on physical characterization

"I most enjoy the loss of self that can only be achieved through detailed understanding of another life — not by limping and growing a moustache."
— Daniel Day-Lewis.

"When are we going to work on creating characters?"

This refrain arises from time to time in the course of my teaching. I might be tempted to reply "What do you think we're doing?", as we strive to come to terms with circumstances, need, plot objective, action, and the path. We look at the *decisions* that a character makes, and the actions that follow from these decisions, as revealing character. So by studying the circumstances in which a character finds herself, some of which are a consequence of her own decisions, we can learn a lot about her character.

But that isn't what the student is asking. The student who asks about when we are going to work on character is asking about physical characterization, the taking up of various physical and vocal idiosyncrasies that define character in the popular imagination. Darth Vader's character impresses itself on us in large part through his voice. The temptation, then, is to assume that the main work of the actor is the finding of the right voice, and the consistent application of it across the role. This ability to change one's vocal and physical demeanor is a kind of miracle to the lay person, and also to the aspiring actor, and indeed, there can be something miraculous about it. But it is not the deepest essence of the actor's work, to my mind. And that deepest essence should be the basis for such physical and vocal mutations.

In the approach to acting that I teach, the actor is exhorted to find the need from which all of the things he says and does in a script will arise. We see this need as living in the core of the body, the abdominal core, the seat of the deepest appetites and the strongest muscles. We further see this need as something essentially aspirational: the character seeks to express himself fully, make himself fully known and fully visible, in all of his potential. The need is a hunger for meaningful alliance with others, a connection in which the individual's ability to contribute to a social context is recognized and productively harnessed.

In my approach, one of the first things an actor needs to do is hunt through the circumstances, find a way to name this need in the character's voice, and then understand how that need is being pursued in the various episodes that comprise a script. The character has this need, but if the actor has uncovered a need that is truly appropriate for the character and the script, it is a need that lives in the actor as well. So the actor contacts a need in himself, and brings that need to bear on the character's struggle.

Now once the actor connects to this need, on the one hand, and also starts to absorb the defining features of the world of the character, its customs, its rules, its taboos, etc. on the other, a synergy emerges, and the actor will start to organically experience certain impulses to move and speak in particular ways. The vaunted physical characterization of the actor emerges instinctually from alignment with the need of the character, on the one hand, and the character's world on the other.

In this way, physical and vocal choices are part and parcel of the conscious effort to touch the needs that define the character, and the world toward which the needs are directed. Such choices are not born of a picture of the character that the actor has standing *outside* the role, as a member of the audience would have. Rather they are borne out of the actor's

contact with the current of imaginative energy circulating through the text they are working on.

The truth is that the process of acting I have described above, not the approach to physical characterization but the effort to connect with the necessities that define a character and her world, and to understand how that connection translates into pursuable imperatives for the actor, is not easy. The actor is faced with intense pressure to attempt to manage her own self-presentation before a camera or an audience, rather than giving herself wholly to the exigencies of the character in her world. Learning to focus on the pursuit of objectives, rather than on how much the audience likes her, takes resolution on the actor's part to jettison whatever bag of tricks she has accumulated, and to submit to a bewildering array of distinctions and instructions in an attempt to cross over to a deeper and more compelling way of entering into a script. In the process of learning to do this, adding physical characterization becomes a distraction and a bit of an impediment. In some sense, the actor is learning to stay tuned into this fire or energy (God, can you believe I grew up on the East coast?) in the abdominal core, and impulses originating there to travel through them and out the extremities, most notably the jaw (saying lines), but also the arms (gesture) and legs (mobility). It's an act of coordination to engage in and to sustain that requires enormous determination and concentration, and no concentration can be spared to maintain physical postures or vocal changes that have not arisen out of this process, in the manner previously described. It is in this way that physical characterization can become a distraction.

Physical and vocal adaptations that arise from the actor's connection with the role, on the other hand, are a whole different matter. They don't tend to distract in the same way. But that doesn't tend to happen early in the learning curve of this approach, as the actor is still groping towards this

underlying connection with the necessities of the character and the role. It's after the process of making this connection becomes somewhat more assured that such impulses toward physical characterization tend to arise.

(I am aware that sometimes, an actor may have a strong impulse at the outset, without any deliberate study of the role, to proceed in a particular way physically and vocally, and this may in turn accelerate the process with which he connects with the all-important necessities of the role, but there is no way to systematize this, and often it doesn't forge such a connection, it merely represents that standing outside of the role I mentioned earlier, and doesn't take the actor any closer to the deep priorities of the character. An outside eye is needed to make the determination which is the case. But such an approach is not the basis for a technique, I believe, since it relies totally on impulses that arise in the actor, which may or may not be serving her. That someone has an impulse, sadly, does not make it a fruitful or valuable impulse).

So what can an actor do to develop facility in physical characterization? Study voice and movement modalities which help the actor to explore the range of possibilities of the voice and the body, for one thing. I have written about a number of them previously, and there are many more. When an actor has an intimate acquaintance with these possibilities, then when the physical impulses in question arise, his voice and body are able to translate these impulses into behavior and mannerism more deftly than she would without such training. Strasberg animal training can be very valuable as well.

But the work of physical characterization should ultimately be a secondary or intermediate phase of the actors work, as the ability to draw people into fictional situations through the use of personal vulnerability is the most important skill for an actor to develop. Every thing else flows from this.

Does it run in the family? Sadly, no.

From a review of Amy Poehler and her brother Greg's new show, *Welcome to Sweden*:

"Welcome to Sweden," about a man who leaves his high paying job as a celebrity accountant to move to Sweden for the love of his life, was created by Greg Poehler, brother of "Parks and Recreation" star and comedy veteran Amy Poehler. The elder Poehler cashes in a few favors from the likes of "SNL" veteran Will Ferrell and "Parks and Rec" co-star Aubrey Plaza to bring some much needed talent to the show, as well as appearing as an evil version of herself on more than one occasion. She, as always, is a delight — as are most of the celebrity guests, who occasionally save some subpar writing — but a much harsher "d" word comes to mind when watching the character her brother portrays on the show.

Unlike his sister, Greg has no formal training as an actor, writer, or producer (he and Amy serve as executive producers). Sadly, it shows. While plenty of family members are funny in their own right, it appears Amy's wealth of experience in the UCB improv theatre, years writing and acting on "Saturday Night Live" and many diverse roles in television and film have actually helped her hone her craft and become one of the funniest people on the planet. Her brother, however, did none of these things, instead relying on whatever inherit

[sic] charm and perseverance was within him to churn out a comedy series based on his own personal experiences moving to Sweden.
Big surprise: it doesn't work… "

Hard work. Dedication. Stamina. There are no short cuts.

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lies,   damn   lies   and hollywood acting teachers

You may have noticed the redesign of the homepage, not to mention the new business name. In the course of effecting this transformation, I looked around at the way some of my competitors are marketing themselves. And some are doing a terrific job. But I did see one thing that gave me pause.

I saw studios that make such promises as that their approach to training will make acting "easy" and "fun". In some cases, they went on to glibly ridicule the great approaches to acting that evolved in the last century or so, as if they were talking about some dated hairstyle that now seems both disastrously misguided and quaint at the same time. I found the level of disrespect and outright mendacity here nothing short of breathtaking.

What makes it so awful is that there is a part of all of us that wants things to be easy, but this part is not the part that acquires stamina, builds careers, and finds the faith it takes to confront adversity. Assertions that acting can be easy fosters the wrong part of those who are drawn to it.

And such messages are already everywhere in our society. We are all relentlessly bombarded with images of grinning celebrities, coiffed, styled, and made-up for the camera; this torrent of images suggests that an actor's life is an

extended cocktail party or romp on the beach, interrupted by the occasional awards ceremony. These images are inescapable; even those of us who know the truth of most actors' lives are vulnerable to them.

Add to that the fact that the acting that most people consume has been packaged and polished: editing, musical underscoring, CGI and camera angeles all conspire to create an impression of effortlessness and flawlessness. It's hard for people drawn to acting NOT to get the impression that acting must be easy and fun. To speak as an authority and validate such misconceptions is truly unconscionable.

The reality of pursuing a craft is quite different. As Mohammed Ali famously said, "The fight is won or lost far away from witnesses — behind the lines, in the gym, and out there on the road, long before I dance under those lights." Bette Davis