


**AnActorPrepares**  
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*A blog for actors, actresses and directors who would like to acquire professional tuition about their crafts without enrolling in a theatre-academy or a formal university context. The blog consists of essays, insights, exercises and observations that will help theatre-artists achieve their professional aims.*



## WORKING WITH EGOTISTS

Charles Marowitz (December 30, 2009)

Everyone has an ego and in the theatre egos come in three sizes: enormous, colossal and humongous. Which is just another way of saying that artists of every stripe have idealized conceptions of themselves which is why they often produce both spectacular successes and monumental disasters.

An actress acquaintance of mine, who over the years had built up a prodigious reputation for herself on the American stage which included Tony nominations and a number of outstanding regional awards, found herself in her 60s auditioning for a television series in Hollywood. The interviewer was a bright young thing recently graduated from UCLA. Her first question was: "Could you tell me a little about what you've actually done on the stage?" The actress was a little dumbfounded but felt it politic not to reveal her surprise. She rattled off a number of top-drawer Broadway productions, many of which were opposite a roster of imposing male stars. The names of those productions meant nothing to the casting director and even many of the celebrity names produced only blank blinks. It became clear that the generational gulf that yawned between the interviewer and the actress could never be bridged. As she left the casting director's office, the actress was in tears and seriously contemplated giving up the business.

To performers, the items on their résumés are a chronology of public achievement, creative experiences they have undergone at various stages in their lives that have turned them into the artists they have become. Their 'credits' are, in a very real sense, the 'meaning of their lives', a catalogue of achievements and a validation of their worth. But to someone unfamiliar with their work they are simply the names of anonymous plays, films and TV roles, no different from those inscribed on the hundreds of résumés that land on agents' desks day after day. An actor's ego is an impenetrable citadel which contains real and imaginary triumphs which, because they have been experienced by audiences and witnessed by professional observers, constitute an irrefutable monument to their reality. To deny that is to deny the very essence of their existence.

Every artist involved in the theatrical collaboration possesses, to some degree, a heightened Sense of Self. It cannot easily be set aside when questioned or assailed by a director. That is why a director needs delicacy and discretion when intruding on an actor's sense of their role because, in so doing, he may be invading a well-armored fortress which, as is to be expected, will be heavily defended.

At the beginning of a rehearsal period, all the scrutiny is on the text and the slowly evolving performances. Actors do not openly declare that they have 'a heightened Sense of Self' nor that they have an instinct about how their characterization should evolve. It is all happening on a subconscious plane but easily surmised in the actor's manner, inflections and choices. The director divines the actor's conception of his role through minute hints and suggestions emanating from the actor's reading. Missteps or serious misconceptions must be detected as early as possible because they are the bricks and mortar out of which

the actor's interpretation will be constructed. If misguided or contrary to the director's understanding of the material, they need to be deracinated immediately for if they are permitted to grow and take on girth, they will ultimately become impossible to uproot.

The tolerant, easygoing, unobtrusive director who lets an actor's misconceptions develop, even as he experiences uneasiness about their implications, will have no defense against the actor who, urged to rethink his characterization only days before an opening, complains: "Why didn't you say something three weeks ago if you thought I was going in the wrong direction? Why tell me now, a week before we have to go up?" In the face of such a rebuke, the tactful, polite and unobtrusive director will not have a leg to stand on. It was his duty to raise a red flag the moment he sensed the actor was on the wrong track.

But let us assume the director does intercede early in the game – say, in the first week that actors are 'on their feet', albeit with 'scripts in hand'. What if the tentative actor resents directorial interference while he is at that delicate stage during which he is still 'testing the waters' and experimenting with different options? He can justifiably complain the director is choking off his oxygen; refusing to allow him to find his way, to flesh out his character and formulate his personal interpretation.

It is a legitimate conflict of interests. No actor wants his performance to be 'dictated' by a director, and no director wants his conception of a play's meaning distorted or derailed by an interpretation that runs counter to what he wants his production to 'say'.

According to protocol, the director should prevail and the actor fall in line. After all, an individual characterization is only a cog in a wheel that contains many spokes. But occasionally an actor's notion, though opposed to a director's preconception, will supplement or even improve the whole. Sometimes an alien idea effectively realized will bring an unexpected dimension to the proceedings whose repercussions will enhance all the surrounding performances. Sometimes, in short, an actor's instinct is superior to a director's, more inspired and more transformative.

It is in situations such as these that ego most threatens the collective effort. For the director's insistence on his way may be nothing more than a deep-seated resistance to having his authority put into question. By the same token, the actor may feel that his 'artistic integrity' is being violated when asked to surrender to the commands of a director who will not bend to a fresh idea that he did not originate.

Egoistic confrontations of this kind are almost never resolved openly. The actor suppresses his resistance, the director suppresses his indignation, and the company suppresses its inclination to take sides. A contretemps of that kind often can sour the rehearsal-atmosphere irreparably.

As I have said elsewhere, a useful temporary solution is for the director to encourage the actor fully to demonstrate his new insight so that everyone, the director included, can gauge its efficacy. If it is subsequently rejected at least the actor has the satisfaction of having given it full vent before an impartial jury i.e. - the company. But if it turns out to be a fructifying idea, one that excites and appeals to others, an idea that causes each member of the company to alter or adjust their performances to the betterment of the whole, the director may have unwittingly been presented with an invaluable gift; a hidden insight which re-fertilizes the material and enhances its power. If that is not the case, if the actor's idea is 'off the wall' and fundamentally wrong-headed, it will ring false to everyone in the rehearsal-room, since all actors are umbilically connected to the context from which every new idea springs.

So incursions of ego are not to be treated as a 'nuisance', a manifestation of the actor's irrepressible desire to 'show off' or 'hog the spotlight', but possibly as a lucky strike that owes its discovery to the reflections of an actor who has turned the tedium of a routine, scheduled flight into a rollicking journey on a magic carpet.

We are referring here to ideas which are relevant to the realization of a playwright's work; always a delicate maneuver fraught with dangers. There are those other, more traditional, ego-problems that concern billing, press coverage, placement in curtain-calls, the size of one's dressing room, the color or accessories of one's costume, the length of one's bio in the program, the degree of illumination on stage commensurate with their conception of their reputation -- all of which are, at base childish quibbles which should be treated by the director in the following manner: A straight line should be formed by the entire company, all of whom should be issued a baseball bat. The offending actor should be forced to stand with his back to his fellow-players and forced to repeat the words "I am an insufferable ham and contemptible human being" at least two hundred times. That done, each actor should take turns whacking the offender firmly on the backside until sitting comfortably is no longer an option. If desired, this ritual can be accompanied by boos, catcalls, whistles and cacophonous music which may give it somewhat greater sense of ritual.