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Meeting the World Halfway

One of the best live-theatre performances I have ever seen was *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* in Detroit. The theatre was not a grand opera house, but a tiny storefront with butcher paper covering the massive front windows. *Hedwig* is an aggressive production for any company and aside from the band it's a one-man show. The young actor onstage commanded our attention for two hours and took us through Hedwig's long and heart breaking story. It was an emotional gear-shifting catharsis I have rarely in the theatre. I've never met people who have been through what Hedwig has, though they are out there, and this actor surely has not. So how did he muster that transformation? It's always a gamble to ask an actor about his/her work because they could give you something useful, or they could talk about pretending to be a lizard.

This artist provided the first. I asked how he made his connection to his character, and he said, "It's **you** in a different circumstance." I had heard similar acting advice before: "There is no character, the situation is your character." The details can be set aside as long as the lines are delivered honestly. But do I have the experience to play a 40 year old? Should I try? Why can't I play a woman and why does any of this matter? I remind myself, "An actor's job is to tell the truth." Telling this truth through myself means that I am 25 years old, I am a man, I have one hand, and the same is true of my characters. It isn't a hard rule because I have played two-handed people before; these illusions are possible when needed. Yet, in my experience, when it isn't imperative for the plot, the strongest choice is

to revert to yourself. Playwrights don't usually specify in the text that a character has two hands, so 90% of my roles are played as though I have only one.

Having one hand has absolutely gotten me more work than lost.

I grew up alongside actors who got work because of their race, sex, hair, and then of course, their talent. If Chelsea gets roles for what she looks like, so do I. There are roles and paid opportunities for which I am rocketed to the front of line.

During high school I spent two summers acting for the Physically Handicapped Actors and Musical Artists League (PHAMALy), in Denver. I played a slave driver with a whip-hand against a deaf scarecrow, a wheelchair tin girl, and a blind lion in *The Wiz*. The casting for *Urinetown* was similarly creative.

Upon graduating from The Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) in Georgia, I applied for a scholarship from the Kennedy Center. Every summer two disabled theatre students are chosen to be apprentices with Williamstown Theatre Festival (WTF), in Massachusetts. I wrote a one-page essay about my motivations and was selected. The phone call came in the hallway of SCAD and I had to sit down.

Williamstown is planted in the Berkshire County of Massachusetts. In the summer, its rolling hills and dense foliage glow with warm sunlight. A young woman with a prosthetic leg and I were placed among 69 acting apprentices at WTF. It was here that we performed in ten-minute plays, walk-on roles for the main stage shows, and ensemble pieces that moved through the center of town. All 69 of us worked and died together. For the multitude of classes and performance opportunities, we drove long hours to pick up gel or paint in other states and worked on sets for eight-hour overnight shifts. I learned the

ropes of the industry training with companies like WTF and The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey.

Film and TV is the industry where appearances truly dominate, but I do get approached for very specific roles on camera. I was being considered to play the part of a young, one handed terrorist in an up and coming independent sci-fi film. It was a decent supporting role. Nobody else I knew was up for this because to that point I was the only one-handed actor I knew.

I did two callbacks with the casting agency and never heard from them again. It is frequent in this career that a company only calls to say they want you, otherwise they don't contact you at all. The more you can forget about it, the better. A year later I finally saw this film with my mother at the Charles Theatre in Baltimore. We were both disappointed to see the role had been rewritten and played by a two handed actor.

Having one hand did land me some extra work on a TV pilot. My first national tour was un booked for a few days so I caught a bus into New York and spent one day on set. They needed an auditorium full of disabled people at a pep-rally, so we crowded together in our seats and waved prosthetic legs and stumps in the air. I had never been around so many one handed actors as that day. Of the disabilities present, one-armed people were the majority. The work was also repetitive and exhausting but lucrative. I made more money that day than I did playing Macbeth on national tour for a week.

I expect to get more work based on my disability and that would be awesome. Whatever the circumstances are that get you an offer, jump right in, because chances are you just want desperately to act. I shouldn't think about it too much. Having one hand can

be used to my advantage but, ultimately, it is not the reason behind why I get hired or not. I think (and hope) my talent affords me that.

Strangers are more nervous about my disability than I am.

We performed 95 times and taught over 125 workshops and Q&As on my first tour with National Players. We met children in more than twenty states at every level of privilege and exposure to the arts. Occasionally I get the question from a brave student,

“How did Macbeth lose his hand? I didn’t even notice until the dinner scene, you were so good at hiding it! I was really impressed with your ability to play a two handed person.”

The girl next to him would interrupt,

“Don’t say that Derrick! You’re such a dick!”

Children were fighting and I had said nothing. Both had their hearts in the right places but from lack of experience were shooting from the hip. I think kids should get to ask their questions; I admit I do not like it when passersby gawk at me, but I am more sympathetic to children. I explained to both students that I was neither hiding it nor pretending to have two hands, that my version of Macbeth had one hand and was still the deadliest warrior in Scotland.

A college in Virginia recruited a team of students to help load out after our show. While coiling cable for me, a student who I’m positive would want to be nameless said,

“I have a question for you.”

“Tell me your question.”

“I’m afraid to.”

“Why is that?”

“I feel like you know what my question’s about.”

“So what’s your question?”

“Can you just talk about it without me having to ask?”

I kept it professional and told him being an actor with one hand wasn’t a big deal any more than anyone else who scrapes a life together by acting. To this day I wonder if I should have made him ask his question out loud in order to get an answer. My job was to share my perspective with students, not take a stand.

In the spring of tour, one of the three National Players vehicles got a flat on a stretch just outside of Oklahoma City. Eliza, Drew and I had to drop out of the caravan for three hours to wait for a new tire. Drew had gone to school in Oklahoma City, so he dialed up his good friend, Miss Oklahoma. She picked us up in the Miss Oklahoma Car and took us out for cupcakes. Fun. At the cupcake store, I ordered a delectable cupcake with peanut butter and fudge and a little bit of sea-salted caramel. I was stoked. My clerk was a hip looking bearded clerk in a graphic tank top. He stopped me after I paid and said,

“I noticed your hand, may I pray for it?”

“Um, sure go right ahead.”

“May I hold it?”

“... oh, okay, here you are.”

“Oh lord and father please bless this young man in all of his endeavors. Please bless his body, give him strength and make his hand grow. In Jesus name we pray. Amen”

“Thank you very much.”

“Have a blessed day.”

From the shy students to characters like this guy, I see a recurring mix of kindhearted good will, combined with confused intentions. Discrimination takes many faces and, for disabled people it can be sympathy. Some people are surprised/put-off/confused when they see disabilities and they get impulsive. Then they tell others how to behave with me, or assuring me that I'm perfect the way I am (as if I had doubts). My reaction to these episodes is usually frustration, but I know in my heart of hearts that the discomfort is in them, not me. Even though the disability exists on my body, it manifests in other people's heads. I'm the one who should have sympathy for their limited perspective. People are never comfortable until I joke about my disability, I have to put it out there a lot to get them to relax. Joking about it also makes me better at taking it in when a cupcake salesman wants to help by praying out loud in a store for my hand to grow.

I am my own worst enemy, and any disabled person can be.

What other people think we can or cannot do is harmless, but what we believe ourselves can stop us dead in our tracks. It's easy to imagine, "Oh, I could never do that." I call this disability brain. It can shut you down either because you don't want to fail, or are afraid normal people will see you trying. But this fear is made of paper and disappears when you choose to ignore it.

When the National Players stopped for a week in New Orleans, we were a short walk from the French Quarter. Street musicians could be found easier than bathrooms and it seemed the whole city had come out to bask in the sun, stroll the art markets and drink. A few of us bought a collective 9 pounds of crawfish for dinner on our way home. I chose not to eat crawfish because it looked difficult enough for the two handed people. I didn't want

to fail at getting any real meat out of the tiny things and, more importantly, I didn't want the other players to sit in silence while the elephant in the room struggled with his shellfish.

How silly is that? I had spent months living with these kind hearted people and still felt the compulsion to guard my life from them. It took me that long to realize I had no idea what I was afraid of. I joined in and the night quickly became about the experience of eating crawfish on the floor of our hostel with each other. I also admit that I let the others do some shelling for me and it was great, I felt completely loved.

Links for disabled artists to find inspiration.

Phiscally Handicapped Actors and Musical Artists League – Denver, CO

<http://www.phamaly.org/>

Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts – New York, NY

<http://inclusioninthearts.org/>

Very Special Arts Kennedy Center

<http://www.kennedy-center.org/education/vsa/>