

rami malek on playing freddie mercury

NPR did a [nice interview](#) with Rami Malek about his work on the role of Freddie Mercury in Bohemian Rhapsody. I particularly like this bit:

Malek speculates that the singer's showmanship sprung from a desire to find his place in the world. Born in Zanzibar as Farrokh Bulsara, Mercury had buck teeth and was called "Bucky" by most of the kids at the boarding school he attended in India. When Mercury returned to Zanzibar after boarding school, the country was in the midst of a revolution and his family had to immigrate to London. "At that point, trying to identify himself, [he] feels like a fish out of water," Malek says.

But in front of a crowd, it was a different story: "When [Mercury] gets out on the stage, he holds everyone's attention and says, 'Hey, I may have been an outcast and a misfit, and I may feel like I don't belong, but here on this stage, we belong together,'" Malek says. "It is the most beautiful thing to see realized."

You see what he did there? He identified a couple of gaping wounds from Mercury's past (having buck teeth and being teased for it, having to immigrate to London as a young adult and feeling like a fish out of water) that produces a need (for belonging) that he as the actor can pursue throughout the film. This is exactly how we break things down in class: we look at the character's past to identify moments or periods of profound loss (which we call **gashes** or **tumors**, respectively), and also moments of triumph or completeness (which we call **trophy moments**), and then try to articulate what the **need** is that arises from those past events. In this way, we find a

need that can be pursued under all circumstances, which we call the **underlying objective**. Then the question arises, with regard to a particular scene: how can this underlying objective be productively **pursued** in the situation of the scene?

No wonder Malek was so good!

□

even movie stars have to deal with anxiety

Came across [this piece](#) recently in the *Hollywood Reporter*, in which the remarkable Chloe Grace Moretz is profiled. She's had a big year: she starred in [The Miseducation of Cameron Post](#), which won the Grand Jury prize at Sundance, and also in the much anticipated [remake of Suspiria](#). She is a truly gifted actor; if you've never seen [Let Me In](#), the British remake of [Let the Right One In](#), do yourself a favor.

Anyway, one of the things I liked in the profile was her discussion of coping with anxiety:

Do you still struggle with anxiety?

Meditation has really, really helped me, and just getting on a workout schedule. Working out is something that really helps with my anxiety. But I know that the minute I fall off of that, for sure.

But I think as a woman, it's very difficult to deal with the hormonal fluxes that we deal with monthly. I deal with so much anxiety hormonally from my cycle. Your cycle doesn't

know when you are going to be on the red carpet for a gala. So partner that with a lack of sleep and jet lag, and it's like a total spiral.

So for me, I just make an effort to make sure that I give myself 30 minutes a day to walk away. That just means shutting a bathroom door and just standing there for a second and focusing on my breathing, and focusing on my brain, and reconnecting to my heart and understanding who I am. That gets rid of the anxiety for me. But I think that, yeah, as an adult, it's never not going to be a struggle. There's so much societal influx around you, and there are so many people who need something from you.

Performing is a kind of test: we want to be found to be a good actor when we're done. In that sense, our identity as an actor is at stake every time we do it. This produced anxiety in many of us, and we each have to go on our own journey in learning to contend with that anxiety. A former student and working actor I know created a whole regimen that she does before every audition to help her with her anxiety, a regimen that involves yoga, eating bananas (for the tryptophan), and even medication.

What I liked about Moretz's comments is that they remind us that success doesn't mean the end of anxiety. In fact, it can often exacerbate it: if I screw up now, everything I've worked so hard to achieve will be taken away. So finding out how to face down the demon of anxiety is something that most of us performers will have to contend with our whole lives long. It's not something that we graduate from. I remember hearing a story about Josh Brolin and George Clooney making plans to get together at Clooney's house to work on the Coen Brothers movie *Hail, Caesar!* together. Brolin, so the story goes, drove to Clooney's house, parked in his car, and then sat in the car for an hour trying to muster the courage to go in. When he finally did, he confessed his anxiety to Clooney,

saying “I’m scared to work with you. You’re George Clooney.” To which Clooney replied, “I’m scared to work with you. You’re Josh Brolin.”

Moretz’s open discussion of her struggles with anxiety is generous in that it makes room for the rest of us to feel ok about having similar struggles. If someone with her talent and skill still feels scared, then it’s no wonder that we sometimes do as well.

an invitation

In 2015, I received a commission from the [Goethe Institut Los Angeles](#), which is the cultural wing of the German consulate, to translate a play by the writer [Peter Handke](#) that had never before been translated into English. The English title of the play is Subterranean Blues, with a nod to Bob Dylan. I’ll be reading the play aloud with two other actors on June 13th at 7 PM. Full information [here](#).

Peter Handke
Untertagblues

Ein Stationendrama
Suhrkamp



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advice from Phillip Seymour Hoffman

“Study, find all the good teachers and study with them, get involved in acting to act, not to be famous or for the money. Do plays. It’s not worth it if you are just in it for the money. You have to love it.”—Phillip Seymour Hoffman

Uranium Madhouse presents The Duchess of Malfi

Super-excited to be working on this incredible play, with current and former Mother of Inventioners Mandy Acosta, Cris D’Annunzio, Katelyn Rydzewski, David Bauman, and Wes Andrews.

[Uranium Madhouse Presents The Duchess of Malfi – project teaser](#) from [Andrew Wood](#) on [Vimeo](#).



experiencing vs learning (for performers)

[Leah Zhang](#), the certified Alexander instructor who is co-teaching my current Advanced class at the moment, sent a great excerpt from a book called [The Body Speaks](#) by Lorna Marshall to my current students. I have picked out an excerpt from the excerpt that I thought was really valuable.

People sometimes confuse experiencing with learning. Experiencing an exercise means you have encountered it and understood it. Learning means that you have repeated it so often that you can reproduce its function at any time,

anywhere. It is no longer something you have met once and found interesting; it is something you own, that you have claimed and can easily repeat. (And remember, the business of performing is repeatability. Every night on stage you must be able to repeat and reproduce a vivid performance. When filming, you must be able to repeat a moment of great sensitivity again and again, until the director has all the takes he or she wants.)

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is a habit, not an act.” –Will Durante, paraphrasing Aristotle

“the muscle of the soul”

One of the things that distinguishes the approach that I teach to acting, which I encountered as a directing graduate student at the Yale School of Drama, is the notion of *visceral activation*. The word “visceral”, I explain to students at their first night of class, comes from the Latin word *viscera*, meaning “gut” or “intestines”. The idea is that the lower abdomen is the seat of our very primitive need to thrive and flourish, that is, for well-being. Thriving and flourishing, it turns out, are intimately linked to a sense of belonging, of connection to others. By attempting to bring the need that is housed in that area to bear on *every moment* of a performance, we strive for maximum vulnerability, authority, and presence as an actor.

I have written about this quite a bit, including [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#). So when I came across [this piece](#), by Yoga teacher Danielle Prohom Olson, on a muscle in the abdominal core called the Psoas, I got very excited. Olson had recently discovered the work of a teacher named Liz Koch, who teaches

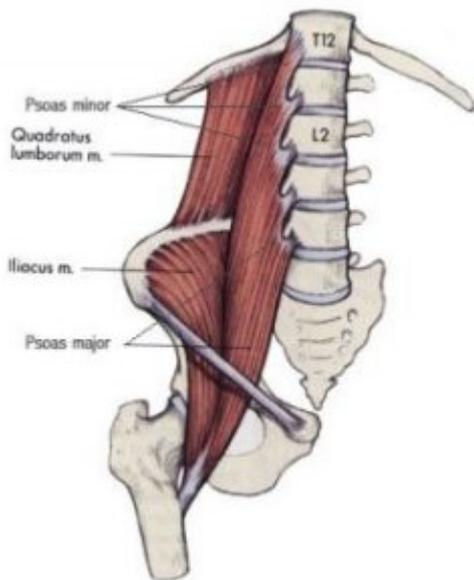
what she calls [Core Awareness](#).

According to Koch, the Psoas is far more than a core stabilizing muscle; it is an organ of perception composed of bio-intelligent tissue and “literally embodies our deepest urge for survival, and more profoundly, our elemental desire to flourish.”

Yes! Our elemental desire to flourish! That is exactly what the work that we do at Mother of Invention, which centers on getting in touch with an underlying objective, our need to flourish, is all about. And it means that all discussions of motivation come down to a basic, visceral, *positive* need to flourish! Everyone is trying to grow, expand, and thrive, by living connected, dynamic, full lives. To be able to do this, everyone has to enter relationship with others, to be connected. So everyone is vulnerable, *viscerally* vulnerable, because of this need for connection.

Also, the Psoas is “bio-intelligent tissue!” The Psoas is not just a muscle, it receives and processes information as well. This is consistent with this earlier blog post I wrote about brain research indicating the the gut processes information in a way that is similar to the brain, that in fact the gut can be thought of as a “[second brain](#).” This is hugely important, because as actors, we have to learn to “receive with the gut” or “receive with the need”; that the measuring of what we are receiving from our world and our scene partners happens not in the head but in the gut!

And what is the Psoas?



The Psoas muscle (pronounced so-as) is the deepest muscle of the human body affecting our structural balance, muscular integrity, flexibility, strength, range of motion, joint mobility, and organ functioning.

Growing out of both sides of the spine, the psoas spans laterally from the 12th thoracic vertebrae (T12) to each of the 5 lumbar vertebrae. From there it flows down through the abdominal core, the pelvis, to attach to the top of the femur (thigh) bone.

But wait! There's more!

A tight psoas not only creates structural problems, it constricts the organs, puts pressure on nerves, interferes with the movement of fluids, and impairs diaphragmatic breathing.

Koch believes the first step in cultivating a healthy psoas is to release unnecessary tension. But "to work with the psoas is not to try to control the muscle, but to cultivate the awareness necessary for sensing its messages. This involves making a conscious choice to become somatically aware."

A relaxed psoas is the mark of play and creative expression. Instead of the contracted psoas, ready to run or fight, the relaxed and released psoas is ready instead to lengthen and open, to dance. In many yoga poses (like tree) the thighs

can't fully rotate outward unless the psoas releases. A released psoas allows the front of the thighs to lengthen and the leg to move independently from the pelvis, enhancing and deepening the lift of the entire torso and heart.

Koch believes that by cultivating a healthy psoas, we can rekindle our body's vital energies by learning to reconnect with the life force of the universe. Within the Taoist tradition the psoas is spoken of as the seat or muscle of the soul, and surrounds the lower "Dan tien" a major energy center of body. A flexible and strong psoas grounds us and allows subtle energies to flow through the bones, muscles and joints.

The relaxed Psoas is ready to lengthen and open, to thrive, to experience meaningful connection that is the basis of our contentment. In class, we always look for a name for the visceral need, the underlying objective, that is *positive*. The actor must always understand herself to be reaching out in a scene for something worth having, even when she the scene requires that she hurl a thunderbolt at someone. We may use the core strength of the Psoas to hurl the thunderbolt, but we need to always return to the condition of openness to what our world has to offer.

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Koch writes "The psoas, by conducting energy, grounds us to the earth, just as a grounding wire prevents shocks and eliminates static on a radio. Freed and grounded, the spine

can awaken"...“ As gravitational flows transfer weight through bones, tissue, and muscle, into the earth, the earth rebounds, flowing back up the legs and spine, energizing, coordinating and animating posture, movement and expression. It is an uninterrupted conversation between self, earth, and cosmos.”

The Psoas is the muscle of the soul. What did Stanislavsky say? Acting is “the life of the human soul receiving its birth through technique.” See how it all comes together?

I am really excited to learn through Olson about Koch’s work. Seems like I am going to have learn something about grantwriting in the near future, so I can go on one of these Core Awareness retreats. And Koch is based in Santa Cruz. Who knows? Maybe I’ll be able to convince her co-teach with me at Mother of Invention one day. As Rachel Maddow likes to say, watch this space!

supremely inspiring: get your kleenex ready

This letter from Andrew Pochter, the American student killed in Egypt recently during the upheaval, will break your heart several times over. The letter was written to an at-risk kid Andrew had been a volunteer mentor to at a summer camp called Camp Opportunity in a previous summer. In the letter, Pochter manifests utmost wisdom and compassion, a supremely-evolved consciousness, especially for his young years. The world is much the worse for the loss of him.

Text of Andrew Pochter’s letter:

June 10, 2013

Dear Justin,

Hello how are you man? I can't believe it has been a year since camp. I am sure you are wiser, taller and smarter since I saw you last. Please accept my apologies that I will not be there for the graduation ceremony. Right now I am in Alexandria, Egypt teaching English to young students who are around your age. They all speak Arabic so learning English as a second language is quite difficult. But they are all really intelligent, just like you! You would really like the Arabic language, you should check it out!

Egypt is hazardous right now because the country is feeling the consequences of a enormous political revolution. I lose electricity and water all of the time but that's okay because I have many Egyptian friends to help take care of me. When I am in trouble, they take care of me and when they are in trouble, I always take care of them. Good friends do not come easily but as a rule, I always appreciate the good deeds people do for me even if I don't know them well. What is most important is that I am trying to do my best for others. I want to surround myself with good people!

I did not come up with this personal philosophy on my own. Without thoughtful and caring people like you, I would probably be a mean and grumpy person. Your kind heart and genuine character serve as a model for me. I hope that you will never stop your curiosity for the beautiful things in life. Go on hikes in forests, canyons and mountains, go fishing, research wildlife, and get out of city Life if you can. Surround yourself with good friends who care about your future. Fall in love with someone. Get your heart broken. And then move on and fall in love again. Breathe life every day like it is your first. Find something that you love to do and never stop doing that thing unless you find something else you love more.

Don't blame others for their mistakes. It makes you weak. You are a strong man who does not need to be weighted down by

people who only complain and say negative things. Speak with conviction and believe in yourself because your personal confidence is just as important as your education.

I wish I could be there to say my congratulations but I know that it wouldn't change much. You have earned it. Hopefully one day you will hang up this diploma next your high school and college diplomas as well.

*Try not to forget me. If you ever need anything, just email:
Best Regards.*

*Your Friend,
Andrew Pochter*

[Andrew Pochter's letter](#) by [The Washington Post](#)

“you have to love the sweat more than the lights”

I really enjoyed this interview with Bette Davis. The youtube title notwithstanding, there is great wisdom and insight in this piece.

it can't be said often enough

Athletes, dancers, and singers never outgrow their need for the basic conditioning that makes their crafts possible. Neither do actors.

–John Gronbeck-Tedesco, *Acting Through Exercises*