

Tough Guise: By playing a role, I discovered myself

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I'm gonna have a shot of Hennessey, smoke a Marlboro cigarette, get drunk and only then show my feelings, because I'm a man. That seems like my father's motto. My entire life, he embodied the idea that men are close-minded, emotionless, and are always winners. Only alcohol allowed them to feel sadness or some emotion that wasn't aggressive.

I grew up believing that to be a man I had to be macho. My father wanted me to learn that men must be strong and valiant for themselves and women. He would criticize me when I showed my vulnerabilities. So, I showed them only when I was alone or with my mother.

It wasn't until I studied acting and played the part of a tough guy who opens up did I realize that a man doesn't have to be emotionally closed off.

SURROUNDED BY ACTORS

My father wasn't the only one I saw trying to act macho. In my neighborhood, young men hid their vulnerabilities by acting tough. I learned that when a guy is upset he keeps his body and head still with a blank expression, reacting to nothing around him. Instead of expressing his real emotions, he becomes verbally aggressive and loud so he won't be seen as weak.

By the time I was 14, most of the young men my age were trying out this act. We were starting to go through puberty, and many guys became defensive if they didn't have facial hair or their voice hadn't changed. There was huge pressure for guys to get into relationships and have sex, wear the right clothes, and have money to feel manly.

To express their masculinity, many guys started to make fun of others, and to speak badly to girls. Other guys got into sports to fit in. But I wanted to think differently, and I did.

At the beginning of my sophomore year of high school, I aspired to have high grades, but none of the subjects I was "supposed" to like as a guy interested me. I wasn't determined to become a great student in math, science and engineering. That year, I was more interested in the theater.

Even as a child of 7 or 8, I was intrigued by acting. Sometimes I'd get on a chair and tell my dad, "I'm a star!" I wanted him to notice me, to hear me. Somehow I'd made the connection that acting allowed me to be heard because all the attention was focused on me. And at that time, I didn't feel like I was getting the attention that I wanted.

Late at night, after everyone was asleep, I'd get up and look in the mirror, make faces, and pretend that I was walking across a stage. I would conjure up an audience, even hear the music, and I'd practice lines and gestures. I was always reinventing myself.

DISCOVERING MYSELF THROUGH A ROLE

At 14, I began practicing monologues and dialogues with my 10-year-old sister. It gave me the freedom to be whoever I wanted, letting go of all the superficial things and discovering my soul. That same year, I auditioned for a program for high school students at the Stella Adler Studio of Acting, and I got accepted.

Adler believed that an actor must observe very specific details in the world around him. To prepare for a role, an actor must train his mind and have an understanding of the script and characters in order to reveal the secrets of the play to the audience. An actor must always be big, never small.

At the end of the course, I had to present a scene from *Jitney* by August Wilson. I had the part of Darnell. He's an older man who has trouble demonstrating to his wife that he has changed. He was no longer getting drunk and cheating on her. Throughout the play, people put Darnell down, accusing him of being lazy, an idiot, incompetent. Now that he'd changed, he was secretly working to buy a house and make a better life for his family.

I read the whole play, but the scene I had to perform was toward the end, when Darnell's wife confronts him. She angrily asks him what he's been doing, assuming he's been up to no good. Suddenly Darnell reveals the surprise he's been working toward. Not only that, but he begins to tell her his true feelings. He's no longer the guy she thinks he is. He lets her know that he's afraid of losing her, and he's nervous about how she'll react to the change in him.

MY FATHER AS CHARACTER STUDY

I didn't just want to be Darnell, I wanted to live his life. I used the acting techniques I learned at Stella Adler to become the character. I imagined Darnell to be someone like my father so for a long time I had my father under a microscope. I studied the way he moved his head, his arms, his breathing and tone of voice. Then, I created a "back story" for Darnell—things I imagined about him that were not in the script, like his favorite color, and what the house he bought looked like.

I read the script over and over again trying to understand Darnell. What was he like? What were his intentions? I reminded myself from the minute I woke up to the time I went to sleep that I was Darnell. In doing so, my behavior became a lot like my father's.

I could also relate to the misperceptions of Darnell. In studying the character, I thought about the times I had been unfairly judged and underestimated, and how that made me more determined to prove people wrong. Darnell had indeed changed by the time he had the conversation with his wife and he deserved that acknowledgement.

Instead of walking away and not saying anything, he expressed his feelings. And finally his wife understood because she could see that he was changing, that he was allowing himself to feel his feelings and express them honestly. That made her feel more secure than being with someone who is just bottling up his feelings. That person is lost. I thought about my father, and that Darnell's promise to his wife sounded like something my father would say when he was drunk—in other words, when his honest feelings would come out.

IDENTITY CRISIS

When I walked into a room now I wanted people to notice me with my new behavior and perspective. Instead of my usual awkward slouch, I would sit with one leg casually crossed, my arms resting on each armrest of the chair with confident posture. My saliva didn't taste the same, I smelled a different kind of air, and everything sounded strange. I was no longer Melvin; I was now Darnell.

One day after school I was on the floor staring at the ceiling practicing my lines when I spontaneously said, "Melvin." I felt so confused. It was as if I was hearing that name for the first time and I thought, "Who is Melvin?" I realized I had become so immersed in the character Darnell that I'd lost my sense of self. I felt it was something I needed to talk to my director about.

I began to tell him how I'd been rehearsing and unconsciously said my name and began to question who I was. He looked at me with a knowing smile and asked me, "Have you ever heard of Socrates?"

"He's the philosopher?" I asked.

"Yes, Melvin, and at age 16 he asked himself the same question you're asking yourself." He paused and waited for me to say something. I was silent.

"Melvin, many people at the age of 40 don't even know who they are and the fact that you managed to question that at such a young age, is beautiful." I couldn't move or say a word. I thought everyone knew who they were and I was just being silly.

NO MORE MASKS

I thought about how, generation after generation, guys grow up to believe they aren't supposed to show feelings or care about their true selves. We are to be tough, strong, independent, athletic, physical, rugged, powerful, and respected and feared. If we don't measure up we are considered wimps, sissies, or fags. Becoming a man in many cultures isn't about being a man, but appearing as a man.

That summer I began to analyze my life, trying to have a better understanding of my real happiness, fears, and wants. Playing Darnell and looking at my father, I came to the conclusion I didn't want to bottle things up inside me.

Instead, I wanted to understand my emotions—the things that made me happy as well as those that scared me. What was happiness to me? It was when I wasn't trying to be anybody but me. I didn't want to have to worry about appearing intimidating or tough.

At times I do get back into the mentality of what society believes men should be because everyone around me thinks this way. I believed that through acting and writing I was finally going to have my voice heard. But when people asked me what I wanted to be, I wasn't sure what to say. I worried that if I said actor or writer people wouldn't consider those manly jobs, or routes to success. So sometimes I'd just say I was going to be a businessman or a cop so people wouldn't look at me funny. The truth is though, all I wanted was to be understood and accepted for who I am.

But now I've become more conscious of when I'm acting and when I'm allowing myself to feel my true feelings. In the end, the Stella Adler Studio didn't just teach me to be a better actor—I also learned more about myself. Now, instead of being afraid to understand and accept my own happiness, fears, and wants—for the first time in my life, I'm listening to my own voice.

Source

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