

John Sharian on being efficient



March 22, 2017 - John Sharian is a [photographer](#), actor, voice artist, and physical trainer. He played Ivan in *The Machinist* and has appeared in a number of films (including *The Fifth Element*, *Lost in Space*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *Chicken Run*), in over 50 stage plays in the US and in the UK, on television (including *Law & Order* and *CSI: Miami*), and on the web (Louis C.K.'s *Horace and Pete*).

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2879 words.

Tags: [Photography](#), [Film](#), [Acting](#), [Focus](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#).

You do a lot—a day job designing body armor, acting, photography, you're a personal trainer outside the 9-5 work, and you're a husband with a young daughter. How do you maintain the desire to be creative with all your commitments?.

My main creative outlet is photography; I take pictures on film. I always liken it to a net: you throw it in and you pull it out, you put the catch from it in the hull of the boat, and it's not until you develop the film that you find out what you actually have. It's a good way to store things, and then to be surprised by them: "Oh, that's what I got on that thing."

I came to photography because I was an actor for a long time. Then I became a film director when I was living in the UK and got fed up with the monetary aspect of things. Everything was down to the money, and you had to carry all these people around with you.

I found out what I really wanted to do was look for the image on film. With the camera, I'm super efficient. I can take the camera, go out by myself, shoot something, put it away, get it developed, and digitize it. Then when it's time, I come to it and start to work on the photograph. For me, that's a really efficient way of starting to make things.

A lot of the auditions that I do are in the city, so I always take a camera and make sure that I take X amount of pictures on my way in. I have a route that I go up to Grand Central on my bike every day, and my commute home, so I start to see things. I see things that I want to photograph, and I'll come back and take time to make a photograph of that thing.

The camera's portable. I always like to be hands-free. Things in cargo pockets, things in jacket pockets. That's how I like to be on the bike. I don't like to have too much on me, and the camera's good that way. In a larger sense, everything is about being efficient and independent.

The work that I do outside of the physical training is designing body armor and other tools for people in the special forces. Those guys are on their own a lot. Essentially, they're trained to be part of a team, but autonomous at the same time. A lot of that does translate to the physical training I do. I keep the equipment at a really rudimentary level. I recently moved my clients out of the gym environment and into a park.

That kind of training allows you to be independent. We work a lot on that in terms of the equipment that we produce for these Special Forces guys. You think about something as simple as Velcro. The reason Velcro appeared on military equipment is that it's not like a button that can pop off, or a zipper that can get stuck. It's something that you can open and close quickly, and that can make a real difference in terms of living or dying.



Quassie, John Sharian

How did you go from acting school to designing body armor?

I was an actor for a long time. I came back over from the UK about 15 years ago. My wife and I decided that we wanted to have a family, so I took on this job. It was essentially going to be this part-time thing, but it started to interest me more and more, and I got more involved with the training aspect of things, how the equipment was actually being used, and getting interested in how the guys were training, which is how I came to the style of training that I use now. The things just started to feed off of one another, and continue to do so.

I think the key to doing a lot of different things at the same time is not putting them in compartments. Instead, see where the connections are made between them, and how one can feed the other thing. The physical training, when I went out to get certified, was through a connection that I'd made. A guy who had been in Delta Force recommended me to an outfit out in Utah that I trained with. Then I immediately made a connection to what I was doing with my job. At the time, I was doing a lot of surfing, and it also fed into that. Everything bounced off of the other thing. I don't separate things a lot.

Do you find that training people, and working where you work, has shifted the way you act? You were just doing a screen test for being a hard-ass military guy; you often play these sorts of characters.

The word has gone around that this is what I do, but I've always been involved in sports. Acting and sports ran side by side from the time that I was 12. I decided that I wanted to be an actor when I was 12, but at the same time, I was playing football and running cross country. There's always been a physical aspect of what I do, especially in terms of the stage work.

At the one point, I hooked up with this Polish theater company. They believed that you had to be physically broken down before you could make a sound, so you would do these intense physical, what they called "warm-ups," that were actually four hours long. Then they said, "Okay, now you can make a sound." I took that as something that I've always used. Before I go on stage, I still do that intense warmup. I break a sweat before I go on, and then I feel ready to go. Again, it's all feeding into what I'm doing every day in terms of the training.

You've gone and trained military people with the equipment you make at your job. Does training with the kind of people you often play make you understand these roles more? Or does it feel different when you're acting? Is it less about real life, and more about the role itself?

No, I think, especially as you say, the roles that I get, if I pick up a gun, I know how to shoot a gun, but that training trip for example was great... All these high powered weapons going off, and shell casings fired, and these really amazing, proficient guys. It was a great opportunity to take photographs, and I did. I got some great photographs. I was torn between wanting to participate and wanting to photograph at the same time. It was a hard balance because they're very strict about where you are in terms of people firing and things like that.

I like being around those types of people. It's amazing to see someone who's so good at that job. One of the assassins that we were working with... watching him move with that gun was like watching someone dance. They were just so fluid, no jumpiness. They could move forward at a constant rate, while you're holding this thing that's got a lot of juice to it. They would internalize whatever was going on. This guy's face was absolutely placid.

Does being busier makes you more productive?

Absolutely. Let's say if my wife and my daughter go away to visit her family in the UK, I dedicate the time that I would be spending time with them to be like, "Okay, now, let's develop this film. Let's digitize it. Let's look at it."

I make a lot of books. What I ultimately like to do with the photographs is make books. The book's a great way to build a story and have something that I can constantly go back to, and slowly build over time until I decide, "Okay, that's good."



Assassin, John Sharian

Do you ever think it would be easier if you didn't have a desire to do all of these projects outside of your day job?

It would be easier. The commute would be easier. It would be more pointed, certainly. I think that eventually, that day may come, but for now it is what it is. I've got a family.

You told me that when you did *Horace and Pete* with Louis C. K., you liked the fact that it was efficient and basic, and they stripped it all back. It's pretty rare in that world, right? You don't have many people doing it that way.

You don't have anybody doing it that way, and you get a lot of people couching things. There's a big thing about how you give an actor a line reading or something like that, like that's a taboo thing, whereas he just doesn't give a fuck. He'll just be like, "Say it this way. The next time, say it this way, and do the smile bigger. Remember that smile you did before? Do that again." I like that.

Then you get the opposite end of things. I was in a film, *The Fifth Element*, directed by Luc Besson, and he didn't really have a script for the film. He had an outline of the film. Everyday you'd come in and be given this rough parameter of what the scene was going to be. You'd get up there and he'd say, "Okay, so you are the captain, this is your ship, Bruce [Willis] is over there, and he's been taken by the aliens. Then you're going to shoot the aliens and go get Bruce." I said, "So what do you want me to say?" "You are actor. You will think of something." That's cool, too, but not very efficient.

He was there for, I don't know, 12 months. He lived in the studio; he would take the camera outside on his own and shoot the hand inserts himself, all the things they'd normally have a second unit for.

What is it that still draws you to acting?

I like to lose myself. It's that same thing that happens when I train. It's the same thing that happens in photography. I forget about the surroundings. Definitely with an actor, especially a stage actor, that moment before you go out...

The other night I was watching some guy skiing off the edge of the Eiger with a parachute. At one point, he goes off the edge of the thing and has to release his skis, the airfoil he has on, and then he free-falls. I very much have that feeling of like, "What the fuck am I doing?" just before I go on. There are all these people out there, and you're basically scared shitless, but it's a good feeling. It's the same thing.

I think there are some things that I do when I train. I've trained enough that I know what's going to happen. I know physically and mentally. I lose myself because I'm trying to go through the pain and have that negotiation in my head-not to quit-and everything goes away.

At this point, the acting's not just a way to pay the bills, you do still love it.

It's that, and it's something that I've been doing since I was 12. It's something that's definitely a part of me, but it's not the thing that I live and die for every single day. At the beginning, it was. There was a lot about it that was mysterious, that was part of it.

Do you find your worlds colliding?

I do. With the people that I train, I don't go into the acting stuff unless I know them well. Then, all of a sudden, it'll slip out that, "Oh yeah I know that about you. So, what was Christian Bale like?"

Everything overlaps. There's not a lot of separation between things I do, and I think that's how it should be. I went to a liberal arts college. Liberal arts is a great education because it gives you a smattering of everything. You major in something, but you're constantly challenged to explore all these other disciplines at the same time. I'm really glad I had that. It's fed into everything that I do, from writing proposal for something that we're going to make, to informing the books I read, and all the rest of it.

You know, some of the creative people are some of the most disciplined people that I train. The business people tend to be the ones who actually want to have a conversation, but they're disciplined in a different way and probably more competitive.



Bathtime, John Sharian

People will say, "I'm so busy. I don't have time to do this." But, really, they do. What are some of your secrets, or tips, on how you manage to do a lot?

Well, I've got a pull-up bar in my space. The thing that you hear everybody say is, "I'm too busy to do a workout." Well, that's a straight bar of metal that's hooked, bolted into a wall, and if you do 100 of those things, and it takes you 30 minutes to do that, trust me, you've got your workout in that day.

I bike every day from Grand Central down into either the Brooklyn Navy Yard, or down to wherever I'm working out and time myself. I try to break that time every single day. In that way, I've not only traveled somewhere, but I've gotten a really good, intense workout in at the same time.

Are there ever days where you feel lazy and don't want to do anything?

No. There are times where I like to relax, certainly, but I like to do something every day. I don't ever feel bored. I don't understand people who say, "I'm bored." My daughter went through a little phase of that, and we dropped it out of her hand. Life isn't boring.

Do you find that you approach your art making and acting in the same way you approach the physical training, in the sense of coming up with a system?

Discipline is freedom. You have to be accountable to something. It's not all freeform, do what you want. You've got to go out there, put some thought behind the thing, and figure out what it is that you're going after, in all respects.

I think that a lot of people get tired of working out, or they look at it as exercise. I think of "exercise" as a word is like what you do with writing exercises or something like that. It's something you do by rote. Training is something that you commit to, and when you point the training towards something, then it all makes sense.

That's it. With the photography, as time goes on, it's finding out more and more what I'm after, what I want to take pictures of, and how they can be used.

There's a certain level of intensity where you take everything you do seriously, not being half-assed about anything.

Yeah, for the training aspect of things, I feel like I'm looking after people. So from the moment that we start, I tell them not to be casual with anything, because that's how you get hurt. It's the same thing for training you do in the military. They start in a really rudimentary way and make sure you're absolutely on point. The whole time they're there, they're vigilant. They never take their eyes off you. Even when someone does something stupid, they don't freak out. They just say, "Okay, let's put this down now, okay? Just take your hand off the trigger, and put the safety on. Okay. That's fine, so what did you do wrong there?" It'd be very easy to freak out.

Once you told me the story of a parade, where a float carrying disabled vets and some military families got stuck on a train track. A couple of Special Forces soldiers got everyone off as fast as they could, and then they themselves got killed. They went down with it. The idea of total commitment and efficiency are tied together.

With that story, they were talking about having your priority chain, about how when you're overseas, your responsibility is to your guys. Then when you come back, it's your family again. Those guys in that moment, they got their family off first, then got the disabled vets off, and then they took the hit.

The idea being that the priority chain was in place, but they also fully realized—they had nine seconds is what they said—that they quite easily could have just jumped off themselves. But there are some things that are much worse than death, so it's better to take the hit and go.

John Sharian recommends:

[The seascapes of Hiroshi Sugimoto](#)

The books of [James Salter](#)

ice baths

[Béla Tarr](#)

[Rickson Gracie](#)

[Name](#)

John Sharian

[Vocation](#)

Photographer, Actor, Physical Trainer, Production Manager

[Fact](#)

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Photo: Jane Lea