

The Voiceless Actor

A Matthew Harrison Essay

I'm listening to the conversation, judge and jury in my head, it's coloring everything, all we did and said. I want you close, I want you near, I can't help but listen, but I don't want to hear...Hear That Voice Again...

Voices in your head.

Sounds like the stuff of psychosis.

But that voice that is inside your head exists, speaks loudly, and is always talking to you. It's normal. It's natural. It's a part of you and a part of life.

The question is...are you listening?

We are all insecure animals by nature and so by nature you and I are self-doubting. There is a *personal negative bias* that has been planted in you long ago from somewhere or someone - a nagging nasty little voice that speaks within your depths. Maybe it's saying:

- *I'm not smart*
- *I think too much*
- *I'm lazy*
- *I try too hard*
- *I'm not worth it*
- *I'm a mistake*
- *I deserve to be hurt*
- *I'm not lovable*
- *I don't belong*
- *I'm weak*
- *I'm too pushy*
- *I'm just like my Father*
- *I'm not enough like my Father*

...or one or more of many, many other possible negative feelings.

What is your voice, deep deep down saying to you?

In life, many of us busy ourselves with actions to quiet the voice. We work, we entertain ourselves, we strive and push to keep the voice from talking too loudly into our inner ear.

Some of us fight the voice destructively through self-sabotage: drug and alcohol addiction, eating disorders, obsessive behaviour, and other destructive mechanisms.

Some of us try to face the voice through meditation, therapy, art, and other ways so that we can locate the voice, find its origins, and take ownership of its nasty speak.

But all of us actors, when we walk onto stage, set, or into the audition room take the chance of letting the voice out so strongly that it devours us.

The Inner Negative Voice suddenly begins shouting, screaming into our inner ear, sometimes rewording itself based on the fact that we're acting, saying things like:

- *This is going terribly*
- *I'm failing at this*
- *I'll never be a good actor*
- *The teacher (director, casting person) hates me*
- *I don't know where to stand*
- *I'm not listening to the other actor*
- *I feel like a fraud*
- *I wish I was at home in bed hiding*

Why is that?

Why is shutting down the negative voice in an actor when they are acting a part of the process that comes up over and over in classes and workshops? Why does the voice speak so loudly then?

In life, when we're confident about knowing what needs to get done and we're busy getting it done, the Inner Negative Voice gets quiet. This is why when you're down or depressed, the best solution is to pick an easy task and get it done...fix something in the house, go for a run, go to the gym, get that errand over with, go to work. In other words...get active. As a young man, when I was self-conscious and stuck in my head, I loved going to work...as a waiter...it gave me several hours to get a do-able task achieved and so get off of myself and into work. By shift's end, I was always much better off mentally, and my inner voice quieter.

The reason this works is NOT because the voice goes away...it's simply that the voice gets drowned out by more important matters. Waiting tables, cleaning out the garage, lifting weights, getting to the finish line - during the activity the voice disappears into the background because we give it no credence while we focus on something other than ourselves.

As in life – so in acting.

The actor simply needs to get the task at hand done. ACT. If she puts all her effort into acting, all her FOCUS on the other, the inner voice will recede into silence.

And yet...

The Voice still becomes deafening within many, many actors' heads - even when actors are fully focussed on their partners - even with actors who have been well-trained in being "outer-focused" or "vectored-out".

So why is that? That's because the actor isn't FULFILLING the scene.

They may be totally "on their partner" but they are not INSIDE THE STORY. There is an instinctive understanding deep inside an actor of how the scene should live out as prescribed by the writer...and when we fail to attain that standard, we lose our focus.

When we lose our focus, there breaks open a space between where the scene ought to be and where it is...and this creates a "Gap".

And when the gap opens up...in floods the actor's inner negative voice.

So. Close the Gap.

Now...that is way simpler said than done, which is why the problem is ubiquitous among actors. It's easy enough for an acting teacher to give you the diagnosis, but I must also write a prescription...follow these steps:

First – remind yourself that the inner voice is natural, normal, and human...don't give it power by giving it more importance than it deserves and do NOT beat yourself up because of your having it. (By the way- make note of your inner voice...it is a major part of your self definition and if nurtured and accepted, will become your **fuel** as an artist and your **theme** to the world...but that's a whole other essay.)

Second – when the voice is making itself heard, accept it as a gift...it's a red flag warning that the scene is not working and be thankful that the mechanism exists as a check and balance to your work.

Third – fix the STORY problem. Knowing that acting is a function of: analysis (scene structure) + emotional preparation (personalization of circumstances) + focus (partner-related actions), decide that the reason your Gap exists between where the scene ought to be and where you are must be because you're under-rehearsed or have misunderstood one of those three key pillars of acting.

VERY IMPORTANT NOTE: When I say "where the scene ought to be", I do NOT mean in any way the result of how the scene should "look". Acting is always process-oriented and not result-oriented, and in no way should your work be presentational, anticipated, or pre-ascribed. Acting is always defined as living truthfully:

Definition of Acting (my new and improved Mesiner): "the real-life accidental behaviour that results from partner-related actions that are prescribed specifically and clearly from the structure and emotional understanding of a heightened circumstance."

By *ought to be*, I mean that in your rigorous and thorough scene analysis and in your emotional exploration to understand and honour the underlying truth of your character, you grew to have an innate understanding of what the circumstances are about in a profound and visceral way.

So...

If the Gap opens up and you find yourself thinking in the scene, you either:

- did not analyse the script deeply enough and mine the story for all its details (don't forget David Mamet's "invent nothing – *deny* nothing")

or

- did not dig deeply inside yourself to attempt to empathize with your character's emotional truth and understanding (and/or probably too scared to go that deep into your personal experiential/imaginative places)

or

- did not clearly define and commit to the partner-related actions (verbs) and focus on what you are trying to achieve in the scene.

Or...a combination of two or all three of the above. In other words:

DO THE SCENE WORK.

Analyse, decode, research, deduce, and dig, dig, dig into the scene structure

DO THE SELF WORK.

Explore, search your triggers, hooks, imagination, dig, dig, dig into the grounding and emotional truths of your character and what you know about them.

DO THE ACTIONS.

Commit to the moment to moment verbs and get it done in the scene through FOCUS.

And then...the "Gap" should close...

And that nasty "inner stage voice" should fall quiet.

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