audience being "It was okay." Are you satisfied with leading an okay life? Life's too short for okay. When your work includes all five of these truths, you will find yourself eminently and imminently employable. You'll also find yourself to be a hell of a lot of fun! Ultimately, you cast yourself by your work, stating through it, "I dare you not to cast me!"

### **It's the Text, Totally**

As Shakespeare says, "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action." Find the need for every line you speak and every move you make. Only move if the text insists upon it. All extraneous, unmotivated movement and devoicing (pulling back on your vocal support) comes from the unconscious desire to turn down internal feelings and sensation and flee. What's required is someone who wants to be in the room and turns the feeling up.

All dramatic scenarios involve fighting through uncomfortable feelings and conflict, using your head, your heart, and your hips. Get comfortable feeling uncomfortable emotions. Remember, it's always all about the text. How delightful and freeing that it's never about you! We get the story or we get your issues. Imagine a surgeon or an airline pilot greeting you with a tense look of consternation and saying, "I've got a lot goin' on right now. I'm not sure how this is gonna go." You'd run for your life! To get hired, you must instill the belief that you will be a useful and essential component of the production.

### **Life Choices and Rejection**

Life is uncertain. Acting is often considered a dubious career if you're seeking financial success. But look at it this way: In the past 30 years, manufacturing in the U.S. has cratered. Many of these jobs have been exported overseas or are now being performed by machines. A good actor, however, has a skill beyond those of any machine. Some of your corporate peers may have criticized your career path as mercurial and full of rejection. They chose with their head what they thought to be "certain" and "reliable" employment paths with promises of future gain. Many are now re-evaluating.

The silver lining of our global economic crisis is that it has forced us all to look in the mirror and ask why we do what we do. Are your life choices based on love for yourself and others or are they based on self-criticism, scarcity, and fear?

By the way, one actor wins one role. Was everyone else "rejected"? When the day comes when 99 out of a hundred actors are hired and the one who didn't get the gig is you, then you can feel rejected. Don't personalize and awfulize our business.

## **The Price of Nice**

Our craft affords us the most incredible vehicle for growth, healing, and the ongoing opportunity to savor the dynamic experience of this life. The task at hand doesn't include convincing anyone that you are an artist; you must convince yourself. Act to seek your own good opinion. The cost of being a people pleaser—the price of nice—is cumulative and astronomical. You convince yourself you are an artist by the choices you make, minute by minute, day by day.

Come home to yourself. Read a play a day. Do your text work, and take the trip of that text. Allow the part to play you. Exercise your voice and your body and read aloud. It's free. Do it every day. Learn the 15 guideposts, six viewpoints, four parts of vocal variation, four agreements, three tenets, and three techniques. Go to museums. Go to the theater every week. You think you can't afford it? You can't afford not to! Buy standing room. Usher Off-Broadway. Offer to sweep the theater or run errands. You don't have a "money problem" you have a drive, will, and imagination block. Learn how to ask for and fight for what you want and say no to what you don't want.

Take the focus off yourself and surprise yourself. Find danger in your work. The windshield is larger than the rearview mirror, just as where you're headed is more important than where you've been. Love takes and makes time. Make and take the time to develop and maintain an unshakable skill set. Hope isn't a life strategy. Celebrate that you are following your first foolish, childish thought of making your life's work the following of your own heart. Learn to fly. By example, you are teaching others to do the same.

Your authentic self is searching for you. Burn bright; revel in your time. The adventure continues....

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