

Creative Insanity and Emotional Perseverance of Being an Actor



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In A&E by Victoria Davis April 27, 2017 [Leave a Comment](#)

Over the years, film addicts have watched beloved actors break free of type-casting, completely transforming themselves from one onscreen character to another. John Travolta went from a singing and dancing high school hunk

in *Greece*, to playing much darker and more serious roles like in his films *Face Off* and *Sword Fish*. Amanda Seyfried went from playing ditsy and darling blonds in films like *Mean Girls* and *Mama Mia*, to acting as a psycho-stalker in the film *Chloe*. In 2010 Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson chose to play the role of a fairy in *The Tooth Fairy* which was drastically different from his typical roles as daredevil gunmen in films like *Get Smart*, and *Faster*. Most recently, Krysten Ritter went from hilarious, fun and fancy-free characters like Stacy in *Vamps* and Patty in *She’s Out of My League* to dark and twisty superhero in *Jessica Jones*. The overarching question is this: why do actors choose the roles they do? Why is breaking free of typecasting so important?

According to Los Angeles actor Julianna Guill, there are two main reasons actors take a job: one for the money, and one for you.

“This is a balance we all try to strike,” said Guill. “The ‘for you’ encompasses your love for the job and the people you work with.”

The 29-year-old, North Carolina-bred actor has spent much of her life auditioning for a multitude of roles starting at the age of 16 when she landed a part on *One Tree Hill*. Since then, Guill has had roles in television series such as *How I Met Your Mother*, *Psych*, *Glory Daze*, *The Mindy Project* and *Girlfriend’s Guild to Divorce*. She has also been given roles in larger films such as *Captain America Civil War*, *Christmas Eve*, *Crazy Stupid Love* and starred in Hallmark’s *Summer in the City*. Guill says that while she rarely gets everything she wants in a role, if there’s a reason to take the job, she takes it.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JULIANNA GUIL

“If it’s creatively satisfying, do it. If it will help you grow as an actor, do it,” said Guill. “But if you can’t find a reason to do something, then it’s probably not for you.”

When an actor chooses a role to invest in, a commitment is made, not just to the job, but to the character itself. While starting actors take a variety of jobs to make a living in a career they love, they also take diverse roles to broaden their creative psychological horizons.

“When you choose to audition for something that your manager or agent sends you, you are taking the first step to opening yourself up to that project,” said Guill.

“You put yourself into the mind of the character,” added Kyle Stouffer, another actor living in LA.

After moving to Los Angeles from his hometown in Cupertino, CA, the 26-year-old actor started out doing a variety of extra work such as playing a superhero drug dealer in a web series, appearing as a guitar player in the Christian film *Youth Band* and acting as a doctor’s intern in NBC’s television series *Code Black*. Stouffer is also known for his roles in TV shows like *Black Dossier*, *Pet Rituals* and the film *White Supremacy: Going Under*. While he says they were all “pretty out-there” projects, Stouffer says the roles were fun to work on.



PHOTO COURTESY OF KYLE STOUFFER

“You learn through trial and error. Things I’ve said yes to in the industry I’ve definitely learned from,” said Stouffer. “There’s certain things I’m ok with based on artistic value and the message the creators are trying to convey.”

Even with topics such as nudity, Stouffer says it all depends on the project.

“If the reason is good then it’s something I’d say yes to,” said Stouffer.

Andrew Benne, an acting teacher and founder of the Los Angeles Acting Studio in San Diego, believes that in order for an actor to become a truly great artist, they must take roles that push boundaries and cause them to dive into their “creative insanity,” or the actor’s “psychological make-up.” According to Benne, an actor’s mind is like a room with many doors. The more diverse roles one takes on, the more doors that are opened. The more doors an actor opens, the better they know themselves as artists.

“The set has an energy all its own—there’s a life about it,” said Benne. “When you tap into something while playing a role, it’s like the universe opens a door for you, a portal to yourself.”

Andrew Benne has been an acting teacher for 28 years and has been an actor for even longer. He is no stranger to the world of type-casting.

“I played college students till I was 31 years old,” said Benne. “One day, I called my agent and said ‘I can’t be a student anymore, I’ve been a teacher for too long. Don’t hand me anything that involves carrying books.’”



PHOTO COURTESY OF ANDREW BENNE

Benne has had his own theater three times in LA and will have been working in his LA studio in San Diego for almost a year in April. The acting teacher uses a Meisner hybrid technique of teaching with his students, inspired by a mix of his own teachings and those of his former mentor, Sanford Meisner. Having learned under other teachers like Stella Adler, Eric Morris and Lee Strasberg, Benne developed a method of teaching focused on getting actors out of their heads and into their bodies.

“My classes are so personal, that people get to know who they are,” said Benne. I never teach any two actors the same because everyone is different. You have to learn to listen and feel on every level of your body.”

Benne’s classes are about getting actors to explore their creative make-up while playing a variety of different roles. He still believes though that the best training is working, even if it means working roles you normally wouldn’t.

“You’re finding out who you are as an actor and you have to learn through experience,” said Benne. “A good cook will make a s***ty meal once in a while because they are learning—good actors are willing to be bad in order to get better.”

But there is a danger for actors who dive too deep into their creative psyche. Benne says that he once had to play a serial killer clown for one of his student’s films. The experience, he describes, was staggering.

“While I was tapping into that character I felt like I tapped into something scary inside me,” said Benne. “I see pictures of myself in the costume and the make-up and it still horrifies me.”

Benne says that while the experience did help him grow as an actor, actors who take on a darker character role might need more time to shake it and put the character on the shelf.

“The set has an energy all its own—there’s a life about it,” said Benne. “I’ll have students that come to class who will still be acting as the character because they can’t let it go easily.”

This can happen when an actor has dived so deep into the creative insanity, that it becomes increasingly difficult to find their way back. Stouffer himself uses a Miesner and Stanislavsky method of acting, where an actor puts themselves in the mind of the character they are embodying. However, Stouffer believes that a fine line must be drawn with embodying the character and actually becoming the character when the camera is no longer rolling.

“Usually when people go too far into the character, they can never shut it off,” said Stouffer. “And it wreaks havoc on their personal life.”

Though the most well-known case might be the death of Heath Ledger in 2008 after having immersed himself too much in the role of the Joker in *The Dark Knight*, in 2014 The Atlantic published an article titled, *How Actors Create Emotions: A Problematic Psychology*. The article talked about an actor named Deborah Margolin who so fully consumed herself in the characters she played, that she actually started to become them.

The article reads: “But for Margolin, the line separating her real self from her stage self became less defined the deeper into character she went. Playing a person whose existence was blight on others’ took a real toll, emotionally and physically.”

The article goes on to suggest that acting and psychology are intimately connected. While an actor must build as real of a world as possible for their characters, they also must learn to separate their world from the character’s before it begins to infringe on their own reality. Researchers like Thalia Goldstein,

an assistant professor of psychology at Pace University, have been investigating the links between the two fields for years. Guill herself is now in the process of getting her undergraduate degree in psychology at UCLA.

“The truth about acting is that to give a good performance, you have to take it personally, you have to be invested,” said Guill. “Some characters stay with you forever. Some you can’t even remember you played. But I always bring myself to the role.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF JULIANNA GUIL

Robert Wald, acting teacher of 28 years and founder of Robert Wald Actors Studio in San Diego, dedicates his time to teaching actors how to make their performances as real as possible as well as teaching them to keep a safe distance from falling into the rabbit hole.

“You’re a vehicle for another life,” said Wald. “The secret in what I’m trying to teach the people here is that you have to lose yourself in the process so you can gain this other life and other identity. It’s a transformational process.”

But when the lights go on and the camera stops rolling, Wald also trains his students to go from the right side of the brain, back to the left.

“When the day is done, I tell my students ‘You better get your wits about you because you’re all going in your death mobiles and driving home.’ You have to learn how to put the character on the shelf.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBERT WALD

Wald was mentored by Charles Conrad, Stanford Meisner's right-hand man in New York. So not surprisingly, Wald and Benne have very similar methods of coaching.

"They have to be more real than the reality shows," said Benne. "It's about being truthful in the moment and believing that what is happening in that scene is really happening to you."

Wald adds, "The best actors are loving when they are really loving and hating when they're really hating. You really believe them because they are actually feeling what they're portraying."

According to Wald, mediocre actors make acting a mental process, great actors make it a spiritual experience.

"When people really go through a creative process and become these characters and figure out what makes them tick in their world, that's when they learn something valuable," said Wald. "There's a great deal to learn. And it's such a beautiful thing. It's a living breathing laboratory about life."

Guill says she is a firm believer in the value of a 'not-perfect' acting experience, for both the way it teaches actors about themselves as well as the characters they play.

"It's all about the mix of variety of the jobs you do," said Guill. "You have to learn, and that's why you take the jobs you may not take later on. It can help you make

choices for yourself that will leave you more fulfilled in the future. You never know what a job will give you.”

Stouffer and Guill have both played characters of all different backgrounds and natures. Whether it was with an independent webseries, film, television series, or a commercial with Walmart, both actors have learned, and are continuing to learn, what doors of their creative psyche they should walk through and which ones they should keep closed.

“When it comes to roles that you feel like you have to do, take Samuel Jackson for example,” said Stouffer. “He’s always working and is so versatile. He’s never turned down a role.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF KYLE STOUFFER

Guill adds, “In this town, it’s never enough. I have friends who are enormously successful in the public eye and they still feel that there are levels they haven’t reached.”

But along with the skill to portray as many characters as realistically as possible, actors must also master the skill of maintaining their own identity, pulling themselves out of the creative insanity and back to reality. This begins with an actor knowing who they are and overcoming insecurities.

“Nothing quite prepares you for stepping into an audition room of 20 people that look exactly like you, wearing exactly what you’re wearing and reading lines for the part you want” said Stouffer. “You think you are so unique and then you step in and it’s just rows of, well, you. It’s terrifying.”

While he has played all different flavors of characters in multiple mediums of the business, the feeling Stouffer describes as “total and complete nerve-racking inadequacy” is an emotion he says every actor has to work through when starting out. Insecurities often surface during auditions and, according to Stouffer, knowing exactly who you are as a person, even for actors who have been working for years, is vital.

“Insecurity is rooted in not knowing who you are,” said Stouffer. “The entire casting process is often formulated around ‘What you can do for me? Because I can change your life.’ Knowing that you don’t have to hang your hat on the fact that you got a certain role really helps.”

The most exciting and stressful auditioning time for an actor is during pilot season according to Guill. This month, the pressure is on.

“There’s all these new shows coming out and every actor in town wants a pilot,” said Guill. “This is my 11th pilot season and less than half the time I’ve been lucky enough to land one. It’s both an exciting time and a heart-wrenching time.”

The young artist is still in Hollywood, bringing characters to life. Guill is constantly auditioning, sometimes having as many as three auditions a day. But while her days may vary, Guill always carries a constant with her.

“We [actors] all have pep-talks in our back pockets,” said Guill. “Pilot season comes and goes and then there are many more job opportunities throughout the rest of the year. ‘You are going to work again,’ is the conversation I have with myself and with my friends.”

The audition process is incredibly personal. An actor’s hopes and dreams are put up to face their toughest insecurities. Because of this, choosing what roles to invest in and what doors to walk through requires careful consideration.

“There’s so many aspects of this industry that are outside your control,” said Stouffer. “All you can control is your own decisions.”

While Stouffer believes that it’s important for an actor to know their yes’s and no’s before going into acting, he and Guill both agree that it’s a learning-as-you-go process.

“You need to have a strong sense of self, but I don’t think you need to know everything before you go in because so much changes along the way,” said Guill. “It’s really about being open and flexible. You never know when a job might change your life.”

Guill and Stouffer say that every new job, whether or not it’s what you hoped for, is a stepping stone that moves you further up in the industry and grows you as an actor. During the audition process, both Stouffer and Guill come face to face with doors upon doors they could walk through. In the audition room, as a new character, they each enter through a new door to another part of their creative psyche. It’s an emotional process that takes a toll. But at its heart, acting is a chance to live in a new way and grow as a human being.

“I have to look at it as an opportunity to do what I love,” said Guill. “You’re always reaching for something higher. In every audition, that’s the opportunity. That’s at the heart of it—getting the opportunity to perform.”

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