

ACTORS, MEDIUMS AND ENTITIES

*A parallel can be drawn between
what a psychic does at a séance
and what an actor does on stage.*

Setting aside the ages-old discussion as to whether a spirit world exists outside the physical parameters of mortal life, an academic parallel can be drawn between a parlor psychic, calling on unseen beings in a candle-lit room, and an actor bringing forth fictional personalities under the lights of a stage.

Taking the side of the skeptic for now, for the sake of making my point, one could say the seeming voice of Abraham Lincoln, speaking through a medium at a séance in Gettysburg, is no more a sentient being than Prince Hamlet speaking through the masterful voice of Rory Kinnear on a Broadway stage. Both are imaginary characters, for all intents and purposes.

What the actor should note is the correlation between the medium and the actor in their respective approaches to bringing characters to the surface of reality. In other words, there might be no such things as ghosts, but there *are* such things as identities, and the difference between the psychic and the performance artist is only a difference in mediums — pun not intended.

I actually met a medium once, in a hotel cocktail lounge. She introduced herself as Rachel Just Rachel, and apparently she did quite well for herself, conducting séances in private homes for three hundred bucks a pop. She told me she was a graduate of the International Institute of Advanced Metaphysics in Sedona, Arizona. Rachel Just Rachel had spooky green eyes. Not haunting eyes, mind you — spooky. The woman was really quite weird.

Since ghosts and séances and haunted houses have always fascinated me — (and I'm not saying I really *believe* in that shit, just that it fascinates me) — I asked Rachel Just Rachel to indulge my curiosity. I asked her to describe how it feels to share her body with a discarnate personality. I was looking to corroborate a personal acting theory of mine, that the trance state of a professed psychic is akin to what I experience on stage: the feeling that I am hosting an actual (albeit fictional) presence.

“It's like riding a horse,” Rachel Just Rachel explained, sipping some kind of apple-green liquid from a cordial glass.

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“Most of it is out of your hands, because you’re not part of the horse’s soul,” she said. “But since you’re the one holding the reins, the horse has to obey you.” She leaned closer and tipped me a wink. “He *has* to obey you.”

“That sounds a lot like acting!” I said with too much volume. I was alarmed by the wink and what seemed like some kind of effort to place a spell on me, but I was pleased to have my theory substantiated, all the same.

“Oh! You’re an actor!” She took a long sip of her green drink and gave me another wink. “How do you memorize all those lines?” Feeling that I was about to be invited up to her room for a private séance or something worse, I took my cue and said good night. “Oh, just by rote memorization,” I lied, nearly tripping over my bar stool as I got up to leave.

It may seem a bit desperate, to cite a loony spiritualist in a cocktail lounge, all to prove a point, but Rachel Just Rachel’s description of being “taken over” by *spirits* (even if they were only phantasms of her own imagination) struck me as eerily familiar, something corresponding to the magic of bringing forth a living, breathing character on stage when all the pieces groove — the rather eldritch feeling that you’re sharing your awareness with something else inside you.

When you’re on stage, connected to the scene, committed to the moment and confident in your lines, something extraordinary occurs: your character really *does* seem to take on a life of its own. Not unlike a conjectural

spirit presence channeling through a medium at a parlor séance, your character's allegorical presence settles into your body and shares the stage and your awareness with you.

I like to say, the character rules the stage, the actor runs the show. Your character is happy to split the stage with
..... you but insists on investigating
The character rules the living moments it
the stage, the actor finds before it. Like a child
runs the show. exploring a new amusement
..... park, your character wants to
comb through his surroundings and frolic amongst his the
discoveries.

Even though you're feeling slightly submerged in consciousness, experiencing a shared cognizance with your character, you are still in control of the show— that is to say, *your* part of the show. The character may break loose in ways they have never done before, but when it comes time for them to cross left, they *will* cross left; when they need to exit the stage on cue, they *will* exit. In other words, you are still calling the shots, you're still running the show, only in a subdued capacity — you're never out of control of the situation, but you may feel like you're somewhat out of sync with reality.

I don't think even William Shakespeare had the writing chops sufficient to put this phenomenon into words, for it rather defies description. You have to experience the sensation first hand to know what I'm saying. It is *you* on stage, but

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at the same time it's *not* you. It's like being possessed, not by a random ha'ant, but by the living presence of a fictional character — your character self, if you will.

Your character self still delivers the scripted lines, still hits the blocking, but because it has pushed you to the back burner, so to speak, it'll feel free to deliver those lines the way *it* chooses. It'll feel free to execute its blocking in the style *it* prefers. Which, of course, is exactly what you want as an actor. People don't go to the theater to listen to you recite lines from a play, they go to watch characters come to life on stage and act out a story in front of their eyes.

Because you're running the show, your character will obey her blocking and her cues but she may approach them differently one night, and differently still the next night. As is called for in the script, she will pull the revolver from the desk drawer and point it at another character on stage, but maybe one night she'll press the barrel against the actor's forehead and pull back the hammer, an action *not* called for in the script.

But don't worry. Your character will never mutiny. There will never be an instance where your character steps so far out of bounds that the play is thrown into turmoil. He *might* want to grab a lantern and hurl it across the room, but he won't. That's because we're not talking about actual split personalities here, we're not talking about you and your

character “mind fighting” for the higher ground. We’re not talking about mental illness, only acting.

You, the actor — you’re the one in charge here; it is *you* running things and keeping your character tethered to the script. Like the eager dog out with his master in the park, wagging his tail like a loon and delighting in all the wonderful smells and stimuli, the dog is free to explore but is safely held to a long leash; he cannot stray too far. You can allow your character to unfold and express himself freely and organically on stage and be confident he isn’t really going to go rogue and blow the production for everyone.