



Several years ago, Alec Baldwin interviewed noted actor Al Pacino to complete his undergraduate degree at New York University. Baldwin had nine hours with Pacino – I wish I had *ten* hours with Baldwin to reflect on acting in general and specifically acting for the camera.

Alec Baldwin

On Acting For The Camera

Text by Colleen Patrick

In addition to having the pleasure of listening to that mellifluous voice, Baldwin knows what it takes to make smart choices, has the skills, attitude and determination to do it right and maintain an award-winning, extraordinarily prolific career in camera work and theatre. He was performing in an off Broadway comedy, *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, when I spoke with him.

While there is a lot of theatre verses camera work contention in the U.S., the point of this column is not to bifurcate the two crafts. It's to demystify, discover and investigate the special craft and art that is performing for the lens in order to enlighten *movieScope* readers. To put the *métier* and its practitioners under the microscope to impart, instruct and inspire.

Many U.S. theatre actors have elitist notions toward their camera comrades. One successful stage actor came to me for camera acting coaching when, after several years, he failed to land a single camera acting job. When he contacted me it was as if he were an alcoholic who had hit the world's worst "bottom" ever. Clearly, he could sink no lower than to seek my assistance. I assured him his "shameful secret" was safe with me.

Six months of dedicated hard work later, he was cast in a quality dramatic short film in which he was the only actor – a genuine *tour de force* for the camera. He assured me then that even if he saw an actor of dubious talent or distinction on screen in the future, he

would never say another disparaging word because he now realised how much work, skill and discipline it takes to do the job well.

Internationally, actors tend to shift their performances more seamlessly between stage and camera, incorporating appropriate and specific techniques for each craft.

I wanted to interview Alec Baldwin for my maiden column because in addition to being a fine actor and international superstar whose body of work is prolific, stunning and diverse; he continues to generously share his knowledge and wisdom with other actors and filmmakers to increase the acumen and hopefully, quality of their work.

If you are a filmmaker, Baldwin's reflections on the too often alienating process of working on film sets today – independent and studio – should give you ideas of how to improve the production experience for quality performers and crew.

Baldwin, through his El Dorado Pictures production company has also executive produced and produced numerous award-winning projects – among them *Nuremberg* and *State And Main*. He also co-wrote an episode of "Law And Order" [Prime], *Tabloid*, in part based on his own mistreatment by the tabloid media.

I experienced him as passionate, compassionate, intelligent, disciplined and professional about his work

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and realistic about working in both cultures of American theatre and film. He has a strong sense of self: he knows who he is, what he wants and needs and what makes him feel successful and satisfied.

Most importantly, I believe his observations about camera acting and career decision-making processes are well worth your time to read – and heed. I wish all camera actors would follow his excellent example, deepening their sense of self and going for what gives them the greatest satisfaction – as people, professionals and artists.

What do you believe is the greatest misconception about acting for the camera? In film you have to take the camera in. Some people say you have to ignore the camera and I think that's a mistake. There's a triangulation that goes on. I'm sitting at a table and I'm talking to you but I'm talking to you *and* I'm talking to the camera. A lot of the best film actors I've worked with are very camera conscious. They're very clear about their lighting and the camera and playing to the camera. And then just in terms of scenes and how you approach the material and how you approach the work becomes clear [in its relationship to the camera]. In the theatre, you can walk off [the stage] and there's always the hope for a better tomorrow. You say, "I really have a chance tomorrow to fine tune that moment, there's this line I'd like to scan better. There's another shot at it tomorrow." Whereas for film that can be very painful [because there is no returning and re-addressing your work for the shoot when you leave the set for the day]. Sometimes, especially early on, I'd be driving home from work and I always did my best acting in my rear view mirror. You can't go back the next day – unless you're the world's biggest movie star – and say "I need us to re-shoot that; I didn't feel my best about that."

Something I've heard from theatre actors that I believe is a major misconception is, "Theatre big, camera small." I say, no, it's theatre big, camera intimate. Would you agree? I think there's some truth to that.

Is being so extremely focused on money hurting filmmaking? I haven't done a movie – even an independent film, in a solid ten years ... haven't set foot on the stage of a film where you didn't hear a constant base line of tension in the background about money that was being spent, and how the movie was going to perform, and how do we rearrange the furniture, so to speak, so the movie's going to be festival worthy or commercial. Even in remakes when you're supposedly reviving worthy material, movies are always just a kind of numbing economic roll of the dice; you feel that pressure all the time. This is why I do the not for profit theatre work most of the time, now. I find these people have a recipe for what they like to do and how they like to do it. Some are critically better than others, but they've raised the money to launch these ships, so to speak, on a regular basis and it's one of the more comfortable environments I've ever worked in from a creative level.

I spoke to a talent manager in L.A. recently, who told me that he'd be reluctant to take on an actor 27 years old because "that's like 100 here. Too old." That's like

living in dog years. How are actors supposed to deal with that obsession with youth and denial of life's realities? The movie business is a big business. There's a lot of "branding" involved. People have spent tens or hundreds of millions of dollars acquainting stars with their audience so people will buy that brand like they buy a Coke [or Gatorade or ...]. When you want to reach for a product on a shelf that signifies Hollywood movie making the actors are the label on that container. People don't stand in line and go, "Hey, Bob, that's a Universal film!" In movies, they're less likely to overlook the visual quotient of an actor – a leading man in the theatre may never be a leading man in a film. In theatre, they're less likely to overlook the talent quotient of an actor and be more forgiving about the visual component. But the two of them [theatre and camera actors] have different talents. Pacino said it to me best, "Everybody in the business at this level has a talent. For something. Whether it's telling a joke, or seeming alluring and sexual. Some are just more talented than others."

What do you think in your background prepared you for your career and international stardom? I don't think there was anything in my background that prepared me. My dad was a teacher with six kids – I didn't have a car when I was a teenager; I didn't have a house with a finished basement and a pool table or a mother like my friends had who were happy we visited their house because they knew where their kids were. The only thing I could bring to the table was me. Who I was and what I had to say and the way I had to say it and entertaining people and engaging people in whatever way I could was all I had. There was virtually nothing else. I go home and I see a couple dozen people like me who I grew up with, with the same outlook and performance capabilities, people who are civilians, so to speak. If they were trained they could do this for a living. But I got lucky and was offered work. I think the critical thing in this business is once you are offered work, once you get started, the real critical thing is how you develop your professional responsibilities and view the work as a job. I mean, so often I see people who become successful and they not only have to learn how to act in the white hot spotlight of stardom because they become very famous when they're young – in particular motion picture and television fame – they have to learn how to behave. It's a tough place. It's a tough universe to improve your acting ability within. When they're young and they become very famous, many of them don't improve. And then [it's important to develop] your attitude about other people – directors, producers, the crew, the cast and the creative people. I remember doing *The Aviator* with [Martin] Scorsese – he let me speak with the designers because I was on the set and I had so many questions for them about the period [in which the story takes place]. These are the matters that deepen for me as I go on every set. The crafts people and artisans who are responsible for the significant contributions to the movie making. When I'm on a movie set the other actors are frequently the last people I want to talk to now. I want to talk with the photographers and the costume designers. But the set designers especially when we did Scorsese's movie – I was just so fascinated the

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way they put it all together from books and research. You must develop your sense of professionalism and how you treat other people and then how you approach your work. I mean, do you come out of the gate very quickly and you're making a lot of choices very early on or do you want to lay back? I've seen all types of approaches with that.

It's a constant learning process. You know, you turn around one day and you have more answers than you don't. You are older. You play the dad. I mean after this stage I'll be playing the "judge phase" of my career. I'll be playing the judge. You develop your feelings. Why you do this work and what it means to you deepens and deepens within you. The things that were interesting to me and that held my attention even ten years ago are completely different now. When you have a relationship with anything – your work, your children, your parents, your spouse, whoever; we have a relationship with people and with things – with institutions, with ourselves. And those relationships change. And my relationship with this work has changed. All I care about now is satisfying myself. I mean I want to make a living, but that idea of what am I going to do to make other people like me, what am I going to do to make the industry want me – to seduce them. I mean those are all distant, distant memories. It isn't about that at all. If you told me, "You know, tomorrow you get up and we've got a six month program and we're going to revive your career and you're going to do this and this and by the time you come out the other end..." You used to hear a lot of that when you'd change agents. Agents would come up to you at film festivals and say, "You know I don't think you're getting the parts you ought to be getting. And we're going to do this and this [for you]." And everyone wants you to have a kind of plan of attack to take "the hills," in this case the Hollywood Hills. All of that seems like it's another lifetime to me now. To me now, it's just how can I get in a situation where we're working on a piece of material I am really excited about and suits where I am at this point in my career and life. Recently I was asked to read for a big Broadway comedy with big people and a playwright I adore. But I'm doing a comedy now and when the run is finished I don't want to do another theatre comedy. At least now. I don't know what I want to do – maybe O'Neill – I don't know what I want to do. But something different.

Who has made the greatest impact on your camera acting career? Probably other actors I've watched throughout my life. People who have a kind of strength or a kind of integrity. Or actors who play villainous roles – who, while they bring a negative value in the film, they try to maintain some kind of charm or some kind of allure to them even though they play these roles. Like Robert Walker was someone I really used to love to watch in *Strangers On A Train*. And men who I thought were great leading men but of a certain school. Like I always loved [Clark] Gable and William Holden. And Gregory Peck is someone I worshipped as a leading man – although he's very iconic because he played these really larger than life roles and was such a huge movie

star. And [Paul] Newman was someone I've admired in his films. Then the method people like [Marlon] Brando, [Al] Pacino and [Robert] DeNiro. I love to see people who still take chances in their careers. One of my favourite movies is *The Misfits*. To see Gable on the screen with three icons of method acting: Marilyn Monroe, Eli Wallach and Montgomery Clift. And here's Gable – a man and actor of his era – standing toe to toe with them. There's a scene where he breaks down; it's one of the most moving scenes to me in all of movies. To watch Gable connect like that ... and he did it in his twilight. I mean he died right after the movie was made. I think a couple of actors in the film died then, too. I just always remember Gable in *The Misfits* trying to pull something out of himself that late in his career. I always admire that, I always love when I see people do something to try and surprise you.

Is there any advice you would have for anyone going into the industry now as a camera actor. I would say it's a visual medium and for that reason people should take care of themselves. If you're young and beautiful and you want to smoke and drink and have that rough and tumble reputation that's fine – for a while. But the need for actors to take care of themselves physically is essential in both theatre and film. In theatre because you need so much stamina. In film because you wear everything on camera and when you're not doing well it shows. And I have a piece of advice for people working on a film: Don't leave the set if you can avoid it. There's this thing I feel that on the set of the film is a reality. If you've got your stuff that feeds you – your book or your newspaper or crossword puzzle or Blackberry or iPod – don't keep going back to the insularity of the trailer or the motor home. I find the greatest actors I know don't lose their contact with the set or the rhythm of their shooting the film. If you walk away – off the set completely – and you come back, you have to reconnect to that reality and you have to rev it up and get it going again. So I find that unless you have to leave to use the rest room, eat, or have a really private moment on the phone – stay on the set. Stay with the crew and stay present in that zone. That is, if you're doing important work. If you're in an action film and all you're doing is jumping out of a car before it blows up, then that's less demanding. But if you're doing dramatic or comic work where your performance is a key component, don't develop that habit of after you shoot, you run away and hide in this kind of isolation chamber that people have on film sets. Not that you have to interact with anyone or be overly gregarious or give yourself [and energy] away or entertain people. It's not that at all. It's just to stay there and keep thinking about what you're doing. I mean when you're on the set and thinking about the scene, even in the most casual way, you'd be surprised how many things can pop up that are useful for you to use. ■

