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CGATM
CREATIVE GENIUS ASIA

A TALENT FOR DIRECTING

Directing

What does a Director do?

I don't expect the everyday movie-going public to really know what a Director does. I'm surprised, though, at how few actors really know what a Director does. We'll get into the specifics of his job after we present what he does in a qualitative sense.

When I was in Vietnam shooting a video, a local production manager was giving me problems. He was a cocky 25 year old who wouldn't follow rules. Finally, I sat him down, and through a translator, I simply said the following.

"Do you know what a Director does? (He shakes his head NO.) I continue, "A Director simply brings out the best in people. Doesn't matter if they're an actor, model, cameraman, or coordinator. A Director draws upon his skills of communication to motivate those he needs, and he inspires them beyond what they would do by setting an example of excellence that is admired. If you let me direct your contribution, I will make you more money than you ever imagined, and in the process, make you a better man."

Wow! The change was immediate and remarkable. He stood, cupped his hands together in a Buddhist tradition of thanks, and bowed. Several times. From that day on, I made him my right hand man whenever possible. He was no longer disrupting the set or hustling girls. He thanked me every day, and I will make him more money than he imagined when I return in September.

Apply that dialog to actors, and add the following ideas.

A Director's first duty is to win the trust of the actors, so that they feel they are in qualified hands. This is easy when you're Sydney Pollack with a dozen hits. Unknown, you must communicate clearly yet passionately about your vision and ideas on acting, and how a Director effects both. It helps to appear to have high morals so that they admire you, so that your guidance or demands seem based on not just logic but character. Everyone wants to be clear that what they are doing is for professional excellence. (This means that a Director who is obviously hitting on the actresses will lose to some degree their trust and faith, because getting sex seems to be more important than delivering the best production.)

I like to explain that a Director is much like a "good daddy" who takes his children on a trip to a foreign country, and places his children in a park to play with others. The children don't know the language (how the Director instructs the D.P., for instance) and don't know the park rules (don't understand how editing will turn this into a gripping scene) and might not know the toys (don't know the lighting limits) but they don't care. They just want to play. The Director will watch all the kids at the same time, and when you

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venture too far off the park or start playing with something you shouldn't, he gently guides you back to where your playing at the top of your game.

Some actors need to be coddled. Some need to be left alone. Some like exacting instruction. Some like to improv every scene. Others are insecure. A few might have drama in their own lives they want the Director to know about. Others are secretive. Some might use Meisner Method, another person is purely reaction-driven. And yet others act so big that they need to be toned down rather than inspiring their creativity. The point being ... actors need different interaction with a Director to get their best work out on camera. A good Director uses every trick he endorses to make this happen. And, the best of them have dozens of tricks. What they each have, also, is a "language" in which they present their vision for a scene or movie. (I'll get into what I mean by Language in a few paragraphs.)

First, you need to understand that Directors fall into different categories according to how the Industry views their strengths and weaknesses, because this will determine how much they might interact with you.

There are Directors who are "Hardware" Directors: Tony Scott (Crimson Tide, Top Gun, Days of Thunder), John McTeirnan (Die Hard, Roller Ball, Predator), Michael Bay (Armageddon, The Rock, Bad Boys.) These Directors make a ton of money when their movie hits, because they know how to deliver the machines that go BOOM! They make the arena or what blows up a character in the movie. In Die Hard the building is nearly a character. Same with most submarine movies. We're fascinated with the object, like, Alcatraz in The Rock or the transports in Armageddon. Sometimes Hardware Directors do this and yet are not very good at bringing good performances out of actual living actors. Tony Scott doesn't. Michael Bay will admit that he's better at envisioning a shot that wins the audience, over a performance moment that wins the audience. His love scenes in both Armageddon and Pearl Harbor were sappy and lacked imagination. I'd have loved it if in the love scene in Armageddon with Liv Tyler and Ben Affleck when they were eating the Animal Crackers, they had an original joke. Like, Ben would read the label that says, "DO NOT EAT IF SEAL IS BROKEN" and he opens it ups and looks and just says, "Sure enough ..."

Hardware Directors are included in the bigger category of Action Directors. Now, most action movies are simply that – action. They can be done cheaply now on digital cameras. But when one really works, it's a huge winner. The Terminator, Aliens, etc. Most big action hits are what we'd refer to as Action/Adventure: The Matrix, Lord of the Rings, Indiana Jones, Braveheart, Gladiator, Star Wars. Directors that deliver a film of this quality have to be considered great Directors. They are our current spectacle film, evolved beyond Cleopatra and Gone With The Wind with the use of modern digital technology.

The "Visionary Directors" are ones who re-define what audiences are willing to accept as movie appearance and story flow. In the past, movies had fairly standard scenes, with the wide shot leading to the close ups. Acting was rather wooden. Slowly, Directors like Orsen Wells with Citizen Kane, led to Martin Scorsese with Raging Bull, which allowed Zemekis to present Who Framed Roger Rabbit and Romancing the Stone, and opened the door to amazing environments to flesh out emotion in Ridley Scott's Blade Runner, opening the door to Forrest Gump with its saturating involvement with a witless hero, and ultimately to Quentin Tarantino being allowed to screw around with story lines in Pulp Fiction. Forrest Gump, in the 60's, would have been a leaden melodrama with hammy acting, Directed by someone who spent most of his years in Broadway stage, making it look like Death of a Salesman. The visionaries now are opening our mind to accept new stimulation, like in video games. In the future, I believe visionaries will

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make movies interactive, our emotions playing out in real time, with all of our senses effected, and they can be interpreted through multiple personalities or at different moments in time (past, present, and future.)

But, it's the "Actors' Director" that gets the love from the stars, and the admiration from their peers. Michael Bay will never be on the same tier as Sydney Pollack until he delivers a masterpiece of "acting." But, Pollack can deliver a tense action film any time he gets his hand on a decent script. These Directors are ones who are loyal most to the actors over the pressures from the Studio or financier. They coddle the actors, and focus most of their will on pulling the greatest performance out of them. Francis Ford Coppola (The Godfather, Apocalypse Now), Martin Scorsese (Raging Bull, GoodFellas), Sydney Pollack (Tootsie, Electric Horseman, Out of Africa, Three Days of the Condor, They Shoot Horses, Don't They?) David Lean (Lawrence of Arabia, Doctor Zhivago) Jonathan Demme (Silence of the Lambs, Philadelphia.) These are the Directors then actors line up to work with. And, actors determine most of the box office potential, and that determines if a film gets funded and a green light, over the quality of the script.

I, for good or bad, have been labeled an 'actors Director' by the actors I direct. My exhausting auditions begin showing hopeful actors that this is a different acting experience for most of them. I don't have a casting director read flat lines, and watch the actor spew out whatever their last acting class taught them to do. Instead, I do a quick audition, and from that, pick ones with charisma, and put them together with other actors I think have a chance. Then, they have a week to practice a scene and come in and do it. This allows them to get over jitters, to really show me what they can do, and then, I direct them in that scene to see how pliable they are, and their range of voice or intensity. My attention to detail, my nurturing of performances, the skill I have at making the actor feel safe and to trust me – these are the foundation for being an actors' Director.

The Language of a Director

Directors use different words (inspiring ones, demanding ones, embarrassing ones) and talk in a variety of ways (softly, directly, angrily, intensely, timidly) on a set and in rehearsal. When the pressure is on, these two might change dramatically. How a Director handles pressure and how much stamina he has is one of the biggest factors in how great a Director he could become. I handle pressure extremely well, and my shoots are usually pleasant, especially around the camera. Problems will come up, dramas will unfold, people will get fired, but, the acting arena is nurturing and positive.

I personally don't have a preference over what technique you use to get into your most creative, imaginative, free and charismatic acting zone. I'll work with you if you ask me what is your motivation. But, on the first days of rehearsal with my main actors, I'll explain the language I use to communicate what is most important about my vision, this film, each scene, and your role in it. I've adapted my entire communicative process from techniques used by some of the best filmmakers alive. Some I worked with, others I listened to in interviews and asked questions, and a few I've befriended. Here're some juicy secrets that usually you don't fully understand until you've risen to a higher level in acting. Acting coaches don't touch on this, mainly because it's too specific and time consuming to explain. The other reason is, honestly, acting coaches are not Directors for a reason. Call it, that people will rise to their highest level of incompetence. Acting Coaches can't direct, they don't understand how, to be honest, until they have directed more than one film or television production. And they shouldn't try to teach a class what a Director will do with actors, it is not their job. Some people say that the job of an acting coach is to keep

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his actors coming back for more classes, and I agree to some extent. Most acting classes are full of very sensitive actors who would pick a class in which they are happily encouraged, where after each scene reading the classmates say, "Wow, I really see you coming along," and "That's nice, what you did then." That's what should happen in most classes. Most actors don't have enough talent to make it, no matter how hard they try. It's a law of numbers. And, acting is damn hard and too complex for the normal mind to rise above average performance. Acting classes are good for stretching, for getting used to reading aloud in front of casting people, and for helping someone learn the most basic skills of acting communication and expression. And remember, the Coach is like a psychiatrist, who never tells you that you're cured, he tells you, "See you next week." A Coach doesn't cure you of acting unemployment, he simply gives you tools to impress the interviewer, the work environment must dictate over any advice he gives you on working, though.

Use acting classes to keep you loose and open minded. But when it comes to working with a quality Director, don't hang on too tightly to what the coach told you. Example: Liz Hyun who won for Best Actress in *Playing Solitaire*, would leave each day and secretly go straight to her Coach, who had convinced her that she needed to see him (pay him) to make the best of what I just directed her to do. I could not figure out why Liz wasn't catching on to this idea of verbs and what the scene is about. She'd be back at square one each day of rehearsals. Finally, on the third week, the final week, she had a breakthrough. Suddenly her performance was gripping, engaging, real, and animalistic. When I told her this, she confessed she'd been going to her coach, who would systematically un-do what I said, and make her believe she needed to use his technique, and that technique did not fit with the language in which I direct or create my vision or write my script. His technique did not mesh with or make the most of camera angles or lens choices that he could not possibly know. And, he had no idea how the scene she brought him would be edited and what role it played in shaping the story. She stopped going to him, and rose in her performance each day until she delivered her performance that won her the award. And, by the way, she only had one or two takes for each scene. Most movies use at least 5 to 7 takes, and it's common to go into 10 or more takes a few times in a day. Stanley Kubrick made Tom Cruise do 73 takes one day of a single angle until he got what he wanted for *Eyes Wide Shut*. Cruise trusted him, and they agreed on what the film was about, so he did that many takes knowing that there was some minut detail of acting that he was not delivering to camera. (Robert Duvall is famous for delivering his best work on the first take or second, so Directors have to be prepared for that confidence and delivery.)

The Language Of Film Creation

Communicating an artistic "vision" of any medium defies the concept of art itself. Nevertheless, a vision must be somehow expressed from the Director to the actors and cinematographers. Here is how two of the best do it, and this is how I choose to do it. I'll use this example.

Robert Zemekis meets with Tom Hanks the first time to discuss *Forrest Gump*. They chatter about family, and finally get down to business when one of them says, "So, what do you think the movie is "about?" Hanks will say what he thinks it's about, and then Zemekis. They'll agree. What the movie is "about" gives them the grand compass, that fuels and simultaneously limits the camerawork and Hanks' performance. "What the film is about" is the single most important piece of information a Director can infuse into the actor.

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What the film is “about” is not the plot (Forrest can’t walk and then he can run fast and this happens and that happens.) It’s not the theme (Life is a box of chocolates.) What the movie is “about” is not the premise (Mediocrity is self-inflicted.) Every scene will point to “what the movie is about.” Every character arch within that scene will peak according to “what the film is about.”

Forrest Gump is about, “Surrender to fate.” Every scene either has a moment of surrendering to fate, or is setting one up in the next scene. Every acting peak moment will have an obvious surrender to fate as its turning point. It tells Hanks how loudly to protest. It tells him how fast to run to Jennie. It tells him how to react to his mother’s death, which he tries to outrun, but, finally, stops, and accepts that she’s gone. He surrenders to the fact that she’s gone.

They start by agreeing “What is this film about.” Then, from there, they work on their own variations of, “What is this scene about.” That leads to, “What is the goal of this scene.” They both know that the most captivating scenes are ones in which their emotions get in the way of their goals. Hanks knows that he’s most emotionally moving when two emotions are fighting for dominance, so he figures that out on his own. Zemekis meanwhile talks to Hanks about his shooting style: smooth camera moves, blazing cinematography at this moment, songs of this key in this scene, a long tracking shot versus a lot of quick cuts, or the use of a tight lens for a whole scene. But Hanks is mentioning other ideas related to his performance, such as “Will you be close for my reaction on this?” During filming, Hanks doesn’t ask Zemekis what his motivation is, it takes Hanks too much into his head and out of the chemistry of the scene, the reality of the scene.

Hanks is in his own visionary mode, Zemekis knows this. Hanks is thinking about ... verbs, if he’s thinking of anything. Hanks knows that his performance needs only two elements to succeed.

Hanks needs: his character to portray more than one emotion at one time, and he must be able to present believable danger into a scene at any moment through his character.

The best moment when this is shown is when at the end of the movie he is told that he has a son. For the entire movie, Hanks kept an acting posture that was identifiable. But, when hit with the extreme importance of such news, he buckles, and for that moment, if you watch it closely, you see the two emotions surge up inside him and battle ... and his danger comes from his profound love for Jennie and hope for an emotional connection after his mom dies – it’s so strong, he could be crushed learning that his son is retarded like he is. We care so much for Forrest by this time, we worry that his danger will be self destruction.

Stage versus Theatrical Acting

Long ago, stage was the only forum for acting. Then came silent film. Actors could use the same big gestures and postures from stage acting to deliver emotion. But as film evolved, in the 50’s, acting became less “projected” toward an audience. Look at *Gone With The Wind*. Clark Gable could stand there and say his lines, and everyone buys it. But outside that grand film, it would be akin to Soap Opera acting. Lawrence Olivier is another good example. He would look at the skull and say, “To be or not to be, that is the question,” and audiences were riveted. But then came different camera moves, and audiences saw a totally raw sort of performance in Brando in *Streetcar Named Desire*. He could yell, “Stella!” and it almost drove audiences out. But, enough wanted this more believable simple man, who cannot control or express his emotions, to erupt. James Dean followed, and was embraced. The 60’s movies brought in obscure themes and film noir second generation experimenting. But, not a key change in acting performance.

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More and more, audiences wanted less posturing and orating like on stage, and more raw experiences, delivered by people they believed were raw.

The next block of actors came with loosening ratings rulings. Scenes that were visceral blended with extreme acting delivery. Stage acting would be ridiculous. Angelina Jolie presented a new era of female who won us over with her raw performance in *Gia*. Billy Bob Thorton brought us a raw, totally different man in *Sling Blade*. Van Diesel, who might not be the best actor, is totally believable as a street fighter protecting his buddies because he's raw and leaves no space between himself and the camera/audience. The performance that Jodie Foster gave in *Silence of the Lambs*, or Hillary Swank did in *Boys Don't Cry* or *Million Dollar Baby* was so understated and raw that subtle moments would never come across with what is known as stage-like acting.

And, camera work, the super close ups, and the riveting fast camera moves and fast edits, all work best with a style of acting far from stage acting.

Yes, stage acting is an art, but an art unto itself, that has been left behind by modern techniques and by the evolving eye and heart of the audience. Is stage acting good for an actor to experience? Yes, Every actor should be in a play, a major one if possible with a talented Director, at least one time. But, when I see actors dedicating year after year to plays, when they live in L.A. and no one really goes to them, I think it's overkill. In New York, you can make a living in stage, and maybe even be discovered. But, the rules you learn, they can kill your film performance.

For proof, watch any David Mamet movie, when he uses his stage actors. Is the directing and acting good? Yes. But does it feel natural, or what we are wanting or used to seeing? No.

Do a play. Then, instead of another play, take that time and produce your own short film on digital. You'll impress a casting agent of Director far more with a short reel you produced and might have written. You have something they can see. Something real, that tells them that you know what they are going through trying to produce something.

One of the key factors pushing a Director in choosing his new talent is fear. The idea that one horrible performance can ruin the film is in his mind. And that performance might come from you, hopeful actor. There is not only lack of talent, but also, lack of knowledge of what it takes to make a film, and all else that a veteran actor knows in meshing with a tight production, that worries the Director. By producing your own short, you're showing him, "Hey, I know how to mesh, I know what you need besides good acting, talk to me, I'll make it happen like you need it to happen." Stage won't do this for him or you.

Veteran actors (movie stars) learn the tricks that make their performances jump off the screen as "great." These tricks are divided into two categories: technique, and technical.

This isn't the same as focusing to deliver great acting. This involves using what you've got in your "bag of tricks."

For example, when William Hurt (Winner *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *Broadcast News*, and never ever gives a poor performance) identifies his key dramatic scenes, and knows that the camera will be close on him, he'll open his mouth and move his jaw slightly, but not let any words come out for about two syllables. Then he'll slip out a different word, and breath, and move into the whole sentence. This inspires the audience to believe he's fishing for exactly the right thing to say. That's a technique. Kevin Costner

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thinks his smile is weak, so he's told Directors that he refuses to smile until about mid-way, so that the audience is starving for his smile, so that when he unleashed it, even if it's a weak one, it wins over the audience. I'll tell models turning to acting not to smile for as long as they can, because once they do, they'll fall into automatic mode, and expect that smile to do their hard acting work.

Technical tricks involve learning about camera lenses, camera moves, and editing. A veteran actor will know when a lens is a 135, it will pick up his neck to his forehead. He'll angle his face just right, he'll save his best delivery for the big lenses. That way, in editing, they're forced to use his close up, thereby increasing his odds of being singled out as the strongest actor by critics and peers.

A simple trick I explain to women is, if you have your mouth closer to the camera, the audience will relate to what you are feeling, with your eyes closer to the camera, they'll focus on what you are thinking.

In television, most of the time, the camera zooms in on the actor, so that the crew saves time on laying dolly tracks. The problem is that the human mind of the viewer knows that the camera did not move closer, that it's still distant, and so it is harder to feel close to the actor and share his emotions so intimately. A camera dolly up to someone always makes it more personal. When an actor sees dolly tracks going down, and the lens changing, even if the Director has told him nothing, he knows this is when he can connect with the emotions of the audience best. In addition, camera moves on a dolly bring a different energy to the scene, and allows actors to pace the delivery of the line to get the most out of it. A camera slowly dolly in to their face will make them want to wait until a certain closeness to deliver the key statement, or to make their emotional sigh.

The other way that lenses and camera moves help the star look good comes when the Director and actor are blocking a scene. For example, let's say that you are talking to someone on the sofa, like Liz does in *Playing Solitaire*. If you walk up, that's a tall shot, far from your face. But, I told her to stoop, and then, crawl the last 10 feet, on hands and knees. This forces the camera to do a very interesting angle on your face. You're suddenly interesting to watch all over again. By leaning in and whispering a line into someone's ear, it forces the script supervisor to suggest a close up. You steal the scene. These are technical "choices", and ultimately, all that matters are the choices you make, and how convincingly you make them. Know how the camera lenses and moves can help you, and you will deliver the choice convincingly.

Editing is the angel of all veteran actors. They know that two things happen in editing: the editor picks their best delivery, and, the audience is pulled into the scene more with each edit. An actor with a good imagination will make choices – light a cigarette, put it out, exhale a smoke ring, kiss his lighter, eat an apple, look over a shoulder – all to give the camera something to cut to, so that if he blows a line that, they can pick one up from another take, and keep his best close up moment. Use your imagination to help a Director make the scene excel through edits. The camera can also jump in close to your face, and that brings the audience into your mind.

Talking to the Director

Talk to the Director. New actors, assess how busy he or she is. Capture him early in the day, to talk about your scene. And even your scenes for tomorrow. Don't babble on about technique or your motivation. Get clear one last time on what this scene is about. Maybe talk to him about the two emotions you want him to capture that are fighting for dominance. Suggest your choices, like, flicking a beer cap at this one line, or blowing your brains out with your fingertip. Don't waste his time. Get right to the point.

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And finally, if you've come this far, just talk in that one VERB that you agreed upon. What's that, you ask? The one Verb? Don't know what I'm talking about? Thought so.

Here's something you won't hear in acting class, because it's too specific to one person. But it's amazingly effective for acting. Emotions are vague. You tell an actor to act angry, and you'll get a dozen variations. Ask him to be "more" angry, and he'll go over the top in five useless ways. But, tell him to simply think of a verb. Verbs are very specific. Sure, you talk about the fact that in this scene he's angry, but, help him out as a Director, or, as an actor, help the Director out. Think of how you'll act in the form of a verb, like, "compress". Using this word alone, the actor can focus just on how he would speak and move if every second he feels like an invisible vise is compressing his world until he is being squeezed, pressured, confined. This will make him angry in a specific way, the one that you want. He won't yell at the top of his lung, he'll squirm and he'll grunt out his words. He'll move his arms in a way that seems to make more room for him, or hold back the will of others, wills that are compressing him. In one of my best scenes, I told both actresses to just think of the word "Pour", and that it's pouring syrup. This made their eyes sweep across the room more fluidly ... it made their words drool out of their mouths like they were all part of the same slick thought ... it made their fingertips stream over their arms ... their body language poured over the sofa. All this, from just one specific word. The word "dissect" would have given a totally different cadence to the words, it would have made their faces look different when they got to the end of the sentence and wanted to observe the fresh cuts into the emotions of the other actors.

One verb, or one at the beginning of the scene, one at the end. All the actor has to think about is one word in their delivery, their movements, etc. It works, try it.

Talk to the Director about this, and he'll "get it." He'll help you find your verb, and he'll chance that verb if he sees it's not working within his vision.

Sitcoms

Sitcoms work on a few basic principles. Outstanding sitcom actors, like the ones I chose, excel in taking advantage of every single one of the following principles and making it shape their characters, choices, and delivery. A Director opens their minds to funnier choices, shows them the camera angles that increase the comic power, and remember how they'll appear from scene to scene so that the expressions remain fresh.

PRINCIPLE #1: COMEDY COMES BY TAKING DIFFERENT PEOPLE AND PUTTING THEM TOGETHER TO SOLVE THE SAME PROBLEM.

PRINCIPLE #2: THE CHARACTERS MUST ALL NEED EACH OTHER, OR ELSE THEY COULD FALL OUT OF FRIENDSHIP AND THE SITCOM WOULD END.

PRINCIPLE #3: COMIC TIMING – KNOWING JUST HOW LONG TO WAIT TO FAULT THAT LOOK OF DISPLEASURE – IS CRITICAL.

PRINCIPLE #4: ENTRANCES AND EXITS NOT ONLY CAN MAKE A COMIC MOMENT HAPPEN, BUT, THEY ALSO DETERMINE IN SECONDS HOW THE AUDIENCE WILL RELATE TO AND BE HUMORED BY THAT CHARACTER'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE SITUATION.

PRINCIPLE #5: VISUAL COMEDY (FACE REACTIONS) AND BROAD COMEDY (PRATFALLS AND SURPRISE GAGS) MAKE UP HALF OF WHAT THE ACTOR DOES TO GET LAUGHS, AND

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ALSO MAKES MUNDANE DIALOG FUNNY ENOUGH TO GIVE THE SITCOM A LIFE (ROBIN WILLIAMS IN MORK AND MINDY IS A GOOD EXAMPLE.)

PRINCIPLE #6: THE AUDIENCE TUNES IN EXPECTING TO SEE THE SAME CHARACTERS EACH WEEK, REACTING IN FRESH WAYS, BUT, ALWAYS APPROACHING A PROBLEM FROM THE SAME BASIC ORIENTATION.

PRINCIPLE #7: IN SITCOMS, MANY THINGS DO NOT NEED EXPLAINING (HOW DID THAT GUY GET AN ADMIRAL'S HAT SO QUICK" IS AN EXAMPLE OF A QUESTION THE AUDIENCE DOESN'T ASK IN A SITCOM, BUT MIGHT IN A FEATURE FILM.)

PRINCIPLE #8: MAKE THE CHARACTERS SO CLEARLY DRAWN THAT THEY COULD BE DESCRIBED IN A SINGLE WORD. DANNY – RAINMAKER. DAX – DREAMER. LIA – WIT. SAMANTHA – ROMANTIC. PHOEBE – PRINCESS.

Once rehearsals began, it becomes clear who has talent. Their comedic timing between their two love interests was a good a comedy television gets.

Sydney Pollack said that a good performance comes down to the “choices you make” and then how believable you make those choices. He used the example of Robert Redford saying he wanted to eat an apple when he came into a room, and that the next take he didn't do it, and when asked, said, “The second time it wasn't the choice I wanted to make. I wanted to smell it, and toss it in the air, but not eat it.” His second take was more believable. A simple thing. What I do so well in working on scenes with actors is, I open their imaginations up to the multitude of choices that could be theirs. Most starting actors keep drilling what they learn in acting class, about the method, while never realizing the importance of making choices relating to your environment. And if the choice does not come from your environment, it should come from your lack of interest in the environment, when makes you make a choice about how you deliver the line. Do you bellow it? Do you say it with an echo? Do you stutter it? Do you breathe in deeply for a few words, saying the word inward, for the fun of it, because you are bored? Most of the actresses I cast came in and found some choice to add to their delivery, as simple as looking at her watch in the middle of the scene and winding it while talking got one actress the part.

Directing Comedy versus Drama

You could pick a high number (depending on your directing style) and say that at least eighty percent of directing is the same whether it is comedy or drama. Most of directing involves the set, camera, cinematography, budget, days left in the shoot, etc. That final 20% deals with some of the technical facts related to comedy, and then of course, some of it has to do with the actual dialog and actor.

Comedy relies so much on facial reactions to deliver laughs. The Director must be able to know which camera will capture this best, and include it in his coverage. The actor must know to deliver it at that time, and a discussion with the Director on which take will show that reaction should take place. Drama too takes reactions, but, largely, comedy reactions are very brief, to deliver the laugh at the precise moment and move on to what else is funny in the scene. I love studying the faces of my comedic actors during rehearsal and seeing which gives the best reaction shot at that joke. That is the close up I'll include in the final edit.

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The other element so important in comedy is timing, which includes entrances and exits. Coming in at just the right moment means the actor must know how much of the set the cameras take in, so that he can time his line at a moment to bring the laugh.

Then there is the timing within the dialog. How long do you wait to answer, for the reaction look to register with the audience? Then, the line is funnier. Just like in real life.

In Drama, I sit very close to the camera at all times. But in comedy, I'll get up and watch the monitor to make sure that the actor has his entrance down to the second for the biggest laughs.

Also in drama, it is easier for me to watch for the slow emergence of the two emotions fighting for dominance. They can be there in comedy too, but, noticing it comes and goes so fast. The exception are scenes in which the actor or actress does very little besides change from one emotional reaction to what he's watching.

Asian Faces

On my first film in 2000, I was way ahead of the Industry when it came to realizing that the U.S.A. and world were prime for Asian female stars and television personalities. I have shot more with Asian women than most emerging Directors who are not in Asia doing Asian films. And I've thought deeply about the current popularity of Asian women and men in film.

First, one key reason we're so interested in Asian actresses and actors is because overall, the Americans admire the Asian nations and what they bring to the world and U.S.A. in ways of production, work ethic, education standards, etc. We want to include these people because they are exciting – more so than the Europeans, who gather negative headlines rather than progressive ones.

Seoul (with Samsung) leads the world in cell phone downloads and (arguably) technology. They also export their entertainers to the point that they dominate all the Asian markets when it comes to singers, and are about to capture the movie idol market completely. It is not their looks that is doing this – though Korea turns out incredibly attractive stars – it's their production energy when it's translated to singing, performances, and good acting.

Japan pushes new frontiers in fashion, hair, social rules, Manga, and video games.

China (Hong Kong/Vietnam) are the biggest producing nation in the world now, and are poised to become the biggest consumer nation. Hollywood wants that market, and so includes them more in films.

For these reasons above and many more, overall in the film world, we're seeing more Asian faces. But, to direct Asians in a movie, the Director should be aware of where the actors are coming from as people, and also learn some tricks to maximize the screen appeal.

First, the Japanese, Koreans, and Chinese are generally stoic in their facial expressions. They value keeping their emotions under check. Children learn to mimic their parents, and when parents do not change their facial expressions much, well ... the child has fewer ideas in mind to play around with. This carries on into adulthood. Therefore, they have developed the keenest eye to notice the slightest change in someone's eyes or mouth to tell them what that person is feeling. Small gestures are picked up on. But, that does not work in Western films as easily.

CREATIVE GENIUS-ASIA

For this reason, when directing Asian actors from North Asia, I watch carefully to see what gestures come naturally, and then help them build upon gestures that won't read very well on camera. Teaching Asians to let their faces be more pliable is what it comes down to, and not being afraid to look silly comes with it.

Asians have nice full lips which are one of the most common attributes among big stars (Angelina Jolie, for example) so teaching them to beam smiles, or purse lips, etc., is easy and really shows up well.

The eyes telegraph a huge percentage of what the actor is feeling or thinking. Most Asian eyes are narrower, or at least not so huge and dominant as say Julia Roberts or smoky like Antonio Banderas. There are some tricks I use to maximize how much the camera can read from Asian eyes. One thing is, I try to get the Asian actors to look up to the camera, thereby showing the whites below the pupils. This can be done simply by moving the camera higher, or having the Asian sit lower or crawl. Any trick to open up the eyes helps.

The finest factor I find to be tremendously useful when it comes to Asian Actors and Actresses falls under the heading of "suspension of disbelief."

Suspension of disbelief is a phrase used in the industry that prefaces believing in an otherwise rare or farfetched action. For example, when you watch Forrest Gump long enough, you begin to believe he's capable of doing extraordinary things, in part because you like him quickly, in part because the Director set this up, and in part because you don't really have many expectations on extraordinary actions done by someone who is mentally retarded. You suspend your disbelief because you want to, and then his believable acting takes you the rest of the way. Likewise, you suspend your disbelief when a killer does unthinkable things to a victim.

Asians are still a bit of a mystery to Americans, especially Asian women. Sure, we follow what we've been shown in movies, that depict the men as stoic and strong willed, even dangerous at times as gangsters. But it is Asian women who have the greatest chance to capitalize on their mystery. We don't exactly know what Asian girls are told by their mothers as they grow up. We don't know what they read, or what they dream about. We don't know if they took Martial Arts at age 4, or if they became concert violinists (two stereotypes.) They might be submissive Geisha types (we've seen that) or killers or the smart kid in class. This is all changing now as Asia is changing how it relates to American entertainment. For decades, Asians just watched American movies and singers. Now, they have studied it enough and are making film and music their own, by altering the American versions. This in turn shows a whole new world to Asian girls, and they grow up with not only their own cultures, but with less limited roles to play in dreams or real life because they are not tied to American puritan ethics or religious limits. I think that it is because of this that we can suspend our disbelief when we watch a good Asian actress, and we can believe she is a killer, or genius, or escapee, or any other extreme character.

Vision

So many elements make up "Vision" for a Director. And no two Directors approach it exactly the same. But, I can list some of the elements that most Directors include in forming a "vision" for a film.

FACTORS INCLUDED BY A DIRECTOR WHEN FORMING HIS "VISION"

COLOR PALETTE

EDITING

CREATIVE GENIUS-ASIA

CAMERA MOVES

CLOSE UPS

MUSIC

PACING

SPECIAL EFFECTS

STUNTS

ACTING STYLE/INTENSITY

PREMISE

WHAT THE MOVIE IS “ABOUT”

THEME

Individual style, when it comes to camera movement, has been written about in countless books. Martin Scorsese’s continuous camera coverage of scenes (GoodFella’s entering the nightclub) is one example. The wide shots with the camera low to the ground is a mark of Orsen Wells’ Vision in Citizen Kane. Alfred Hitchcock mastered a different vision for each of his famous films, editing probably being his key stroke of genius in movies like Psycho or Rope. Lighting and color palette plays grandest in many of the Asian directing legends like Kurasawa, and became key in their vision. Music plays a huge role in the vision of a film, as Spielberg will attest in Indiana Jones and Jaws.

The factors listed above that fall into the “mental” category include Theme, Premise, and What the Movie Is About. There is more written on What A Movie Is About in other chapters of my website. But, in a nutshell, every scene should point to a simple idea, that will determine the pacing and peaks of the movie. Premise is a hook that you can hang comedy upon (Don’t Be Who You Are is a premise, and the Director will know that when this happens, he can maximize his laughs.) And then there is theme. It is known that most famous Directors are drawn to themes in life that are important to them. For me, hypocrisy is a theme I’m drawn to illuminate in film, and so, I’ll pull out all the stops cinematically to punch up this factor in a drama or comedy. That then makes it part of the vision for my film – a vision that has the most effect on a viewer.

Some Directors now can base entire careers on blowing things up in creative ways, and adding in the right soundtrack, like Michael Bay did in Bad Boys, The Rock, Pearl Harbor, and Armageddon.

Then there is a vision based primarily on solid acting. This is a “vision” that doesn’t jump off a high concept pitch page, or even the script. The Director counting on just the acting to deliver his vision is very brave, very rare, and very confident. An example of this is Sling Blade. The performance WAS the vision. Angelina Jolie’s performance in Gia WAS the vision.