

FEATURE

Oh, the Things We Do

One actor reflects on the confusing business of being an actor.

by Rachel Zientz

So this is me: an actor, living in a world supported by dreams that is hard to understand, harder to explain, and hardest—but far grander than all other options—to live in. It is a lifestyle fueled by the ridiculous. But for those of us in the know, it is just par for the course. No two paths for performers are the same, however, and not every path leads to somewhere. In fact, many paths lead to fire and cliffs—or if you're lucky enough not to crash and burn, just dead ends. But we struggle on as waitresses and couriers, caterers and temps, fighting off the wolves luring us with temptations of stability or shortcuts for success without effort.

Luckily, we are creatures who thrive on make-believe, and pretending to play other roles as we head toward our one true role is OK by us.

So this is me: fueled by an inescapable desire to affect people the way I still feel when the lights go down and the show begins; who, despite all the years, is still an innocent; who will always be that little 12-year-old girl returning to theatre camp, summer after summer, with hopes and dreams and dancing shoes, belting out, "The sun'll come out tomorrow" to anyone who'll listen, knowing that this must be her year, her year for the lead.

That little girl from camp may have grown up, but the thought still whispers in her ear, "Maybe this year."

Over the years, I have ditched my college degree. I have lived in apartments you wouldn't show your parents. I have tried not to lie. I have tried. I have desired stability while pursuing uncertainty. I have moved away from home on a whim. I have left my mother. I have mistaken people's fancy jobs and status for their personalities. I have trusted people I shouldn't have trusted. I have wasted time. I have allowed selfishness and jealousy to be traits I am comfortable with. I have put on basement plays with my own money, my own sweat, my own friends, crying, "Who needs the movie business—as long as we can act?" I have ruined those friendships over artistic squabbles. I have quit my day job because I got a call-back as a stand-in on Saturday morning's *Hang Time*. I have faced that look that says, "I'm trying to understand and, yes, by golly, support that little acting thing you do," that some family members seem so fond of. I have had \$3 in my bank account. I have studied with the best and been convinced that that and a headshot would be enough. I have been humbled and humiliated on a set when the director yelled, "Don't speak! You're just an extra!" I have stood on the sidelines as friends walked the red carpet. I have been brilliant when no one was watching and failed when it mattered. I have done things required in auditions that I am sure are appearing somewhere on the Internet. I have taken it all too seriously and not seriously enough.

I have also decided to live this way—to balance on the brink of fabulous and failure. I recognize that.

Therefore, I try to make the most of it. But while pursuing what I want, obviously, there are things I need. Hence, I must work.

So a waitress I became, at a comedy club, no less.

Playing the Waitress

I figured since all of L.A. is a canvas for learning, for experiencing and gathering the tools needed to succeed in this town, this way at least I'd be guaranteed exposure to the industry night after night. Now there are some who advise, "Never get a job in the industry where they can't see you for the artist you are. They'll forever see you as a waitress, an assistant, a secretary. Work clandestinely, so one day you can emerge as that eccentric performer who supported himself all those years as a clock maker." But I say, whatever works for you, works for you. And what worked for me was Waitress U.

On the road to wherever it is I am headed, I have shown you to your table. I have paid attention during seating: to the person who is scouting and taking notes, to the person they talk to after, to those comics who leave us behind for network TV, and to those who still beg for an open mic. I have watched it all.

And this is what I've learned: Tomorrow may not be full of auditions or appointments (or the sun coming out, for that matter, though in L.A. it's a good bet). An empty day can breed an empty soul. So I take pleasure in my tangible accomplishments: good service, boosting my confidence, adding to my strut, knowing that baby steps can lead me to where I need to go just as well as long strides.

I've also learned that the power of the laugh is impressive—and the discipline of performing comedy even more so. Top comics will come into the club and work out material late at night—comics you wouldn't think would need to. In fact, the ones you wouldn't think would need to are the ones doing it the most. That's how they became who they are. And I stand there in the cor-



Illustration by Steve Mirard

Perilous path.

ner, watching and feeling honored that my survival job allows me these moments, realizing that the struggle of the artist never ends, it just changes.

And I take a deep breath and face all that I have bitten off, all that is ahead. And I continue on my path. Sometimes that path has led me astray, made me go in circles, or plopped me down right at the beginning. But ultimately it is my decision to get back up and try another route. Surprisingly it was not years of Meisner training, nor years of singing and dancing, nor that theatre company in which I really got to strut my stuff that got me my biggest break so far. It was simply a case of "right place, right time." I was "The Improv Waitress" in Milos Forman's *Man on the Moon*. Go figure.

Every little break counts. We find ways to justify our lives. The brief moment of true clarity we experience when really listening to our acting partners balances out hiding away in our studio apartments, smoking a second pack of Camels before noon, and listening to the same depressing song repeat, as bills pile up and those we went to high school with become homeowners and parents, productive members of society.

It'll Make a Great Story

So this was me: fresh out of drama school only a few years ago, prior to all I learned in L.A., sitting on a subway, heading out to Brooklyn, an hour and a half each way, to earn my first paycheck as a professional actress—in dinner theatre. Murder mystery musical dinner theatre, actually.

The initial thrill that they picked me over the hundreds willing to do this job had faded, and I sat and sulked, mumbling to myself and to anyone else who'd listen, "I am a trained actress."

So I entertained myself with thoughts of Dominick Dunne. *Vanity Fair* will eat this up! "We had to wait for the bar mitzvah to be over," I'll explain. "I almost had to sue to get my \$60," I'll giggle.

Even better than that, my *Tonight Show* spot will rival Bette's! "Dinner theatre, Rachel?" "Yes, Johnny!" (In my mind, it is still Johnny, always Johnny.) "You sing? You dance? I did not know that." We'll smile. We'll laugh. He'll cajole me into a number. I'll oblige. I'll recall, in my best Brooklynese, zipping on the N train from Bay Ridge to my waitressing job in upper Manhattan. Then I'll sigh, all bright-eyed and shy, "Oh, Johnny, the things we do."

I will not tell him of my embarrassment during those years, how I would not let anyone in my family come see me perform, no matter how much they begged. I will not speak of the sense of entitlement one needs in order to exist in this town, all the while mired down by a looming sense of doom. I will not talk of the debt I accumulated in order to pursue my dreams. I will not try to recreate the feeling of turning on the TV or going to the movies and seeing those who had beaten me to the job. I will not discuss my never-ending issues with food that have found me trying to be cuter, thinner, prettier, younger than the girl next to me. I will not explain, for I would not know how to, that all of that and much more is actually accepted and welcomed in exchange for the brief gift of an audience's laugh, a lengthy bow, or even a deafening silence as I command the stage.

So this is me today: I can see the Hollywood sign when I drive home. It seems so exciting lit up on the hill. And the simple truth is, it is exciting. Whenever I am worn to my core, weeping or disgusted, ready to rise up and denounce the business or, worse yet, ready to quietly fade away, that excitement will sneak up and bite me with a sting so deep, so full of excitement, glamour, and glory, that I cannot even try to explain how fun this life can be. And I smile, knowing it is all within my sight.

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