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Hi all,

GREETING:

Thanks to all of you who responded with feedback and condolences for the last Insider. I was pleased that so many of you thought that the dance issue was one of the most humorous so far. That's good. I try to make these educational AND fun. I was also impressed that many of you have found yourselves in similar situations in your careers. One reader informed me that she had a less than encouraging dance teacher, but she stuck it out and her persistence paid off. She was able to impress the CEO of a major corporation with the rapidity with which she picked up the Viennese Waltz at his birthday bash in Austria. Nice life some of you lead by the way. Okay, as promised, this issue deals with what an actor goes through from booking the role until the final curtain call.

THIS ISSUE'S HIGHLIGHTS:

- Anatomy of the Performance
- Crossing Wall Street – Arol's attempt at writing a book

WHAT I HAVE DONE:

ACTING:

In HWI#8 I talked (in excruciating detail!) about the audition process that an actor goes through before landing a role. Well, I thought that it might be interesting for y'all if I talked about what happens between the audition and when you, the audience member, see the final product. While the process is different for film and television, what follows is generally what happens in the case of a stage play.

The Anatomy of the Performance:

I auditioned for THE DINER PLAYS at the Bickford Theatre in Morristown, NJ. I had seen the casting call in Backstage Magazine and since it was only 10 minutes away from my parents' house, I figured, why not? The play consisted of four original one-act plays by four different local playwrights. Their only mandate was to write a one-act play that takes place in booth at a diner. The result was THE DINER PLAYS; two comedies, one drama and one dramedy. I read for several different parts over a two-day audition/callback period.

The Call:

The director, Margaret Noonan, called to offer me the role of Norman in the comedy "THE SESSION". Usually that initial call brings euphoria to the actor, but in this case I couldn't hide my disappointment. I thought I had had a really good audition, but Norman was a relatively small part. I had been hoping for the more edgy role of Henry in the drama "OH HENRY" where he threatens to blow up his ex-wife. Now, lest you think I was being a snob (as we all know "there are no small parts, only small actors") I was wavering because I could still audition for another play with a meatier role that I could do instead. However, with some urging from Margaret, I accepted the role. Opportunity costs be damned!

The Read Through:

Our first rehearsal took place at Margaret's house, not too far from the Bickford Theatre. "THE SESSION" is about a psychiatrist and her patient who meet by chance in a diner and a friendly conversation turns into a full-blown session with the twist being that the patient ends up analyzing the psychiatrist. Norman is a waiter in the diner and a kind of a surrogate son for Susan, the psychiatrist. In turn, he looks up to her as a mentor - indeed it is mentioned that he is "following in her footsteps" by getting his Masters degree in psychiatry. So what happens in the read though, as you can imagine, is the actors sit around a table and literally read through the play, speaking their lines, but not really acting. It is too early for that. The purpose here is to allow the actors to concentrate on the words and what is happening in the play without the distractions of movement (a.k.a. "blocking") and "acting". It was also the first time for me to meet Susan (actress Eve Alexander) and to get to know Margaret, who would do double duty as director and actor in "THE SESSION". She would play the role of Leslie, the patient.

The Character Development Process:

Over the next few weeks we would rehearse 2-3 times per week. We would work on "blocking" (where and when an actor enters, exits and moves while on stage), getting "off book" (memorizing lines) and, most importantly, "character development". This is the process by which an actor makes a character his own. Now the words on the page give the actor some clues as to the personality of his character, but more often than not it is not entirely spelled out for him. Even more so with a one-act play where the actor is less likely to get "backstory" (background information as to who the character is and what in his past is making him do what he is doing on the stage). This was entirely new to me. While I had performed on stage once before in ONCE UPON A TIME, that was children's theater which is very different. For that you really don't need to become a Prince or a Princess, but just make funny faces and voices to make the kids laugh. Now, while Norman was a part with relatively few lines, he comes on stage frequently interrupting the session going on between Susan and Leslie. And while an actor might have some basis from which to create Susan and Leslie (we all have some pre-conceived notions about how a psychiatrist and a patient would act), there were very few clues as to the make up of Norman.

The script offered the following kernels of information as a starting point. First we know he is a waiter in a diner. But we also know that he is getting his masters in Psychiatry (originally the script read Political Science) and Susan mentions that he "has brains" and comes from a rich family. Well what to make of all that? What is a smart, wealthy, 30-something, graduate student, doing waiting tables in a diner?! Furthermore, it is clear that while, he is supposedly intelligent, he doesn't appear to have much common sense. For example, he overhears Leslie saying that she is "frigid" (due to her talking Prozac) so he goes and turns up the thermostat, thinking that she is cold. These apparent contradictions were the source of much frustration for me for quite a while. At first I blamed it on the writer. I knew that it was written by Eve/Susan's sister, a first time playwright and so I just assumed that she hadn't considered Norman all that carefully perhaps because he is not the main character in the play. But I continually reminded myself that as a good actor, I should make sense of the writing as is and that writers usually labor intensely over very little "if" and "but" and that every word is carefully chosen. Therefore it was up to me to make sense of Norman. (For those of you who are wondering, yes, I did ask the director for help early on, but she said she wanted me to figure it out for myself. Okay then).

First Eve and I developed a little backstory for Susan and Norman's relationship. We decided that they met when she was lecturing at his grad school and she recommended that he get a job someplace where he could observe people closely - later suggesting that he work as a waiter in a diner that she frequented. While this was never revealed to the audience, it helped us develop our characters and their relationship to one another.

Then I worked on reconciling the fact that Norman is smart and rich and yet working in a diner (after all, there are less labor intensive jobs where you can observe people). At first I made Norman an all-American, lazy, indifferent kind of guy who's family money allowed him not to have to get a better paying job. However, even if he was lazy, that didn't explain why so much went over his head - like the frigid business. Then I tried several accents for Norman (like the Brooklynese "hey, how yous doin'??") to try to dumb him down, but Margaret was adamant that she did not want any accents.

Finally, over the following few weeks of rehearsal, Norman became this nebbish, quirky character who was at the same time lovable and repulsive. His speech was slow, but enunciated. His posture was a constant slouch and his gut hung out over his belt (I had to concentrate on keeping mine forced out). He always seemed to have a sort of dim confused expression on his face and when he laughed he was all big, toothy smiles with a little hyperventilation thrown in for good measure. In short, Norman sat uncomfortably between nerdy and retarded.

Norman was from a wealthy family (hence he can afford grad school without a high paying job), but he's not really that bright (at least not common sense-wise). Even though Susan says he has brains, it seemed to be more in the way that a loving mother would compliment her son even if it were unwarranted. I had started to get a good handle on Norman, but even with only three more rehearsals until opening night, he was still developing.

I had been styling my hair the way I normally do - the conservative Wall Street look. Then one day in the dressing room I brushed it all forward and matted it down (trust me, not a good look). The result led instant credibility to Norman's dim wittedness. He was not a fashion plate after all and now he didn't look like one.

Then came the walk. As I was becoming Norman I started to think of this kid at summer camp when I was a boy. His name was Tommy James. He was overweight and if not clinically retarded, certainly slow on the uptake. Like nice little kids of privilege, we used to make fun of Tommy and the way he walked - kind of a quick shuffle step, never really bending his knees. I would practice this walk backstage or out in the parking lot during rehearsals until I had it perfected. Then I laid it on Margaret and the cast during dress rehearsal. It was a huge hit. "What the hell is that?!" I heard someone shout. Later, during the actual performances, Norman's signature walk would get chuckles and snickers from the audience as he shuffled on and off stage in search of some coffee or silverware for Susan and Leslie.

The Writer's Preview:

Roughly four days before opening night we performed the play (all four one-acts) for the writers. This was the first time that any of them had seen what we, the actors, had made of their words. Although I was not nervous, it was apparent that Margaret was (her brothers had written two of the plays) and probably some of the other actors were as well. Will the writers like how I, the actor or director, have interpreted their "baby"? I guess I figured that I had made something out of relatively little, so I was pleased and thought my writer, Jenny, would be too. Although I was not privy to all of the feedback, it seemed that all the writers were pleased with our work. Jenny told me that she loved what I had done with Norman, especially the walk. I was dying to ask her if it was at all similar to how she had envisioned Norman while she was writing him, but I refrained, reasoning that Norman was mine now. She had given me pretty much full control and I didn't want her original conceptions of him to color my interpretation at this late stage. I have to admit I was really quite pleased though that she told me she liked my work. She gushed about my choices and in particular what I had done with the juggling scene (more on that later).

Then, the following day, Margaret gathered us around and gave us the "true story" - the notes that the writers had given to her. As it turns out, while Jenny did like my Norman creation, she thought he was too eccentric and wanted me to "pull it back" just a little. Well, I was clearly despondent. Here I had taken a small role with no real blueprint and created what I had hoped was a scene-stealer and now I was being asked to, basically, not steal the scene. There were some specific moments that she wanted eliminated (like Norman mixing up the regular and decaf coffee pots and then switching them mid pour - this is something I had done once quite by accident, but the rest of the cast loved it so we kept it in). She was afraid that Norman would upstage Leslie and Susan, who were supposed to be the main focus. I was a little disappointed, but tried to remind myself that this was team effort and that I was a team player. Plus it was complimentary in a way when someone is worried about you getting laughs that might drown out their dialogue.

Note: Obviously the writer's preview usually only happens for original plays. I doubt very much if Tennessee Williams would show up at a high school production of his "Glass Menagerie".....even if he were alive.

The Tech Rehearsal:

This is the rehearsal, usually two or three days before opening night, where you run through the entire show (or at least "cue to cue") with all the lights and sounds and music. In THE DINER PLAYS there was a song before and after each act, special lighting for certain scenes, blackouts after each act and a bomb explosion (lights, sound-boom!, glass breaking, and smoke) at the end of "OH HENRY". Lewis, our tech guy was a gray haired, ponytail wearing, theatre veteran. Yet, somehow he couldn't seem to get any of the tech cues right. The songs would start too late, the blackouts would come too soon, etc. This caused much hand wringing for Margaret, but Lewis eventually got it all down by opening night. Thank God. There is enough to worry about (missing cues, forgetting lines, etc.) without having to worry about whether or not you will be delivering your lines in complete darkness.

The Preview Performances:

This is basically our final dress/tech rehearsal (the night before the opening), but the director (and actors) can invite close friends and family to watch. It is notable for two reasons. First, it is the first time that we are performing the play in front of a live audience. So, especially for newbies like me, it is good to feel the butterflies, heretofore unfelt, caused by people actually watching your every move on stage. That nervousness can cause even veteran actors to forget their lines. It's something akin to being able to walk easily on a curb, but losing your balance on a steel girder of the same width ten stories high. Second, and perhaps more importantly, this preview is the first time that we will be able to gauge audience response. For example, we know "THE SESSION" is a comedy, and a darn funny one, but until now there has been no one to laugh at it, so we are not completely sure what audiences will find humorous. This is important so that the actors can gauge where they will need to wait on their lines to allow laughter to die down. I'm not kidding you. This is something that directors make a big point about - waiting on a line until the audience laughter subsides. Although there might be an unrealistically lengthy pause between lines, it is better than not being able to hear the next one - especially if that next one happens to be funny as well. We were all quite encouraged by the audience response on preview night. It made us feel that we had something worthwhile going on here. Then again, they were friends and family - a stacked audience. The real true test would be opening night.

Opening Night!:

What can I say about opening night? It's huge! It is the culmination of all the hard work that everyone put into the show. I don't care what actors tell you about only being in it for the process (character analysis, etc.). That's rubbish. Having an audience react (favorably!) to you on stage is the reason we all do it. A Wall Street research analyst might say "I love analyzing company reports, but I hate delivering them in public". Not so for the actor. It's all about making the audience laugh (if you are doing a comedy) or making them sit absolutely pin drop still (if you are doing a drama).

We had a great opening night audience. Norman was well received. In fact, he got an ovation during his scarf-juggling scene. Toward the end of "THE SESSION" Susan, trying to impress Leslie with her protégé, asks Norman what else he can do, "besides, you know, waiting tables?" Norman looks a bit puzzled, then a smile creeps over his face and he says, "Well, I'm learning how to juggle. Wanna see?" Without waiting for an answer he proceeds to whip out three brightly colored scarves from his apron and concentrating intensely, begins to juggle them while singing the 50 states song. Not sure if you know this one. I didn't, but I guess it's how they teach kids the states nowadays. I think it's the same tune as that other children's classic "Do Your Ears Hang Low", or you may be more familiar with the college campus version "Do Your Balls Hang Low". Anyway, after the first stanza the audience erupted in thunderous applause and then once again when a beaming Norman finishes all 50 states. Thankfully there was dialogue in between so while I did have to keep juggling, I didn't really have to say all 50 states in alpha

order – I would just memorize the ones that I needed to say aloud and the rest I would just mumble under my breath. It's amazing how many non-states come up when you are nervous.....Detroit and Chicago seemed to be regulars. No matter, because any slip up like that was in character for Norman. In case you were wondering, no, I did not know how to juggle prior to my role as Norman. Of course, scarf juggling is not nearly as difficult as ball juggling, but I still put it on my acting resume under "special skills".

I can't tell you how great a feeling it was to be on stage and to make people laugh. Of course there is anxiety too, but if you've done the work before hand, you are really on autopilot during the performance, barely aware of an audience and just staying connected to the other actors on stage with you. When I came off the stage other actors asked me how big the crowd was and I said I honestly didn't know. While I looked out toward the "fourth wall" (that's what actors/directors call the open area where you all sit staring at us) on several occasions, I really was just having a conversation with Susan and Leslie and didn't notice how large or small the audience was. Gosh, I'm really beginning to sound like a real artsy type!

Press Night:

During the opening night the press was invited to see our performance in order to write reviews. Well, considering our run was only scheduled to last three more days after they saw it, there was little likelihood of a review getting printed in time so I, for one, didn't feel any extra nerves on this night.

The Curtain Call:

When the house lights finally come up at the end of "OH HENRY" I anxiously await my turn in the wings to jaunt (actors tend to jaunt out for their curtain calls) out onto the stage. On opening night I was flush with the adrenaline rush that comes with a good performance. Not just me, but everyone. We all did a nice job I thought and the audience seemed to agree. Standing there in the hot lights with the applause ringing in my ears I thought to myself.....yup, this is it. This is the reason why we actors do this. This is why I left the cubicle world. Nice.

WRITING:

Many of you have suggested to me that these Hollywood Insiders would make for an interesting book. Well after surveying the existing publications of humor books on both acting and business (for this is a tale of both) and reading several books of questionable quality and interest, I have written a book proposal for CROSSING WALL STREET: THE YEAR OF LIVING ARTISTICALLY. The next step is to find an agent or go directly to the publishers of similar books. I have been looking online for advice and contacting people I know who have written books, but if any of you have any advice or, better yet, know any literary agents or publishers, please let me know.

MUSIC:

Nothing on the music front this summer. Still on hiatus.

THIS ISSUE'S STATISTICS:

Days since becoming an "actor": 475

Number of Films: 3

Number of TV Shows: 1

Number of Theatre Shows: 6

Number of Subscribers to the Insider: 157

Website Hits: 2,428 (I am starting to get email from people whom I don't know that happen upon my site for one reason or another. This is fun!)

Mood Meter: Mixed. I am very excited about doing more film and TV, but I realize that it won't be easy to even get auditions for these roles. My agent told me plain and simple that since I don't have Yale

Drama School or an MFA from NYU on my resume and I haven't been struggling at it for ten years, casting directors won't even look at me unless I am 100% appropriate for the part. Well, I was raised on "if there's a will, there's a way" and I am confident that I will make it happen for myself without the acting pedigree.

LAST ISSUE'S STATISTICS:

Days since becoming an "actor": 431

Number of Films: 3

Number of TV Shows: 1

Number of Theatre Shows: 6

Number of Subscribers to the Insider: 157

Website Hits: 2,211

Mood Meter: Mixed. While I am excited about moving on and concentrating on film and TV, I know that it will be a hard road, especially without an agent with strong relationships with casting directors of soaps, commercials and primetime TV. I am also dealing with the very real concern of finances and making a living. The time is drawing nigh when I will have to get some kind of steady paying job to finance my acting classes, headshot printing, etc., not to mention food and rent. I know that this is something every actor has to face, but I have very much enjoyed acting full time – looking through the trade mags for casting calls, mailing out headshots, going to auditions, seeing plays, etc. But mostly I am excited about stepping it up a notch.