

WHY DO A SOLO SHOW?

An e-Article by Matt Hoverman © 11/2007
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In the first meeting of my CREATE YOUR OWN SOLO SHOW class, I ask my students to share what brought them to the class. Why do they want to do a solo show?

There are as many reasons to do solo shows as there are performer/writers who do them, but – in my experience teaching this class over 40 times and privately coaching and directing solo shows since 2001 - they generally tend to fall into these three basic categories:

1. To Create A Showcase for Yourself as an Actor!

What do John Leguizamo, Camryn Manheim, Nia Vardalos, Chazz Palminteri, Whoopi Goldberg and Billy Bob Thornton all have in common? They are all actors whose careers took off when they wrote and performed in their own one-person shows.

John Leguizamo was only getting cast as Latino drug dealers and thugs, Camryn Manheim was overweight and out of sight, Nia Vardalos (a Greek-American) was “ethnic” but not the “right ethnic” according to Hollywood, Chazz Palminteri was out of work and out of luck, Whoopi Goldberg had “too much edge” and Billy Bob Thornton was just getting small, forgettable parts.

Enter the magic of the solo show!

John Leguizamo started performing monologues exploring Latino male identity based on his friends and family called MAMBO MOUTH and SPIC-O-RAMA – and became a Broadway sensation and film star. Camryn Manheim created a show called WAKE UP, I'M FAT and scored a principal part on THE PRACTICE - a role that allowed her to give voice to the themes of her solo show. Nia Vardalos celebrated her ethnicity in her one-woman show MY BIG FAT GREEK WEDDING - which, after a successful run in LA, was bought by Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson, and turned into one of the highest grossing independent films of all time. Chazz Palminteri turned a story about his father and a Mafioso he knew growing up into the solo show A BRONX TALE - and Robert DeNiro offered to buy the film and direct himself and Chazz in it. Whoopi Goldberg performed character monologues born from her life experience as a recovering drug-addict, single mom, high school dropout – and became an Oscar-winning, A-list Hollywood icon.

But my favorite story is Billy Bob Thornton's (and not just because, like me, the man is follicly challenged.) It was late one night, and Billy Bob was filming a small part in a TV series like Outer Limits. He had been hired to play the small role of a ghostly train conductor. They'd given him a strange, short haircut, powdered his face and put him in a blue shirt buttoned all the way up. He sat in his dressing room, staring at his face in the mirror in despair. ‘All my friends are really working,’ he thought to himself angrily, ‘and what am I doing? This ridiculous, stupid role!’ So upset with himself and his lack of success, Billy Bob started making faces at himself in the mirror and grunting. One face stuck, and a deep, slow, gravely voice came out of his mouth. On the spot, he improvised a monologue that would soon become a solo show – and eventually develop

into the film SLING BLADE, for which Billy Bob was nominated for a Best Actor Oscar – and won the Best Screenplay Oscar!

What do all these true-life stories tell us?

When you create your own work for yourself as an actor, amazing things can happen in your career!

The life of an actor is difficult, and while talent and hard work and networking are important, sometimes it appears that certain actors – who aren't necessarily the most talented or even the hardest working – get job after job, while others – equally if not more talented – audition and audition and don't get cast. It's my personal philosophy that this happens because some actors are just more obviously cast-able than others. By the luck of the draw, they just *are* a physical type (be it young and beautiful, or off-kilter and funny, or dark and threatening) that clearly suggests a certain kind of role, for which there happens to be a large demand. Casting directors and agents know what kind of roles are in demand, and – being in a money-making business – they want to call in and represent *actors who have the greatest likelihood of being right for the most roles.*

All of the above examples are actors who weren't these types. There was no glut of Latino comedic leading roles for a John Leguizamo, or overweight, outspoken female roles for a Camryn Manheim, or Greek comedienne roles for a Nia Varalos, or smart, sensitive Sicilian roles for a Chazz Palminteri, or edgy, African-American outsider roles for a Whoopi Goldberg. And maybe there were roles for southern, balding character actors like Billy Bob Thornton, but they weren't great roles.

But after they did their solo shows, there were roles – and in some cases, many terrific roles - for these actors.

Why?

When you create your own solo show, you create a new type. You create a demand for YOU. You show the world – the directors, writers, casting directors and agents – what to do with you as an actor. Are you funny? A great mimic? Are you great at creating characters, singing, keeping an audience enthralled with a good story? What are the unique qualities that make you *you*? Even if you are 19 and beautiful, you often need to show the world – and the biz – how to particularly use your particular talents. (Sometimes the issue for an actor is standing out in a crowd of an established type.)

Either way, you have two choices. You can wait for lightning to strike - for somebody else to write the perfect role for your special qualities and attributes, and then cast you in it.

Or you can write it yourself – and perform it – TODAY!

An example from my class: *Aspiring actress Cynthia Silver was talented, funny and well-trained – but after years of delivering great performances in off-off-Broadway shows, she still didn't have representation. When a film company approached her to film her wedding for a documentary called MANHATTAN BRIDES, she agreed – hoping the exposure might jumpstart her career. Well, MANHATTAN BRIDES became the first season of BRIDEZILLAS, and instead of moving her career forward, the show set Cynthia up for public ridicule by misrepresenting her as a “neurotic” bride. Cynthia turned this horror show into a triumphant, moving, funny solo show called BRIDEZILLA STRIKES BACK!, which won her love-letter reviews from the New York Times and many other papers, the 2005 New York International Fringe Festival Award for Best Solo*

Show, offers to tour the show, roles in other plays and films, and... representation by a top agent!

2. To Have Your Say!

Another big reason students tend to take my class and create a one-person show is that they have something in their hearts, souls and/or minds they need to express.

I often liken being an actor to being a painter who must audition for paints. After you audition to paint a painting of a cloud in the sky, some strangers behind a table say capriciously, “No, you don’t look like someone who can paint with the color blue. We’re not giving it to you.”

When you write and perform your own solo show, you’re not asking for anyone’s permission to say what you’ve got to say. You get to use any color, feeling, character, idea, image, thought, memory, truth, lie, dance, song, prop, ideology, political belief, hairstyle, story you want to!

Some actors like to be a vessel for the writer and the director. They like being a valued, important part in a greater picture.

Other actors need to have more control, at least once in their careers. They want to explore their own point of view. They want to create something from nothing themselves. They want to uncover and strengthen their own voice, let loose their own power.

I believe that everyone – whether they are an actor, writer or “civilian” – has at least one story to tell, one testament to what life on the planet is like from inside their shoes.

Often, students take my class to take a difficult moment from their lives – a loss, an injustice, an abandonment – and turn into a powerful, hilarious, touching story of triumph.

Sometimes students just start with a hilarious anecdote or character from their lives – and what they want to share is their unique sense of humor, their comic outlook on life.

Sometimes students want to inspire, or provoke an audience into reconsidering a viewpoint, a bias, a prejudice. Current examples of this type abound: Sarah Jones’ BRIDGE & TUNNEL, Nilaja Sun’s NO CHILD, Iris Bahr’s DAI, Heather Raffo’s NINE PARTS OF DESIRE, Dan Hoyle’s TINGS DEY HAPPEN, Anna Deavere Smith’s FIRES IN THE MIRROR...etc. In all of these pieces, a talented actor/writer makes a political statement personal by performing a series of character portraits, lending heartbreakingly human faces to national or global issues of race, gender and justice.

Sometimes a student comes into the class not knowing what he or she needs to express, just that they need to express *something*, to *exist* – onstage, in front of an audience. **The central idea of my solo show class is that *your perfect solo show already exists inside of you.*** It’s not about coming up with something. It’s about learning to listen to what’s already there, inside you, calling out to be expressed. One of the greatest thrills of teaching my class over the years has been seeing students – writers, actors and folks who have never performed or written before – discover that they have a beautiful, rich, compelling, entertaining solo show inside of them. Watching them perform that show for the first time is a truly powerful experience.

Many of the previously mentioned stars who got their break by doing solo shows also had something to say. John Leguizamo wanted to show Latino men doing something other than dealing dope and beating up prostitutes, Camryn Manheim wanted to show that overweight women could be so much more than sight gags, Whoopi Goldberg wanted to show the humanity of parts of our society who are routinely dismissed. I think it's fascinating and ironic: when these actors stopped trying to fit into society and resolved to change it – that's when society (and the biz) embraced them!

Be unafraid. Tell YOUR story. Be an ARTIST. Discover YOUR VOICE.

The world needs you.

Have YOUR say.

3. To Refill Your Creative Well!

Whether you're an actor pounding the pavement, working a day job or even performing in an ongoing show – your creative well can run dry. This is just as true for writers or regular folk as it is for actors. ***All artists require rejuvenation at some point in their creative cycle.*** Doing a solo show is a way of taking the focus off of the external, business world. It's a way of letting go of the adrenaline-rush of auditions, the demands of customers at a B-job, the responsibilities of family, career and life in New York - and putting the focus on yourself. It's a gift YOU can give YOU. Allow yourself to dream. Ignore the fickle finger of fate and the constant media circus of “what's HOT now!” and allow yourself to sit by the burbling brook of your own creativity. Listen to what's coming up from your subconscious, your inner artist. Running around, chasing “what's HOT now!” is like driving a car looking in the rearview mirror. The minute something becomes “HOT”, it's already on its way out. Look inside for the guide to what's going to be HOT – for you – IN you.

While it's important to take consistent action to move forward in your acting career, auditioning and doing readings and sending postcards can really drain you. I've found in teaching this class that actors who take a time-out - just for 3 hours, once a week – return to their other career activities refreshed and renewed, and benefit greatly from it.

One of my students – Camille M. Brown - has been a cast member of THE LION KING on Broadway since its opening night, over ten years ago! After thousands of performances of the same show, she maintains the high level of energy and spontaneity demanded - by doing her own solo show work on her off-nights.

Doing a solo show can directly result in career advancement (when a casting director, agent or director sees your show or reads a review), but it often INDIRECTLY benefits you as well. When you're letting your own creativity out in your own work, you come into an audition room differently. You have a freedom, a confidence and an enthusiasm that comes from knowing you don't *need* this job to fulfill your artistic desires. And because you're doing your own work, you're filled with a kind of energy and power that is VERY attractive to directors and the people who make decisions in this business.

I have countless examples from my class of actors who booked parts in plays, movies, television shows and commercials during the class or right after their final showing. One actress started getting repeating roles in sketches on David Letterman and then won a Best Actress award in the Midtown Theatre Festival. Another booked 3 commercials for the AMC channel; she aced the audition which called on her to “tell a

story from her life”, something she was very at ease doing after turning stories from her life into a solo show. A male actor who had long been searching for a romantic partner even found the love of his life, because he was feeling so fully expressed! ***All credit their successes to the way focusing on their own creativity had renewed their enthusiasm for acting – and for life.***

There are as many kinds of solo shows – and as many reasons for doing solo shows – as there are actor/writers who do them. In my experience, the previous three examples are the most popular reasons to do them, but they’re not the only ones. Other examples include: stars doing memoir shows (Billy Crystal’s 700 SUNDAYS, Elaine Stritch’s ELAINE STRITCH AT LIBERTY), actors fascinated by the writing or lives of other artists or historical figures and impersonating them (Frank Gorshin as George Burns in SAY GOODNIGHT, GRACIE, Robert Morse as Truman Capote in TRU, Hal Holbrook in MARK TWAIN TONIGHT!, Tova Feldshuh as Golda Meir in GOLDA’S BALCONY), stand-up comics fashioning their material into themed evenings (Rob Becker’s DEFENDING THE CAVEMAN), singers combining song and patter for cabaret-type solo shows (too many examples to cite), and a ventriloquist performing a love letter to his vanishing art form (Jay Johnson’s THE TWO AND ONLY).

You may have a reason that no one else has ever had before, and an idea for a show that’s unlike any ever done.

What’s important is, ***if you have the impulse to write and perform your own solo show – do it!***

Writing and performing a solo show is a powerful, fun and life-changing way to jumpstart your career, show the world (and the biz) what you can do, express your unique point of view, and refill your creative well.

So go for it!

One last thought: With the costs of producing theatre rising these days, solo shows are becoming more and more attractive to producers and theatres across the country. Why? ***Because they’re inexpensive.*** It’s just you up there, after all.

It’s just you.

And...

It’s **all** you.

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