January 9, 2018 -

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2154 words.

Tags: Film, Process, Inspiration, Beginnings, Success.

Yolonda Ross on being observant

Did you always think that you would be an actor? Was this always your path?

No. It was not the plan *at all*. Though, I am extremely creative and always have been, so I've done a
little bit of everything—acting, writing, painting—everything except dance. It's like I get overly excited
and want to do it really well, and can't. So that one's not on my list, but I've painted for a long time.
Starting out I was in the fashion business. I used to make clothes for money, and for myself, and I also
did windows. I did all kinds of jobs in fashion.

For my last job in that world I was a buyer and a merchandiser. I was basically doing it in my sleep. I
knew that getting to NYC was important because these opportunities would open up, things that would never
happen back in Nebraska. As it happened, a friend of mine was doing extra work on *SNL*, and she couldn't do
it one week, so I asked if I could fill in for her, and they let me. I got my union card because I kept
doing it, and eventually I got an agent. Then eventually I auditioned for my first scene, which was for
New York Undercover, and the feeling of preparing for that, and learning what I have to do to get to a
certain place emotionally, was exciting to me. I could become somebody else, and feel somebody else's
emotions. I never realized how much I would enjoy that.

So, when the company that I was working for in the fashion business decided to close up shop in New York,
I took it as a sign to stay and take the acting stuff seriously. I ended up getting a big audition four
years later. It doesn't happen overnight. It was *Stranger Inside*, which was my first film. When I look
back on it, I think it was always there—this desire to act—but I didn't realize it because I'm a pretty
shy person. Like me, myself, in front of people? I would've never thought to get on a stage, or to get in
front of people, and act. If someone would have suggested that when I was younger I would have said they
were crazy.

The thing that makes me feel like I can do it, is that when I'm acting it's like I'm not there. I am other
people. I'm putting on somebody else's thoughts, body, feelings, everything. I'm learning as I go about
how to be them and create them. You're not actually seeing me, which is what makes it alright for me to do
it. Otherwise, if I have to get on stage and just be me and talk? No. Just to get up on stage and
introduce someone, I'll have no saliva in my mouth. I can barely talk. I'm such a mess, and it's so crazy
how nervous I get. I was never one of those actors who grew up needing to be in front of people saying,
"Look at me! Look at me!" It was actually more like, "No, don't look at me."

**People might assume that all actors and performers are extroverts, but that's often not the case. For a
lot of entertainers, they really turn off when they are not on stage. Often the key to being a good
performer seems to be about being a keen observer.**

That's exactly how I feel. I didn't go to school for acting, but I feel like I understand emotion, and
thought, and human behavior really well. I think it comes from just being a wallflower and watching people
and listening to people my whole life. That seems like the most important skill when it comes to creating
a character, to just understand people. I don't want to pass judgement on any character I'm playing—I
can't like or dislike them—I just am them. I want to give you emotions and behavior that feel truthful.
Given the context of the scene and the dialogue, I want to show you what they would or wouldn't do as real
people. So much of that just comes from paying attention to people.

I feel like if I have a special power, it is the ability to be invisible. I really feel like I'm invisible
a lot of times. People do shit in front of me, and I'm just like, "Wait. Did they not see me sitting
here?" It's like, "Did they really?" It's crazy, but to me it's a good thing.

**You put in several years before you started to get big auditions. So many people give up on acting because
it's a struggle. What sustained you during those years? What made you want to keep going?**

When I realized that *this* was the thing that I feel I was put here to do, I couldn't have stopped. I often
feel like my job in life is to bring certain kinds of characters to life, because if you look at my body
of work, it's never the pretty girlfriend who doesn't have much depth to her, or the friend that's just on
the side doing and saying a few lines here or there. It's always these characters that you can relate to,
people you know. I like characters that seem like people you've seen in life, but maybe you've never
actually *really* looked at. I want you to see them in a new light.

As for how I kept doing it, or why I kept doing it even when it was a struggle, once you realize what you're here for there is no other option. Then it's just about figuring out how to keep doing that thing. Creating, to me, is breathing. When I'm not doing it, I'm pretty much suffocating. I *have* to get another job just to fulfill myself. That's the thing that keeps you going, even when it's hard.

As an actor, isn't is exhausting to be constantly trying to convince someone to let you do what you're good at?

Yeah, but that's your job. Once you're doing it, once you're actually acting, that's the fun and exciting part. It's all this other mess, like auditioning, that can be tiresome. At this point, I've had to learn all these other skills that come along with trying to get the job. You often have to tape yourself for auditions, so you have to learn how to do that. We're cameramen, we're editors, we're lighting people. You have to do everything in order to get that job, in order to work.

Do you do a ton of auditions?

I audition a lot. I average about three to four big jobs a year, or at least that's what it's been lately. Now that I'm working on a series—that's my good, regular job—maybe I won't be auditioning so much. But before it was like three to four jobs a year, and I can't even tell you how many auditions there were. Lots. Loads. For every one job you get, there are a million auditions for all the ones you don't.

Do you develop ways of thinking about it so you don't get discouraged?

Maybe. I guess you have to. I can't say I ever take it personally because there's a million factors involved with all of it. Also, it's a business. You know what I mean? If you're not that A-list star, for the most part, you can't take anything for granted and you *really* can't take anything personally because they're *always* looking at somebody else. As far as the actual auditioning goes, I definitely feel like the more you do it, the more comfortable you feel. And once you actually get to go into a room and audition for somebody, you start to establish that relationship with the casting people. You can feel a little more comfortable the next time you're walking into that room, which helps. You get less nervous.

Again, the other side of that is that now so much of it is *not* done in the room. Often you're just auditioning on tape, where you're never even meeting actual people. It starts messing with your audition skills, because you can literally just be reading off of a paper while looking into a camera. You know what I mean? It also take a while getting comfortable in that way, just learning how to read fast and read well and to look at the camera. Each thing is different.

In the time between projects, how do you sustain yourself creatively?

I write. I direct my own projects. I have to make sure I'm always focused on my own stuff in some way. My own creative work keeps me going. If you can stay focused on something else, I feel like it leaves things open to happen for you. It can be frustrating because you can't just go make a movie by yourself, not really. I have a feature now that I'm working on and I'm working on getting the last of the funding so I can shoot it. There's a TV series that I want to make. I always want to be in the position where I have my own stuff going. There's a lot of different kinds of things that I want to do, and I don't want to always have to act in them. I like to produce and direct.

You mentioned how much you enjoy the process of preparing for a role. What is that process usually like for you?

I break down scripts by keeping in mind what info I'm given about the character, what they're trying to accomplish in the scene, and what, if any, emotions come into play. After that's all figured out, I find what music speaks to me as the character, and what music helps me hit certain emotions in specific places in the text. Also, speaking musically, I like to figure out how I will deliver my lines. I will mark up my script like a piece of music, so I know how long to hold things or where I want to take breaths.

What do you get from creating your own work that you don't necessarily get from acting in other people's films?

Creating is how I breathe. It's great being able to work on other people's projects, but there are stories and characters that I am interested in that I still do not see in film and television, so why not write them? Having been in this business for a while, I know as an actor and as a storyteller that I have a unique way of connecting to people and creating a story, so I need to do that. By doing my own work, the story and characters can stay as close to how they were envisioned as possible. As an actor, we're who the viewers see, but you never know fully what that performance was or wasn't from the beginning. Producers have notes, directors have direction, and editors can make edits, and all of these factors go into what you see on screen. The more you can put into the product from the beginning, the more your actual vision can make it into the final product.

What is the best bit of advice you've ever been given about acting? Or what advice do you have for young actors who are just getting into the business?

The best advice I've ever been given as an actor is to "Listen and stay present" in your scenes. I would give the same advice. Observe. If you listen to the person opposite you and react authentically, you should never hit a false note.

Yolonda Ross recommends:

1. Learn to let things go. Being someone that works for themselves and has to make their own magic happen can get frustrating—you can push every which way and it seems like nothing is working. I do feel we can push against the natural order of what's in store for us. It's not an easy one, but learn to let things go. This leads to…

2. TRUST… TRUSTING THAT THE RIGHT THING WILL HAPPEN FOR YOU.

3. Take time to walk away from everything and sit. Sit and enjoy the beauty of what we can see, hear, and smell daily. Because not everyone wakes up to experience it.

4. Say something nice to someone you don't know. It can change someone else's whole day and more, and it will make you feel brighter as well.

5. Revisit your favorite films when idle or stuck, they can take on new meanings to you at different times in your life. My 5 films: _Gloria_ (Cassavetes), _3 Women_, _Superfly_, _Goodfellas_, and _Boogie Nights_.

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<u>Vocation</u>
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<u>Fact</u>

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