

Why I Do Theatre

An interviewer last week asked me why I became an actor and why I was doing this show in Albany, NY. The glib answer to the first is that the Harvard English Department made it clear they didn't think much of my plans to be an English professor, and the obvious answer to the second is "Hey, who wouldn't jump at the opportunity to spend February and March in Albany?" Much as I like to be glib, I thought I'd drill a little deeper for you and create a corollary to my other piece on Theater: "The Case for Analog Entertainment in a Digital Age."

I am an actor because I enjoy the challenge of creating a character, of figuring out why people do what they do and how best to tell an author's story. I like creating recognizable human behavior, but mostly I like the interaction, the connection with people.

When I do a play, I become part of a family. This family -- frequently less dysfunctional than most -- works together to tell a story. We develop our characters and our relationships organically in a rehearsal lasting sometimes only a week or two (hello, summer stock!) but usually four, five or more weeks. I learn about my character, about the play, about myself and about the other actors. I solve problems: how to get the truth out of a fellow character, how to con another character, how to reassure an anxious juvenile, how to stop boring the rest of the cast. I grow. I grow as an actor and as a person. With luck I am a better actor and a better person at the end of the process.

When I do television or film, rehearsal/development time is measured in minutes not weeks. Depending on the size of my role, I may get to know either a portion of that television/film family -- or a tiny portion of that family. Indeed, our interaction is frequently so brief that I never become part of their family; I am an acquaintance, a transient visitor.

The roles I play in these media are usually too small to have an arc in the script; their drive-by relationships with the leading players reflects my family visitor status. Sometimes I just serve up the exposition the leading players eschew.

I do my scenes two to ten times, focusing primarily on hitting my marks and maintaining continuity with previous takes. Sometimes I feel I've nailed it, sometimes -- not so much. Whichever way it went, there is never another chance to improve it or try something new: it's done. Sometimes I feel great, only to be disappointed when I see the end result. In "Planes, Trains and Automobiles," as a lawyer who jacks up the price of allowing Steve Martin to take my cab while John Candy commandeers said cab, I thought my cool, stone-faced smugness in the face of Steve Martin's importuning would be great. Perhaps it was. In the edited movie when Steve Martin talks, you see a close-up of Steve Martin, not my reaction. Indeed, half the time when Nick Wyman talks, you see Steve Martin's face. The ticket buyers were coming to see Steve, not Nick.

This brings me back to the idea of acting as interacting with people. In the theater, if I am onstage an audience member has the option to ignore the good acting and focus on my cheap and vulgar histrionics. When I do movies or television, I have no control over whether the audience gets to see my performance. Indeed, I have no relationship with the audience whatsoever -- and vice versa. I have no idea whether they love what I am doing or if they can't stand it; and no matter how excited or bored or moved the audience gets, my performance never alters.

Theater is Community [one of "The Five Cs" ITYMATL] -- and not just the family that puts a theater piece together. There is Community between those of us who do it and those for

whom we are doing it. It is actually a collaborative effort. We get constant feedback with laughter, applause, and that most precious of audience reactions, utter breath-holding silence.

That immediate reward is very gratifying. Television and film have their rewards as well, and I am always very happy when those rewards come in the mail. I am a big fan of making money with my acting, and Theater is rarely as financially rewarding as TV and film. But, just like the rest of you, I didn't go into this business to make money. At the end of my life, the important tally will not be how much money I made but rather how many lives I improved or eased with laughter, with entertainment, with connection. And that's why I do Theater."