

# It's Not A "Character," It's A Person!

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When I coach an actor whose performance is flat—lacking a three-dimensional quality, I tell them to, “remember, you’re not *playing* a ‘character,’ you’re *becoming another person.*”

That single recommendation can spell the difference between a mediocre and a great performance.

Granted, the actor is responsible for injecting life into words slumbering on a page, no matter what they are. But the script must still give the director and actor some insight with which to create a complete person.

Too often the content does not.

I believe many writers would benefit from exercising this concept: “you’re not *inventing* a ‘character,’ you’re *creating a real person.*”

## CAN YOU HEAR THEM BREATHE? CAN YOU FEEL THEIR BREATH?

All too often I’ve read scripts that do not portray people, they try too hard to create “characters” and end up contriving artificial “personalities.”

Read a lot of scripts and you’ll instantly detect the writer who tells his story through living souls and the writer who fabricates excessively quirky, bizarre caricatures in order to impress us with his “imagination.”

Genuine original, unique, well-developed personalities are magnetic and easily draw us into their lives. Manipulated puppet portraits, on the other hand, are simply

narrative, expository vehicles who make it difficult to maintain an interest in them or their story.

Actors can only do so much to make your characters believable; the director can only do so much to assist the actors’ passionate portrayals if there’s no evidence of it in the script.

The basis for good film characters is that they are constantly reacting to something they experience as a matter of life or death. In reality the problem may not be nearly that grave, but the characters experience it as ominous.

For example, let’s say you’re running late for an important conference. With a producer interested in your new script. Now, you are a very punctual, reliable person. And you suffer from angst, misery and torment if you’re not on time for a manicure, let alone a meeting.

Now, you are not facing a genuine life or death dilemma, but it sure *feels* that way!

The way your characters react to situations like this, to other people, to what happens, and to their environment determines who they are. It’s my belief that fear is the key emotion that sends us into our most definitive behavior—of that life or death sensation. It’s fight or flight.

So ultimately, the way we deal with fear defines who we are. In a state of fear, the courageous or the coward is revealed immediately.

In fact, no matter what is actually transpiring, who we are is the way we respond to the personal perception of our own reality.

“We” means living and literary people who populate our planet, scripts and books.

## IF IT AIN'T ON THE PAGE, IT AIN'T ON THE STAGE

If characters only factually explain who they are, what they’ve done, what happened before we see them, what is going on and what got them where they are—all without an emotional base, there is nothing to which the actor can respond. In this situation, a great actor can still create a personality, but to do what? There is no real movement of the story or the person.

Too many films I’ve seen recently have cast exceptional actors who performed as well as they *possibly* could—but for dull, lifeless, idiotic, pointless scripts.

In one film the lead actress, a beautiful, brilliant, award-winning talent, sobbed uncontrollably over the death of her leading man. She gave a fine, realistic performance. But the story and characters were so incredibly concocted and implausible that I couldn’t help thinking, “Why are



you crying? I never cared about anyone or anything in this story. I'm glad the guy died.

What a waste of talent, money and hard work. Worse, those are two hours of my life I'll never get back."

The only reason I stayed is because the cast was so terrific I desperately hoped the writing would improve. Or maybe the story would become, I don't know, clever ... thoughtful ... even palpable.

No such luck.

Even worse: just ten minutes into the movie I was so certain of what was going to happen and the "surprise ending" that I

your character—inside or outside—as long as you experience them as real people.

## YOUR CHARACTER DESERVES A SOUL

The key is to create your character and then let go. Let the character express him or herself as a living person would instead of trying to edit the creation to suit your senses or a specific plot point. This process will always have an impact on your story; but that person's impact could be the best thing that ever happened to it.

By creating a genuine person, you are separating yourself from that character. If

If you have that personality clearly established in your gut, knowing, and then describing how the character acts and reacts comes naturally.

## MAKE THEM YOURS

There is a process of adjusting characters as your script progresses to make certain they are being true to themselves and not being contorted to suit something you're trying to fabricate. If you need a character to do something specific, create a personality who would naturally do that.

Once you finally get inside your charac-

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wrote it out and handed it to my assistant so she could read it at the end of the film.

Interestingly, I'm told the original script was pretty good; what we watched was the result of studio "committee" writing. Ouch.

## CHARACTERS: INSIDE OR OUTSIDE

I visualize the actor's persona within the character, allowing "another person" to envelope the actor's body, leaving the actor free to become another person. Interior = actor; full body = whole person. Elements of the character are introduced from the outside, to be assimilated and nurtured until the soul of another person emerges.

Put another way, the actor is introduced to the character through a script—a script written by someone who, hopefully, has an intimate relationship with the character that radiates from the page. The actor gets to know the character and love him or her, internalizing the senses and sensibilities of the person they prepare to portray.

For the writer, however, the character originates from within. But the writer must imagine and experience the character as a real person. Someone whose breath you feel, whose heartbeat you hear, whose voice, life and values are different from your own. Who moves differently than you, which is why I recommend tape recording the dialogue and actually getting up and moving the way your character would.

These help identify the details that make a good character great.

Some people may see themselves on the outside and their character on the inside.

It doesn't matter where you experience

you try to include yourself, your sensibilities, your morals, your intelligence, you do not give your character the respect s/he deserves—you are not giving your character his or her own soul.

When the soul is experienced, you're on your way to creating a three-dimensional character.

## SPONGING OFF YOUR CHARACTERS

Here's a physical description of what I'm talking about.

You know those little sponge toys children play with? They start as the tiniest bit of dry sponge; they don't look like much of anything, let alone a toy. In fact, they normally look like something you'd toss in the garbage if you don't know what they are.

That is what we start with when we're creating our scripts.

But when the tiny, dry, shapeless sponge is dropped in a bowl of water, it expands about a hundred times its original size, taking on the three-dimensional appearance of a creature: a dinosaur, dog, cat, bird, whatever.

Every minuscule cell must be infused with inflating H<sub>2</sub>O or the lifeless material will not expand into the shape of a recognizable creature with which a youngster can play.

As writers, that's what we must do. Fill every little cell with life.

I'm not talking about writing page after page of exposition describing the character. I'm talking about putting the character in a spot that requires him or her to react as only he or she would, based on the "reality" of his or her background, environment and experience.

ters (or they get inside of you), understanding how they feel, react, act, move and think—they only come alive when you set them free to be who they are.

This allows *them* to separate themselves from *you!*

Writers will understand this: I've actually had characters "speak" to me when I've misquoted or had them do something they wouldn't do. Likewise, they can make suggestions of what to do that would make the story more interesting.

## SEMANTICS, SCHEMATICS

When I was speaking about these ideas with a friend of mine—an extremely talented actress—we ran into a language quandary. It's nearly impossible to continually refer to a character as a person, or a person as a character.

So perhaps a new term like character-person might help the process.

Linguistics aside, the point is that a character must be considered a pulsating, vital person.

Which brings me back to why I came up with these ideas in the first place: too often we depict characters as words lying on paper or a computer screen, rather than genuinely experiencing them as "real" people.

When we experience our characters as people, having a physical sensation of them as sweaty, belching, scratching, coughing, living human beings, writing about them can be much more fun and rewarding. More, you'll create **much** better scripts and escalate the quality of your work dramatically. ■