

How I learned to stop worrying and trust the unknown

Posted on **June 23, 2015** by **Andrew Gallant**

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Earlier this week, we got an email from a student about a scene she had just performed in class, a performance in which she discovered a new level of honesty and emotional depth in her work. Her email read: “Not sure what just happened. But thanks for that.” Embedded in this seemingly simple email is the DNA of a fundamental problem actors (and all artists) face: the struggle to give up control.

The desire to control is a seductive force. We are culturally obsessed with planning for the future, laying out career paths and giving infants college funds. The entire insurance industry is built upon our desire to foresee every outcome and protect us from the unknown. We pathologically work to eliminate any threat to our knowing what is going to happen because, if we know, then we can control. But this mindset, all of it, is death for an artist.

In every acting or improv class you’ve ever taken, you’ve heard your teacher say, “get out of your head.” I heard it every day of my own training. When I first started as an actor, I went in with the mindset that I could solve the problem of acting. I can remember my frustration and hurt as my plans crumbled because of collaborators not doing what I wanted them to do. The more the world around fought me, the deeper and deeper in my head I went. I craved the safety of my plan. I feared the unknown. And my acting sucked as a result. I’m not being hard on myself, it’s just the truth. My acting was bad and I knew it, and that put me in my head even more. Over time, my jaw and hands became more tense and my breath became shallower as my body tried to muscle through the fear I felt but tried to outwardly deny.

I see actors like this all the time in classes and on stage, actors who prefer to work impossibly hard to shut out what is going on around them or force some inorganic idea into their work rather than give up control and admit how vulnerable they actually are. Many hide behind an effortful and false veneer of fearlessness. Having been there myself as a performer, I know how empty and hollow that posturing is. The creative act is terrifying. Acting is doubly scary because you have to perform the creative act in front of others instead of behind closed doors. I’m here to tell you, you DO NOT have to deny that you are afraid, but you do need to find the courage do your work and give up control no matter how exposed and vulnerable you may feel.

So how did I do it? So how did I give up control? It's a simple thing really. I finally noticed (with a lot of help from a lot of great teachers) the fact that I NEVER HAD CONTROL. Not once. I'd never been able to make things happen the way I had intellectually envisioned them and I was ruining my acting, my body and my voice trying to hang on to the illusion of control. When I began to understand that all the work I was doing to control my acting was wasted effort, I began to find a new path. Tension finally released and acting began to feel fun again. I began to love that, onstage, anything could happen.

It is a fundamental truth of the world: You will never be completely in control. The world is too big with too many people in it and too many variables to ever plan for everything. The more you grip, the more it slips through your fingers. Anyone who has ever been in a theatrical production knows that no two shows are the same. Theater at its core is an art of the temporary, each show a once-in-a-lifetime event. So why not learn to work in such a way that embraces the unknown?

And you do have to work. Giving up control is not permission to be lazy. In fact, I believe that you must work obsessively and tirelessly as an actor and artist. What is important is that you do the right kind of work, the kind of work that supports and nourishes the creative act rather than the kind of work that feeds the ego and fuels self-consciousness. There is a quote I love that goes something like, "We make a pot from clay, but it is the emptiness that holds water." Our job as artists is to work in such a way that the conditions are right for inspiration and creativity to occur knowing that we cannot control creativity itself. As an actor, you personalize, you learn your lines by rote, you rehearse, you research and you work on your body and voice. That is our clay. You do all that work so that, in the moment on stage or in front of the camera, you can put all of your attention on your scene partner and get out of your own way. The right work done offstage will let you trust that you can open yourself to the creative spark of the moment.

As our student discovered and expressed in that email, when you do the right work, you can let go and magic just might happen.

The Worst Thing You Can Do in an Audition

Posted on **July 17, 2015** by **Andrew Gallant**

Over the last few years, I've stepped outside my usual role as an actor and instead have dedicated a lot of time to directing and producing plays. As a result, I've spent a ton of time in the audition room behind the table watching actors audition. The experience of seeing hundreds of back-to-back auditions has made it very clear to me that most actors think about casting in a way that works against them, fills them with anxiety and prevents them from doing their best work in the casting room. They walk in with a single thought that sabotages them, when a simple shift in thinking could make all the difference between getting that "thanks-but-no-thanks" email and booking the job.

Here is the insidious thought I'm talking about: "*What do they want to see?*"

Does that sound familiar? Have you asked yourself or your acting buddy that question after reading a casting breakdown? Have you lain awake the night before an audition trying to solve the casting puzzle, second-guessing your monologue choice or interpretation of the audition sides? If so, you are not alone. It is a perfectly reasonable thought to have when you want something (the role) that someone (the casting director/director) has to give you. It is also perfectly destructive.

When you worry about what the auditors want to see, you give away all your power. You turn the people you're auditioning for into judges with yellow pads and Pellegrinos, eager to mock you for your failure rather than what they actually are: people who genuinely want you to succeed. You may not believe me, but every casting director and director I've ever spoken with about holding auditions has said the same thing. On the other side of the table, we are hoping beyond hope that you will walk in the room and solve our problem, which is that we don't yet have the right actor for the part.

When actors come in with confidence and rock the audition, we breathe a sigh of relief knowing that there's someone for the job. When you come in nervous or desperate we still hope that your work will surprise us. Directors and casting directors NEED actors! We NEED you! We get bummed when you cancel your audition or come in less than prepared because you have the power to turn our directorial vision into reality. Let me say it again: Actors have power! Directors can't do their job without actors.

There have been times (and maybe I shouldn't be saying this) when I've been in that casting room and been completely clueless as to what exactly I was looking for, where I couldn't even answer the

question “What do I want to see.” There have also been times when the idea I had in the morning about I wanted was completely upended by an amazing, confident, artistically exciting performance by an actor who showed me something I could never have come up with on my own. As a director, I love those moments. I love having actors who come in with a point of view that fuels my own creativity. It gets me excited to have that actor in the room, excited to have them inspire me again and make my work better. Again, that is the power you have as an actor.

So, with all this in mind, I offer an adjustment to the question. Instead of asking “*What do they want to see?*” ask “*What art do I want to make with time I’m given?*” Instead of worrying about pleasing everyone on the other side of the table, which, by the way, no one in the history of acting has ever been able to do 100 percent of the time, treat the audition as an opportunity to act the way you’ve always wanted to act. Do your work, make your choices, but do it for you! That’s what the actors who find success have in common: They are unapologetically confident in their own artistry. You’re the only one who has your point of view and your particular artistic vision. You are not right for every role, every project or to work with every director. You will find the ones you are right for you by owning the idea that your audition is your time to create something uniquely your own. By shifting your thinking, you will begin to audition with integrity, confidence and, most importantly, joy!

Andrew Gallant



Andrew holds an MFA in Acting from DePaul University’s Theatre School, a BA in Theater from the University of Wisconsin – Madison and a postgraduate Diploma from the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts. He became a fully certified instructor of the Meisner Approach by completing the two-year certification process taught by actor, author and master Meisner teacher [Larry Silverberg](#). Andrew co-founded Green Shirt Studio with his wife, Sommer Austin. Along with teaching and coaching at Green Shirt, he is an adjunct professor at [The Theatre School](#) at DePaul University.

When not teaching, Andrew serves as the Artistic Director of [The Agency Theater Collective](#) in Chicago. For The Agency he wrote and directed *I Wish to Apologize to the People of Illinois* and *At the Center*. He wrote and starred in each incarnation *Out of Tune Confessional* and directed Clifford Odets’ *Paradise Lost*, and Copi’s *Four Twins*. When not working on the Agency or Green Shirt, Andrew continues to act and direct professionally with various venues and is a proud member of Actor’s Equity Association.