



INTRODUCTION

Jack Plotnick is an actor and acting teacher that trained at Carnegie Melon University and has worked and lived in NYC and Los Angeles. This interview was the first time we'd ever spoken. It took place in early Marcy, 2012.

GETTING ACQUAINTED

JW: I read what you posted online, and I got a lot out of it.

JP: Good. Thank you.

JW: I feel like you integrated and made practical a lot of stuff I've gotten too theoretical about. A lot of the self-help or the spiritual stuff I've done on my own...and then I go back to my acting work and think, "how do I apply this?"

JP: Thank you for saying that, because that is what I was doing without realizing it...taking everything I was studying and applying it to acting without realizing it. I was addicted to negative thinking, you could blame it on my mom or you could say it's genetic. I realized I wanted to change and find a new way to think. So, that's what I did for ten years, I was applying all this new thought or self-help work to my acting and a friend of mine was friends with Andrea Martin, she was on SCTV, but I coached her and she ended up getting so much out of it that...that made me realize, gosh, I've got something that can help people now. This thing that I've done for myself is something that I should be sharing. And then I saw a therapist for a few years, you know, as part of my growth, and I remember saying that I felt guilty that I wasn't doing things to help people, but that I didn't want to hold a dying person's hand. That's literally what I said to her. And she said, "Well, is that the only way you can help people, by holding a dying person's hand". And I realized, oh, I could also... like helping actors... that's something I could do to give back that I would actually enjoy that wouldn't be holding a dying person's hand. I was looking for something I could do to make me feel good about myself...

JW: You were looking for some service you could do, and you thought, helping this population ... the traditional way would be a hospice or a soup kitchen... and then you thought you could help that acting community. You could help and be of service.

JP: Yeah, and it was something that I was specifically trained and something that I would enjoy doing and make me feel good and was still giving back. So I just started inviting people to my apartment, and sometimes five people would show up and sometimes it was one, which was always awkward. And I would just coach them for an hour and so it all started in my apartment with like one or two or three people and then my apartment started to get so full...I was charging I think nothing at first and then five dollars for a while...and then my apartment got so full that I started to find space to rent. And now I do it in LA and New York. And then, what happened was that I was doing that for years, and I was meeting so many actors that were so miserable based on the fear based and results oriented training in LA, because there's a lot of bad training in LA. And I wanted to get my message out to more people, so I started doing a monthly charity fundraising lecture, where I charge everyone five dollars and I do those once a month; because I really want to change the way that people look at acting and actor training.

JW: You do these as just lectures...to plant ideas, not practices.

JP: See in my workshop only 14 people can come and perform. So I usually get 20 people come to the class, because it's free to come and watch. But the lecture I can get a 150 people to come and watch, so it was a way to get to more people. And I have since found that I really enjoy lecturing. I love working with someone on their particular issues, and I think that a big part of my growth as a human and my self-help growth was listening to Marianne Williamson...those CD's I just constantly played them in my car and they changed my life and meant so much to me...and I go see her talk

sometimes here, not so much lately. But I love doing what she did; I love talking to people and sharing this...because I feel what I teach you don't have to sit down and do a scene with me to get it, it's pretty simple. I think if you just hear the theories you can apply it yourself. I really want to empower actors to understand that...there are so many teachers in LA that are saying come to me and find out the secrets and it will take you three years and this much money to get my techniques and learn how to use them...and they have to do that...they have to convince you they have a lot to teach you and that it's going to be difficult so you'll keep coming to them and paying them because their making their living off artists...which seems wrong to me...I mean it's not wrong if you're a good teacher...I mean the ones that fear based and result oriented and ego driven.

JW: In your work you talk a lot about the magic, as it were...and I do experience that, something beyond ourselves, not ego based, something magical happening all around us that we can participate in...and I experience that quite literally sometimes.

JP: Can you make things move with your mind.

JW: No, but part of my research is funded by the Esalen Institute...Michael Murphy's research is on supernormal functioning... and he did a book on supernormal functioning in sports, stories of extraordinary capacities...and he was putting all these stories forward to say, this is no folklore, this is our birthright, this is human potential, this is what we're capable of if we can really let go.

JP: Yeah, I agree with all of that.

JW: Yeah, so some of what I'm doing is collecting stories of these extraordinary capacities that actors have...and a lot of it as it relates to your work, is when we start to let go, something greater than our own will, when we start to align with that and participate with that then we find that those things that seem extraordinary or supernatural start to happen as just kind of commonplace...the magic just starts to take place...and it's not explicable but it is extraordinary...and we can't force it we can't will it to happen, but it's available if we allow for it. So, that's part of it... I'll be looking for these exceptional moments of performance. I talk for a little at the beginning to lay some groundwork. That's really the study...

JP: Is that what you're looking for...stories of that sort of thing?

JW: What I usually end up with are people's experiences, because if people have a theory about it, it's come from an actual experience they've had. I'm trying to not get to theoretical and get to the place the people are sharing their actual experiences. The reasons those are interesting to me, is because those sorts of moments tend to take place, as the result of some long term transformative practices...whether that be listening to Marianne Williamson, and releasing some things around the vulture...you know I'm using some of your language here...or whether it be Zen meditation...sometimes people experience that if they do a lot of emptiness meditation and then over a long period of time they start to experience a spaciousness and receptivity within themselves that wasn't there with these more fear driven or ego based techniques as you say...so there are new techniques, they are spiritual techniques in some ways, but there are new techniques...and they lead to pretty profound results. Because there is a kind of paradox in some ways in what you do, which is

that it actually did take a lot of work, a different kind of technique, and not there's a kind of effortlessness in it. It's like a technique of letting go rather than a technique of controlling...

JP: I agree with what you said that it's a birthright. I mean I can speak very spiritually about this subject or very scientifically...I think that magic you're talking about is we can all access any time with no training or with lots of training...because it's who we are as humans. And it's when our heart races it's what plugs us into this magic or our higher power...or just literally, this is my opinion, when more blood is in your brain you become super human, your brain just works better...and that's your heart racing...that's why we act so our heart races so we can touch god, or we can have magic happen...that's my belief. That's why marathon runners...I think if people who aren't artists, some people talk about right and left brain and some talk about a third eye, people who are not artists don't get to experience magic unless they're involved in very physical activity. That's why people want to climb mount Everest...because they feel like they've touched god or experience magic. But what I love about artists is that all we have to do is pick up a script and stand in front of people and we get to touch god or experience magic. But then you're involved in fear or controlling, then you're in control and magic is not going to happen. But there are a lot people that didn't have to train at all in any spiritual practice, because their ego isn't strong and their vulture doesn't squawk and they can just be amazing...that's why you get those child actors that are just fucking brilliant.

JW: Those techniques are ways of getting out of our own way more than anything else.

JP: You know we're all perfect...like Marianne Williamson says that Michelangelo said he found a big rock and picked away everything that wasn't the perfect male form of David. We're all like that. There's nothing we need, there's things we have to let go of. We are all exactly like Jesus, he didn't have something we don't have; it's that we have something he didn't have...which is...all that fear and shit. But and when I say Jesus, I mean like Buddha and all these great amazing people, that's all of us, there's nothing to learn, there's stuff we need to let go of. I can talk spiritually, but in a physical way, I think the reason why sports, you know you mentioned magic in sports, is because their hearts racing and they don't have that self-doubt...and that's why they can shoot from that far away and the ball goes right through the net, because their hearts racing... and that's why it's so sad that some actors take medication to make their heart rate slow down, because they don't like that feeling, because they call it nervous, and that it's actually excitement. And that the reason that they call it nervous is that their culture is saying negative things that make them feel anxiety, and when they have anxiety when your hearts racing people call that nervous, but really you're having anxious thoughts you need to get rid of.

JW: It's interesting that you bring up the nervous system, because I recently had an experience of my own nervous system...it's interesting that we call it the nervous systems, it's the electrical system in our body, its literally the electoral impulses pulsing through our body...and that central nervous system is so central to the excitation and energy we have in life...and we think of being nervous as being a bad thing but actually in some ways it just means that the Christmas tree of your nervous system is fucking lit up. Energy and life force is pulsing through.

JP: That's a nice way to put it. But in my class we just get rid of the word nervous; you're not allowed to say it. Because people are so ingrained to hear nerve as a negative thing that I just take it off that table, but I like what you're saying; very right.

JW: I've experienced the shake of nervousness before going on to perform, often it's in direct proportion to...like if I'm cut off and I'm not living my life fully. If I'm living my life fully, if I'm wide open and I'm living, there's often no transition onto the stage. But if I'm kind of living a little shut down and small in my day to day, in my relationships, and then I go on stage and I'm suddenly totally seen and there's no hiding anymore then I feel nervous before I get up there but...It's almost like that transition is in direct proportion to how much I'm not living fully already in my life.

JP: That makes sense but that's not really how I approach dealing with anxiety, because one of my affirmations...that feeling you're calling nervous is just anxiety, and anxiety is a feeling caused by a thought, a very specific thought that your ego is saying to you, and for you it might be in that moment where you're let's say you're feeling depressed and you haven't talked to anyone and you get up and you've got to go perform. And your vulture says, now that feeling of nervousness is a thought, and your thought is something like "you're not ready, you're not prepared because you're not living your life to its fullest right now." And that gives you anxiety. So all you have to say to your vulture is...and our job is not to prove our vulture wrong, our job is just to say whatever we need to say to get our vulture to shut up. So one of my favorite affirmations, that means, true things we say to our vulture to make it shut up, one of my favorite affirmations is "I'm going to take it from where I am." In other words, however I'm feeling, wherever I am, however prepared I am is a fine place to

start, and if you said that to yourself right before you went on stage you wouldn't feel that moment that you're calling um...difficult to make the magic happen. Because you can sit around all day and be in a bad mood and then go on stage and have an amazing magical experience. You just have a thought system right now that makes that difficult because you listen to your vulture when it says to you, "you're not where you need to be. You need to be more joyful, or you know it's going to list a lot of things...because your vulture in my book is the half of you that wants you to fail. So, it's as smart as you are...the best thing would be to be living your life joyfully everyday but if you're not it doesn't matter. See I'm always...to me, any moment is a win moment and there is nothing we need.

JW: Awesome. So uh, I'm going to try to back up because I think we could go on for quite a while but um, so part of what I've been doing is like in terms of stories about people's lives and how they came to what they came to in terms of their acting is kind of three threads or narratives that I've been following and that's the personal narrative, you know, where you come from, who you are, what formed you in relationship to your acting. And then there's what I might call the training narrative, which is like, where did I train, what was the background, what did I learn, what kind of techniques formed me as an artist. And then the third one is this narrative of spiritual or personal transformation, and some people, say, came from a catholic background and then they became a Buddhist or whatever, and other people...and this is one of those things, I'm guessing there's some issue around this and the editing process that we talked about, but I came from an alcoholic home and so, you know, recovery has been part of my journey, and that's...being clear about whatever it was, the wounding and the transformation that I needed to later get that was part of my personal and spiritual transformation...mine also included everything from Zen meditation to ecstatic dance,

you know I tried a little bit of everything, so...those are kind of, you know, if we could take twenty minutes or so and just talk through those a little bit. A little bit about where you come from and what formed you...let's start with the personal stuff. Are there any formative experiences that brought you to be an actor or turned you towards this path?

PART I: **BACKGROUND AND TRAINING**

EARLY LIFE EXPERIENCE RELEVANT TO ACTING

JP: Well, I think I'm lucky because I think I always kind of knew. So um, it happened really young, I just remember the first indication was probably 5th grade when I was...I liked to watch Saturday Night Live, so I would get all the fifth grade classes and they would watch me and my friend do skits, those news skits from Saturday Night Live that we wrote ourselves. So, I think...like that's crazy that I did that and that they let me do that. Then in sixth grade I went and saw the high school musical and when I saw it I realized, 'Oh! Like, that's where I can do acting! On stage!' And so I thought I wanted to be a stage actor, and that is really the only outlet at that time for a kid in Ohio, and so I just pursued that. I pursued musical theatre and thought that was what I was going to do with my life. But then I realized after a few years in New York and I started to get a little film work, that really that was what I wanted to do most of all...and it brings back the memories of the Carol Burnett show and Saturday Night Live, those were the things that really made me want to be an actor. I liked theatre and I liked live performing but not as much. For me, I enjoy a relationship to the camera; which is

really essentially your relationship to yourself when you look at it...and I like selfish acting...I think that's the best kind because the more you feel the more the audience feels, the more your needing the audience's approval, the less you're having a rich selfish emotional experience thereby giving them the same. So, I took you through my whole life down one road.

JW: What's kind of interesting about your story is that there is something innate in that; like you said that was just who you were...and you have very early experiences of what your natural essence was and your attraction to that.

JP: Yeah.

JW: And it wasn't until you were in New York in what...your mid-twenties or so that you realized it wasn't so much the theatre as the on-camera stuff or...?

JP: It was...I was about twenty-three or four and I was realizing and I had just seen a big Broadway musical and it was my favorite thing I'd ever seen and the lead in it was amazing and I was in a show off Broadway at the time, I was the understudy, and we would all go to this restraint bar after the show. And he was there one night and I remember I was sitting at his table because I knew someone who knew him, and he was talking about how he was trying to get an audition to play a plumber in one scene of a TV show. And it made me realize, oh my God! Like, being on Broadway doesn't mean anything in the world of TV and film, necessarily. I mean it can absolutely, but it doesn't necessarily. And I think maybe subconsciously that was my goal; that I would hit it big on Broadway and then I'd

be a TV and Movie star. You know. And when I heard him say that it made me realize I might be barking up the wrong tree. And also, the people around me didn't seem very happy, the people in Broadway shows. Some did, but many didn't...and I think the reason why that is, oh my god, like, we're artists and an artist is often not fed by doing the same thing every night. Some artists like that but...not me. A joyful creator is what I would say I am...and that means I like to be doing different things, you know. And yeah it's Broadway but you still essentially just...especially for musicals, you know, maybe for plays its slightly different, but when you're in a musical you're basically in a big machine and you do it eight times a week, it's exhausting and nothing new happens. And that really kills a lot of artists, their spirit. And they drink and they act out because they are secretly not doing what they were meant to be doing; which is to be creative.

JW: Yeah to be making new things

JP: Yeah. We're artists.

JW: ...and that's what made the transition?

JP: Yeah, I was so lucky... the universe sent me some wonderful opportunities and I was ready for them and they lead me out to LA.



Jack Plotnick as Dolph in Quentin Dupieux's "Wrong."

TRAINING

JW: That's great. On the training side... maybe we can do a similar kind of thing. Did you start training very young? What's your background there?

JP: Yeah. I don't call what I did in my hometown training, but I was always doing the youth theatre when I was a kid, and then I took the acting classes in high school, but my acting teacher in high school was fantastic, we're still in touch. And she wasn't giving us a bunch of techniques, she was really inspiring us to play. And then in terms of going to a school, I lucked out because I didn't know anything about schools and somebody mentioned Carnegie Mellon so I went to Carnegie Mellon... the reason I say I lucked out is that Carnegie Mellon had auditions for agents at the end your four

years which was the best part of going there. Any school that doesn't help out young actors set you up with an agent, that's a problem, potentially because other kids are getting these big breaks before you are, you know? But in terms of my training at Carnegie Mellon, I'm very thankful for the Alexander Technique, they fixed my posture... the thing is that if I was living a life in the theatre, there's a lot of stuff they taught me that was very helpful in terms of learning how to do accents and movement and stuff like that; and that's kind of, I would call that Style classes and I got a lot out of that. But in terms of acting, Carnegie Mellon...I'm happy to say they gave us a kind of smorgasbord and never said, 'you have to do it this way'. So I got to try Meisner and I got to try this or that, but I never had a teacher saying, this is how to act. And thank god they never made us do actions and beats and objectives...I don't know how I got through Carnegie Mellon without being forced to do that. But I just think it's the worst way to approach acting. There is a healthy way to approach the concept of what they're trying to teach when they use words like actions, beats, and objectives...but I hate those words and I think that most people teach it in a very result-oriented way. And then you're going down the wrong path. I teach those concepts in a loving, joyful, simple way. But anyway, to sort of sum it up, the one sentence that I really took out of my training at Carnegie Mellon was something a teacher just happen to say once while we were doing a show, she was directing and she said to us actors, " you know more than you think you know". And you'll notice, that's a very magical statement. It says, "There's magic in acting"...and it's why it's the only thing I took with me, because it was the only thing that made me feel great and powerful. And she basically told us, if you look at a picture of a man in the forties, because it was a Tennessee Williams show, just find a picture of somebody who you think is your character and there, now you're him. And everything else, I wouldn't say I took with me in my head. It's in my gut. Like, I'm sure I'm still utilizing my

training there, but I'm not aware of it because I don't believe in any kind of...result oriented acting technique. Because I think schools are created sadly to put out the message that there are so many ways you could earn the right to act this scene...*(laughter)*...and the sad thing is that there is nothing you need to do to earn the right to act this scene. There are things you could do if you want to and it's joyful. And we know that actors like Kate Winslet, she does a lot of daydream work and obviously there are actors like Dustin Hoffman that do a lot of work but there is actors like Laurence Olivier who with that great quote said, "Why don't you just try saying the lines." But I always put out there that if you enjoy doing the result oriented technique you're doing, or if you have an approach to acting that involves things like daydreaming or research or all those things that coaches will say you have to do, if you enjoy doing it and it helps your acting, I support that, but I want to be a voice that's letting people know, you don't HAVE to. But I definitely don't teach, 'oh just read it once and play'... because we do have to do scene comprehension, but scene comprehension is really super fun and easy, as long as you look at the script and say to yourself, this is really happening to me, so, what's happening? And that's how you get what's obviously literally happening in every moment, and those are called the circumstances. But teachers will convince us that scene comprehension is very hard because they say it's not enough to know what's literally obviously happening, because you have to do something that's called "dig deeper". Okay, now I'm going to stop talking because I'm just sharing my theories. So I'll stop.

JW: It's great. And what I do want to say is what I feel really strongly in your work is that you're an advocate for a voice that is so necessary and so lacking in most of our experience of training, and especially when we get into that adult world of working, there's a spiritual reality aspect that you're a

voice for, and there's a real inner child aspect that you're a voice for too that's so important and has nothing to do with the thinking or the science of it, which is all valuable but it's just being in it which I think is so important to what you offer.

JP: Yeah in terms of magic in acting, I always say, "the scene exists magically in the air around you and it's just waiting for an honest vessel to funnel through". And to provide the scene an honest vessel you just simply have to be free of anxiety for the most part, meaning your vulture isn't squawking, and you have to understand what is literally, obviously happening in every moment. But you're not an honest vessel to the magic of the scene or the magic of acting or your higher power if you have a vulture screaming at you or you if you've made a bunch of choices about how the scene is supposed to look. If you are not involved in those things you'll feel magic every time you get up, because you're going to feel like something else is guiding you through the scene. And we've all had that experience. We're just afraid that it won't happen, or we have a reality where we can fail. And if an artist has that reality, then he can't do his art joyfully and experience magic. So to have the reality where there's no such thing as failure you only have to understand five concepts and I teach those to people and they're very simple.

TRANSFORMATION

JW: So, we'll get back to this...now the narrative of personal transformation, and I don't know if you have a recovery background, but you use the term higher power and you've mentioned Marianne

Williamson and self-help books...did you have an exposure to spiritual or personal growth work early on or was there a time where you...

JP: Here's how it happened, I remember the moment. I grew up Jewish, but we didn't practice, there was no spirituality in my house. What happened was I was out of college and it was one of my first shows in New York City and I met an actor and he said to me, you could afford to read this book. In other words, he saw in me that I had issues...he felt in me that I had issues, I saw in me a person who had some negative thinking and probably could use self-help. And he gave me my first self-help book, which was *Way of the Peaceful Warrior*. It's a great intro to the concept of controlling your thoughts and of self-help in general, and when I read that book I just, it opened up my world because I saw that there was another way for me to think. You know, we just think that every thought in our head is the truth and our reality is the only one, and when I read that book I saw another way to be and that started me down the self-help road. Thank God, that he did that. That's why...what I love about teaching actors is that I think I'm a lot of people's first experience with the concept of self-help...they don't realize it, they think their taking an acting class but they're actually being introduced to the concept of new thought or self-help. Because in my book you can't be an artist without...I tell actors, "your number one job as an actor is to control your thoughts, not to learn how to control the scene."

JW: I know that for me and many other people it goes through phases over the years. Do you see major periods of time where you were into this kind of thing and then you learned something and transitioned into something else?

JP: No. See, I'm not the kind of person that goes, "this is the answer" ...because I believe there is only one answer and it's very simple and it just...it's just love. And love can be set in so many different ways, so...I was never like "this is what I'm going to do now!" But I can tell you...the first book was *Way of the Peaceful Warrior*, then I discovered Louise L Hayes, and she has some of what she calls affirmations, and they sound like this: "I'm relaxed and trusting in a higher plane that's unfolding for me", or "all is well in my world". So she introduced me to the concept of talking to my vulture with these loving thoughts. But then I met a woman who was a psychic, she said, at a party. And she introduced me to the verbiage to say "I release and destroy need to..." And that for me is really the basis for how I approach affirmations, because your vulture is you, it's the half of you that wants you to fail, so you can't argue with your vulture, you can't say to your vulture "I am a brilliant shining star," because your vulture will go "bullshit, you're ugly and unemployed." But to say to your vulture, "I release and destroy my need to be a good actor," that gets your vulture to stop saying, "you suck as an actor". So for me, that's the healthiest way to do affirmations. People who teach affirmations like "I am rich and successful", to me they are totally missing the point, and it's why affirmations get a bum rap and why people think they're stupid, because they sound like lies, and you can't lie to yourself. So anyway...that was how I discovered affirmations, and then next, around that time, I discovered Peter McWilliams' book, "You Can't Afford the Luxury of a Negative Thought", which is by far my favorite self-help book, it's my bible, and then I started listening to those Marianne Williamson CDs because in my book she's hard to read but easy to listen to, and those changed my life. And now that I have seen Marianne speak in person, she has convinced me of the importance of every morning taking at least two minutes to sit and say to my vulture... to say

to my higher power, "I'm aware..." This is how I start every day now...I say to myself, "I'm aware that my first thought will always be from fear." In other words, I realize that my thinking is opposite to the true way, is opposite of love, and so I say to my higher power, "help me all day to choose love over fear, to not go with my first thought but to replace it with a loving one," so that's what I've been doing now. So that's like the first time that I've had a daily thing to do and that really has helped.

JW: That's great. There is a lot of reading and listening and studying. And what's interesting about your story is that it started to seamlessly get integrated into the work you do as an actor...and that's something that I have interest in, because I have a general interest in spiritual practices of various kinds, whether it be prayer or meditation or yoga or whatever it is...therapy...which in some ways I see going to therapy, whether it be group therapy or one on one therapy, as one aspect of a transformative practice; building a certain amount of self-awareness and things can really start to shift...

JP: Yeah.

JW: I think physical exercise can be one of them too, I think you can really transform the... whether it be Alexander technique, you know, a shift in posture, can really transform the way your consciousness is operating. A lot of time the when the fucked-up thoughts are happening, the vulture, it literally starts to manifest in the physical form...but I've started to ask myself this question, how do I integrate these principles into when I act, so really I'm practicing them all day every day, so

when I'm in rehearsal, there I am...I'm still practicing my spiritual principles. It becomes a process of self-revelation and self-reflection in and of itself.

JP: Yes, for me the spiritual practice is, I've never put it this way, but you could sum it up by just saying, like...I believe that God is the power of love...so a little piece of Him is in all of us, so you don't need to go to a church or do anything to touch God because he's in you, you are Him. So being spiritual is literally the act of just paying attention to your thoughts, because when you pay attention to your thoughts and chose a loving thought over a fearful thought you essentially get to experience your birthright as a human, of getting to experience what you really are which is pure love, and that's God. Wow... and I love the book, what is it called, shit...Walsh wrote it...he said he was dictating to God.

JW: Oh, Neal Donald Walsh, conversations with God.

JP: That's it. And what I loved about that book is he said that when you read this it will strike you as something you knew already and that's how I felt. So, when I talk the most spiritually or the most religiously, I like to use his verbiage and way of putting it because I think it's beautiful. But anyway, in terms of applying your spiritual journey to acting, it's really just about [being] on set or in rehearsal and saying what you need to say to get it to shut up so you can enjoy being in a place of love and also magic. So that's what I'm focusing on set...I'm not focusing on the work I did to prepare for the role. I'm literally right before they call action I'm talking to my vulture...because my vulture's saying something very specific in that moment to fuck me up, like "boy oh boy, it's take four, they must not

be happy with what you're doing," or " well you cried in the last take you probably won't cry in this one," so what I'm focusing on instead is my spiritual practice to say what I need to say to get it to shut up so I can experience magic. So, to say, I do believe we are able to will magic to happen, and the way to do that is to get out of our way and the way we get out of our way is to choose our thoughts.

JW: Yeah. And do you experience it as a voice of love, or do you just get quiet and perceive what's going on around you and participate...and you're in the moment and you're present, and you're playing...and in the experience of love...?

JP: If you're vulture's silent, that's when magic can happen. And no, I don't. I feel...I say that acting is all about trust and faith and so you feel you're back in a trusting or faithful place. So, there's no voice...and you could say I feel like I'm ...I don't like to use concepts like in the moment because we're always in the moment but when our vulture squawks we feel like we're not. So, I get to enjoy my human constant state of in the moment because my vulture isn't squawking. So, it's a feeling of...you just feel joyful again, and excited ...

JW: And then whatever is appropriate to the scene you're working on...you just grateful and participating and...

JP: Yeah, and you're grateful, because being grateful is the secret to happiness.



Robin Tunney, Simon Baker, and Jack Plotnick in "The Mentalist" (2008)

PART 2: STORIES

SUGGESTIVE OF

SUPERNORMAL CAPACITIES

IN PROFESSIONAL ACTORS

JW: So, I'm curious now...through this work...when I say supernormal moments, sometimes they're the moments that are most beautiful to us, they touch us profoundly, they give us an experience of awe or extreme gratitude, overwhelming gratitude. You know, something amazing happens that gives us the sense of the presence of God or just the beauty of life or something like that.

JP: I got it, I've got some stories. What we're talking about is what led me to believe I was going down the right road, because these books I was reading told me about a way that the universe works, and I was finding that it was true in my life...it talked about principles that if you follow, you can receive instead of chase after. So you know for instance I was on...okay, I teach people just do what you love and the jobs will come to you, and the concept is form meets structure. And the idea is that when you work on your craft and put all your focus on joyfully doing what you love then that's when jobs come to you. But when you focus on the outer, the jobs and such, then jobs run away from you. That's why I don't believe in networking, branding, marketing classes. Because that's a fear-based results-oriented way to approach your career that can work, but it's not joyful, and then you're going to spend your life doing something that's not joyful. Anyway, my friend invited me, he said, do you want to perform in my birthday party, because one of the characters I was doing in my sketch show was this old lady, and he liked the old lady character, and he said would you do a whole play with the old lady at my birthday party...and I did. So we put on a show and I was in drag as this old woman, I was falling down stairs and it was a lot of fun, and the director of God's and Monsters was in the audience because he happened to be a friend of this guy, and he called me in and for an audition and because he was so taken with the joy I showed on stage, they gave me the role and the next year I was in the Oscar clip opposite Ian McKellen for his Oscar...right? I guess what I'm pointing out to you is that that's an example of what you call magic, but really is just one of the principles of how the universe works...because I got on the Oscars by doing what I love for the pure love of doing it. You know, a lot of the big breaks I've had in my life is because I was just doing what I loved for the sake of doing it. And that's why I teach that. So that's one aspect of how I've seen magic in my life. And then the other way I'd say, the best way I could talk about experiencing magic

while acting would be every time I act...and a line comes out in a way that I didn't expect, and I love it and it tickles me or something, that to me is touching god or magic. Because I felt something bigger than me guiding me to do that, so every time I have a look back at something I filmed and I'm like, oh my god I don't remember doing any of that, but I love it.... that's the joy of experiencing magic. But I guess the clearest moments have been the times that I've been asked to cry on film, which a lot of people see as a very difficult thing, and when you can get your ego out of the way and experience a huge emotion like sobbing on camera, that's magic. You really get to experience the joy because it's such a big joyful emotion to get to feel. You know what I mean?

JW: Was there one in particular where you were called to do that, and you were worried about it?

JP: Well, I don't worry about it anymore, because you can't do it if you don't have faith that it can happen. Let me think, my favorite stories about that...there are several but none of them if I told you...you wouldn't think, wow, how magical that is...because the way I approach acting is kind of how...Sean Penn said about *Mystic River* where he did that scene where he was so emotional because he found out that his daughter died...Larry King said, how did you prepare for that...and he said, "I didn't do anything"...he did nothing to prepare for that because what are you going to do to prepare for that? Like sit around thinking about substitution or like daydreaming about your daughter? They said action and he behaved like it was really happening and what was really happening was that he found out his daughter died and so he played pretend, and so it's as simple as that...

JW: What I sense is that there is an absence of importance around the story...like I had a yoga teacher at one point where she had just dropped a certain amount of her stories...she was so present with you in the moment that in the next moment she kind of wouldn't remember what just happened because she was so in the next thing, and so the stories about what happened in the past where not that big of deal for her. She didn't think about them or meditate on them very often...and I'm just guessing, or what I'm experiencing with you as I'm asking you to pull up certain stories and it's hard for you to dig it up because it's a little bit irrelevant or something like that?

JP: No, what I think that it is...I don't know, maybe I'm just thinking...I don't know that it's going to satisfy what you're looking for...

JW: Well, maybe that's the result orientation of my process here.

JP: Yeah, exactly. I'll just tell you a story really quickly which was, I was told I had to sit down on the bed and cry, they needed tears going down my face about my dog, which was lost, and I told myself, I'm not going to do anything planning, we'll just see what the universe delivers to me, and I was downstairs and they called me upstairs to the room and as I was walking upstairs to the room I realized I was walking away from the door and in the story my character had been out looking for his dog all day and now it was nighttime and he had to just stop looking for his dog and wait till the next day and he's very sad about that...and as I was walking away from the front door the thought that you could say that the universe sent me that... because when my heart's racing I feel like I'm plugged into my higher power and the thoughts that come to me feel like they're heaven sent, but

really it's just that they're better than thoughts that I might come up with when my heart isn't racing because more blood is in my brain, so the idea that hit me was this concept of walking away from the front door which meant my dog was out there and I couldn't look anymore and so I just walked right up to the bedroom, sat down and started crying because that thought was so powerful, the concept that my dog was out there all alone and I couldn't look for him anymore. And so, having that thought come to me felt like magic. And getting to feel that great grief over my dog and feeling those tears come out felt like magic. And then I just did a film where I played a skin head and it was a short film where my wife gets killed and I go undercover as a skinhead to find her killer. But anyway, it just seemed like every scene they needed me to cry and that shoot was the most thrilling shoot I've ever had because I'm really in a place now where I just trust that it will happen. And they would say, you know, we're running late, you've got five minutes, we need you to cross the street and find your wife's dead body. And I didn't go, oh god, how do I do this. I didn't go, oh my god, is this going to happen? I just went, okay, and I crossed the street and found my wife's dead body and tears were just, you know, flying out of my eyes. And the same thing, there was another scene, where he was like, you know, with a short film its always like, you know, we've got five minutes we need you to mouth the words to this song and then right after you do that I need tears to go right down your face... and... I just don't... it's, uh... I could go into detail about the process of how I do that so easily but just the fact that it happened on every take and wasn't a big deal, I was like... to me it was like, um... it was getting to experience my spiritual growth and my getting out of my own way and my relationship to the magic of acting. But then also it can happen in comedy, like for instance, I've done stuff where they'll say, come in and we'll just sort of improv...they wanted me to come in and do a character in a web series and just improv... and when I watched the footage of

that it's like the funniest thing I've ever done, I didn't prepare at all, I just threw a wig on, put a costume on, and I let character funnel through me. I hadn't given any thought, I hadn't given any thought to the character really before I arrived, but this fully formed character just funneled through me, and I'm obsessed with the character and that's another way to experience magic or touching your higher power in acting, which is to experience the fact that you can let something just funnel through you magically. I'm just so grateful that I allowed that to happen so easily and joyfully and things that came out of my mouth are so funny, but I don't necessarily take credit for them. I actually go, wow, that's magic.

JW: That's great, you know, in some ways the emotional availability and the extreme circumstances of that short film are... it is a kind of extraordinary feat that you pulled off in some ways...granted, a lot of it was just acceptance and allowance and participation but you know for a lot of actors they would have way too much getting in their way for them to allow what you allowed to have happen. And same thing in the story you shared about the improvisation, like, I think that's one of the extraordinary moments for me that I find over and over again, is that sense of things coming "fully formed", um... explicably, I can't really take ownership for it.

JP: That's what any great artist says about any art...they say, the book wrote itself...Michael Jackson said, the song wrote itself...the play wrote itself. On my website I list different creative people who say that about their work. And actors are artists, and I don't know why, somewhere along the line, so that people could make money off of us or so that we could feel like we were getting something called training, they decided that there is a technique to acting that you have to do and every school

sells and says, no my technique is the one, and it's just so sad...you know the only training a painter gets is 'let's learn how the greats painted and then when you leave here, you paint the way you paint.' But that's not how actors will look at it...see, I felt that from Carnegie Mellon, thankfully, but other people had a different experience with them...but I felt it, they said, here's how the greats did it, now go play.

JW: Great. We'll wrap up here in a few minutes. I'll just rattle off a few other things that I've heard people talk about and if you relate or have any similar kinds of stories. Sometimes people talk about extraordinary sensitivity or connectivity, whether that be in improvisational groups or whatever, sensing other people's thoughts before, there's almost an ESP sometimes with actors, a feeling of the energetic connection to their audience and the cycle between them and the other performers, sometimes quite extraordinary things can happen there...

JP: My take on it is a little more selfish...meaning I'm not looking for some sort of magical connection between my scene partner and me, because that's not real life, in real life you don't feel some kind of magical connection with your wife when she's telling you she's leaving you. Our thoughts are very private and very selfish and self-involved and that's why when I've been explaining moments of magic to you, they've been these very personal experiences. With comedy I would agree with that, it's different with live comedy, there can be that feeling of...

JW: ...they call it "group mind" or...

JP: Yeah, but the thing is, when I do improv, and when we have an amazing scene that feels like it was written beforehand, that's really just two or three people that are all letting their higher power guide them and the universe is guiding the scene, and it just feels joyful and it feels like something else made me say that, this wonderfully funny thing popped out...For me the magic isn't about...see I guess you could say this is that we're always totally connected to everyone around us because we're all one, I mean if there is a piece of God in each of us then that means we are literally all the same person...So when your vulture's squawking you don't get to feel the wonderful constant connection you have, so again, it just goes back to um...as long as my vulture isn't squawking, I always feel connected to the performers on stage, but for me it's not a hard magical thing where I go, "Oh my god, something's vibrating or some voice is in my head"; it just feels joyful.

JW: ... and that sense is the heart racing and the heightened energy in some way. Around this selfishness, was there a time when there was a pivotal experience or something...? Because it seems to be a big part of how you operate, the idea of focusing on a very selfish experience and I kind of jokingly call it the codependence of performance you know, because if we have that then we're kind of codependent with other people and we're trying to please the audience or try to get their approval and our energy is all tied up, but when we're really focused on ourselves...I'm wondering if there is any particular moment or time where that really got cemented for you or that you really got that.

JP: I want to point out that when I say selfish, I mean it in a really positive and loving way...because an artist, when a painter is painting, he's not thinking, will they like it if I add yellow here. He's

thinking, what is my higher power guiding me to do, what do I feel good about, so that's all I mean when I say selfish actors. Because that's how you give a great performance in my book...So anyway, what I realized was that my, you know, the whole reason I took the spiritual path and why I sort of did all this self-help was because I was so worried about...and so often with negative thoughts we project them on other people, we think, oh they hate me, they think I'm lousy or this or that, so it's a lot of non-selfish thoughts, it's a lot of concern about the people around you, so my growth spiritually and self-help wise was about me and focusing on my personal relationship to my higher power or the loving voice in my head, and I think just slowly over the years, without realizing it was tying in to my acting. So there wasn't a moment, there was no hard moment where I could say I realized it...it was just something that because of my work in self-help, which is about focusing on not needing other people's approval but on loving yourself, it just rubbed off on my acting.

JW: Yeah.

JP: I really would like to help you with this concept of the magical stuff...any project that you ask me about that I was a part of that I am happy with, that I was out of my own way and giving a good performance...

JW: You want to tell me about the two favorite things you've ever done...where you look back and go, "God, I loved doing that, it was such a joy, I'm really satisfied with what was created there...giving me a feeling of pride or gratitude," I have a few of those. Sometimes I will participate in some work and I feel the lack of joy and there is sadness in that. But sometimes what I look back

on and like are the things I find the most beautiful, and often that which is beautiful is often because it has the most profound truth expressed, within me and into the work. I still feel like there is a pursuit in my work...I'm still going after something.

JP: Most people would say that they are going after something because they think their job at an audition is to show somebody what the scene would look like in a finished product and that's why I teach that you must not approach your auditions or even once you're on set, you don't want to approach it thinking, I'm here to show them what the scene would look like in the finished product because it gets you involved in thoughts around this concept you just said which was going after something...

JW: Oh, Jack, I just realized what time it is, in relation to my schedule...

JP: Oh, ok... let me know later if you find any gaps in our conversation.

JW: I hope to talk to you soon and really enjoyed our conversation.

JP: I'm really excited to be part of this, I think it's such a wonderful important thing you're talking about...and the fact that I'm doing what I'm doing and you're doing what you're doing shows that maybe there is a shift in consciousness and that uh... more actors will hear this and stop going to the fear-based teachers, some of them are just so evil.

JW: I think there is an evolution in the approach that is happening in the culture at large, and we are part of what's happening...