

The #1 Way to Live Truthfully in Imaginary Circumstances

From Backstage by Rob Adler

When my nephew was 5, I caught him running on top of the furniture in my parent's living room, with my jacket over his shoulders. When he saw me, he suddenly stopped.

Caught in the act, I thought. Then, with arms extended, belly down, he leapt from the sofa in my direction. I caught him. Still in my arms, he was now reaching and twisting. Without saying a word, he showed me he was a superhero and I was to fly him around the room, which I gladly did. When he "landed" (I put him down), he instantly cast his beloved uncle into the role of super-villain. Humoring him, I played my part, donning a deeper voice and a wider stance to support my mischievous cackle. As I began chasing him, the fear in his breath was real. He sought cover from the downpour of sofa cushions as though it were hailing fire. He "killed" me twice before I tucked him in that night.

We were playing, living truthfully in imaginary circumstances, and communicating them. We were acting.

Children play. Adults censor themselves. Our mind very quickly tells us no—we can't or we shouldn't. As a result, actors tend to think too much, get in their heads and get in their own way. And heady, analytical approaches to actor training can reinforce the limiting mind. We need a viable way to get out of our heads.

Using games to study acting can liberate us from the "constraints" of adulthood. Just like acting, games have agreed upon (imaginary) rules (circumstances) in which the player (actor) must spontaneously (in the moment) improvise how (actions) to survive the onslaught of sofa cushions, get the basketball in the hoop or Juliet off the balcony (objective). Games are childlike, but can be more than kid's stuff.

Here's an analogy: I studied acting in Chicago when Michael Jordan was still playing basketball. Imagine if, while dribbling down court, three seconds left on the clock, approaching the foul line, surrounded by all five members of the opposing team, he stopped, analyzed the situation and thought to himself, What should I do now? The clock would've run out and the world might never know him as "Air" Jordan. Or, what if he called a time out and consulted with his coach. Do you think Phil Jackson would've thought to say, "Why don't you just fly to the hoop?" Instead of thinking through it, Jordan played the game and, in the safe crisis of the moment, his body did something new. He discovered he was capable of more than anything anyone could dream up and he changed the game forever. You can't think that kind of creativity. Play can do the same thing for your acting.

When we play, time seems to slow down, concentration sharpens, and an underlying joy carries the action. There's also a full spectrum of real emotion. When was the last time you experienced that at an audition?

By using play as an acting tool, we can discover ways of expressing things that are not limited by our adult thinking. You may find yourself laughing at an inopportune moment, or glaring at someone with heat, or effortlessly flying around in front of a green screen. Games are the essence of acting. The pioneer of improvisational acting, Viola Spolin, who developed a way of training actors through play and games, said, "When the rational mind is shut off, we have the possibility of intuition."

Play liberates intuition. It is an altered, maybe even higher state that has some very valuable properties for actors. Great acting, like play, is attractive to watch, reduces self-consciousness and leaves people with the desire for more. Play is filled with primal excitement, anticipation, and passion. These are all qualities of the best acting. The play's the thing.